



grantcraft

A GRANTCRAFT CASE STORY

YouthBank Model Has Global Appeal

Philanthropy is about strategy and choices. When foundations make choices and award grants, young people do not usually have a say in them, even when the grants affect them. Yet, young people have tremendous capacity to listen, to understand, and to make tough decisions. Involving them in grantmaking can have huge benefits and some interesting practices are emerging that give young people a prominent role in grantmaking.

This case story explores in more detail one model – YouthBank – that engages young people directly in grantmaking. Inspired by practices of community foundations in the US and Canada, the model is spreading rapidly in Europe and globally. It particularly appeals to funders who are interested in engaging young people more actively with their communities. Since the model is very much hands-on and youth-led, YouthBank has a strong appeal for young people.

YouthBank Model Has Global Appeal

“Funders who consider funding YouthBanks should not think that working with young people is only about teaching them something; you will learn with them.” This reflection from a YouthBank funder captures an essential feature of YouthBank: everyone learns, everyone is knowledgeable, and the thrill is to learn together. The YouthBank keywords are youth, community, grantmaking, youth-led, and self-development. A YouthBank team is a group of young people who work together to make grants that support projects developed by their peers.

“Once we paid an unplanned visit to a small village – we had an evaluation from our donor – and we met with the mayor. The donor asked the mayor if he knew YouthBank and he says “Sure, I know YouthBank very well. They rebuilt our park. In 20 years we have not been able to find the resources to do that. Our young people normally hang out in cafés and bars; there are no possibilities to play sports, no other places to hang out. And then these two fourteen-year old girls – they are in 9th grade – approached me and asked if they could rebuild the park. And I said they could but they wouldn’t be able to; they had no money. But these two girls raised the money, they found companies who wanted to contribute and they mobilised community volunteers, other youngsters and adults, to get the work done. So these two girls were able to change something, they accomplished something that the entire community failed to do for a long time.”

Currently, YouthBanks are operating in 24 countries worldwide and the movement is rapidly growing, which indicates a broad appeal of the model. People involved in YouthBanks globally are connected through YouthBank International, a network that was launched officially in April 2013.

The YouthBank operational model is adapted to different country contexts, but in all cases, YouthBank teams collectively identify local community needs and make grants to projects undertaken by peers that address these needs. Everywhere this process is supported by adults, but is led by young people themselves.

Involving young people in grantmaking through YouthBanks is exciting in concept but also requires significant skill and thought. A seasoned professional says half-jokingly: “The programme combines two big challenges: one is working with young people as grantmakers and the other one is working with young people as grantmakers.” In other words, working with young people is complex as it is, and putting

money in their hands – giving them real responsibilities to manage financial resources – adds a whole new level of complexity.

In YouthBank young people manage all aspects of grantmaking and due diligence, from setting priorities, issuing calls for proposals, to reviewing and awarding grants to projects. Often teams also undertake fundraising activities to match the funds provided by sponsors. And once the grants are made, the YouthBank team is tasked with monitoring project implementation and will intervene if and when needed. Many YouthBanks operate on the basis of an annual, nine-month long cycle with each step in the process being supported by training events that are delivered by professionals or volunteers. To manage their financial resources, YouthBanks are usually connected to a formal, established organisation, which is often a nonprofit. These infrastructure components help YouthBanks run smoothly and create an environment where the core values and mission can thrive.

There is a range of youth-centred programmes that focus on getting young people actively and constructively engaged in their broader communities. However, the YouthBank model has several distinguishing aspects to its approach:

- **Hands-on:** the grantmaking process is a vehicle for practical learning
- **Youth-led:** young people are at the heart of YouthBank and all processes are youth-led
- **Adaptable:** adhering to the core values of YouthBank still provides for the nimbleness to operate under a broad variety of institutional arrangements
- **Development:** the network creates a space for young people to develop skills and foster their engagement with their communities

When starting or funding a young grantmaker programme, funders and NGOs adapt the YouthBank model to fit local needs and circumstances. The theory of change and essential features remain, but various other aspects can change. For example, the age limit of the target group (some groups involve young people aged 14–20, others include participants up to 30 years old), the partners involved, the programme’s institutional arrangements, and the funding models are all adapted. Indeed it is a process of reinvention, as one national coordinator explains, “When others ask me how to do it, I tell them: this is how we do it, this is our YouthBank, and this is why we do things this way. But I also tell them

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that they have to adapt it and find their own way because I really think that is the only way it will work.”

While the model is adaptable, YouthBank International’s coordinator Vernon Ringland insists, “If you replicate YouthBank, you have to keep its core values.” So, adapting the model also implies preserving its essence, which lies in its values.

How does YouthBank work? There are some ‘golden rules’ for managing a YouthBank programme:

- 1. YOUTH-LED:** Young people who make up a YouthBank committee decide how money is allocated in their community. The role of adults within YouthBank is to provide training, support, and advice to the young people, rather than to make decisions on their behalf.
- 2. OPEN TO ALL YOUNG PEOPLE:** YouthBank is for young people who want to make a difference in their community. All young people who live in a YouthBank area are encouraged to apply. YouthBank particularly welcomes applications from young people who do not get the same opportunities that others might have, such as those in or leaving foster or residential care, homeless, parents or young people with caretaking responsibilities, disabled, or underrepresented groups.
- 3. PARTICIPATION & INCLUSION:** Every member of a YouthBank committee is given equal opportunity to express their views and decide how grants are allocated.
- 4. PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING & RESPECTING DIFFERENCE:** YouthBank provides opportunities for young people from different cultural, religious and political backgrounds to come together in a safe environment, share experiences, and develop understanding and respect for one another.
- 5. CLEAR AND FAIR METHODS OF GRANTMAKING:** The YouthBank decision-making process ensures that all money awarded is given out fairly and that the processes used for checking how money is spent are clear and transparent.
- 6. SAY IT AS IT IS!** YouthBank uses clear and straightforward language so that all training materials, publicity, application forms, etc. are easy to read and understand.
- 7. DEVELOPING SKILLS & EXPERIENCE:** Using a range of creative and fun activities, YouthBank offers young people new experiences, new

skills and new learning, and provides opportunities to do things that they would not normally have the chance to do.

8. REFLECTION & EVALUATION: YouthBank committees take time to look back at everything they have been involved in, from training and team-building activities to how they have made decisions and the type of projects they have funded. They reflect on what worked well and decide if they would do anything differently next time around.

9. CELEBRATION: YouthBank believes it is important to celebrate both the hard work of young grantmakers who give their time freely and also to congratulate the young people who use grants to make a difference in their community. By hosting celebrations, young grantmakers and funding recipients join adult members of the local community to acknowledge the impact of YouthBank in their area.

Why do people get involved in YouthBank? Young people involved in YouthBank get excited about contributing to their community and also the process of personal development that comes with it. As one YouthBank alumnus recalls, "I was a very shy person...YouthBank is the reason I got interested in volunteering, getting involved, and doing something useful with my life after school."

The programme is easily implemented in rural communities and small towns, because the tie to local context is so strong. In large cities, it is sometimes more complicated to recruit YouthBank members. As one coordinator observes, "In [large cities], we see less interest. Maybe they lack time; maybe there is an overdose of opportunities for young people. We see it works better in small towns and rural areas."

The primary motivation for YouthBank members to get involved is that they can see that YouthBank works! One YouthBank member testifies, "I was afraid of talking to anyone except my family or close friends. It took me a few months to get used to it, but two years later I realised YouthBank had really changed me...I would not have learned these things in any other way, especially not at school." Another YouthBank member adds, "I have been in trainings but there was no long-term relationship among participants or with trainers. It was just training and that was it."

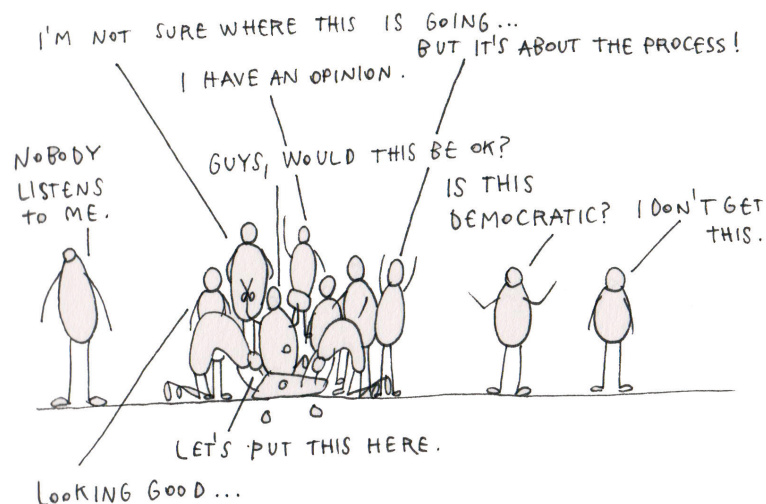
"What counts in my view is the process", observes a funder of YouthBank, "this programme offers young people who are not particularly engaged with their community a framework to develop themselves, to learn to collaborate, and to make decisions together." Indeed funders see

"The traditional approach is to say 'young people will design our future,' which is why we invest in their education. But that excludes them from the present. YouthBanks involve youth now. The programme views young people as agents of change, not in the future, but here and now. They participate in the decision-making process, they meet the local administration in their community and they develop projects on their own."

YouthBank as a way to engage young people in philanthropy in their own diverse communities, including in remote rural areas where it is often harder to build initiatives. One funder articulates how YouthBank complements their more conventional investment in formal education, "The traditional approach is to say 'young people will design our future,' which is why we invest in their education. But that excludes them from the present. YouthBanks involve youth now. The programme views young people as agents of change, not in the future, but here and now. They participate in the decision-making process, they meet the local administration in their community and they develop projects on their own."

Real money and comprehensive learning. The learning process is a crucial aspect of the programme, as a national YouthBank coordinator explains, "They learn to design a grant programme, to define procedures and policies. One example is that money cannot be given to a friend; they have procedures for when there are conflicts of interest. Using the criteria they designed themselves, they score the projects. They do that independently from adult input."

There is a strong focus on skills that are relevant beyond YouthBank. As one coordinator emphasises, "The first part of the grantmaking training focuses exclusively on what it means to make a decision, and how the fact that we are different makes that we can take better decisions because we each bring in a different perspective [...] So they have to learn to listen to each other... and to speak-up... and to ensure that all perspectives are evenly weighed."



Learning what it means to take a decision when you are all different

The grantmaking component triggers a special kind of learning-by-doing. As one funder explains, “We see that the grantmaking aspect [of YouthBank] keeps the focus of the work and discussions on local needs. The young people do surveys in the community and ask peers what they need and want in their lives; this is different compared to regular volunteering because they develop the content themselves, on their own. They are not enlisted in an initiative that somebody else came up with. They think about what they have and what they do not have, and they are shaping their environment...and another good thing is that the young people do all this by themselves [...] which has a tremendous, positive effect on their self-confidence.”

Making grant decisions allows young YouthBank participants to reflect on procedures, setting criteria, joint decision-making, and vetting. At times the experience leads to profound insights. For example a member of a YouthBank team commented on what grants may achieve, “Making a grant, you not only help projects get off the ground, you are also showing support for young people who have a good idea, but who may lack know-how or confidence to put that idea into practice. Making a grant is a vote of trust!”

Often, YouthBank programmes involve former YouthBank members as trainers. As a coordinator explains, “They bring their own experience, they know where the process can go wrong, so they can say, ‘be careful about this and that’ and the new cohort of young people really listen to them.”

Youth-led in a safe space. Participants emphasize that YouthBank is different. When asked how the programme compares to other activities in which she is involved, one YouthBank member says, “What I really like about YouthBank is that it is youth-led.” It is because they are youth-led that YouthBank programmes everywhere push the boundaries of what adults and governments think young people should do and what they can decide on independently.

Pushing those boundaries is feasible because YouthBank funders are deliberate and clear about their own role, “As a funder we do not intervene. In our national programmes, we have strategic priorities, but we do not make them fund projects in our field of interest; they have to respond to the needs in their local community.” One manager of a foundation that both funds and operates a YouthBank programme in partnership with a municipality is adamant, “We support and coordinate the programme, but none of us tells the young people involved what to do.”

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While young people identify the needs and make the funding decisions, the support provided by adults to this youth-led process is critical. Adults have the roles of coach and facilitator in this model. They are also guardians of the ‘safe space’, where a group of diverse young people can meet and work together without fear of judgement or being overlooked, and with the support and vote of confidence from others. One funder emphasizes how critical this is, also because it allows for failure to be part of success. “It works because they have the space to fail and struggle and sometimes they hit a wall but they learn from that.” In this vein, the adult coordinators are also responsible for preserving a space that is free from external pressure. One national coordinator elaborates, “When we set up a group, we talk about potential pressure. Actually one group failed, right before the grantmaking phase, because the ‘host’ kept on putting pressure and pushing certain projects. We tried to solve the problem, but it was a very small community. They were blaming each other and it was difficult to say who was right and who was wrong, and there were no alternatives... As national coordinator, I decided to suspend the work of that group until a solution could be worked out.”

Inclusion of young people with different cultural, religious, ethnic, and political backgrounds has been an essential aspect of the programme since the first YouthBank programme was set up under a UK-wide consortium. This early experience showed that this hands-on model works well in a context of sectarian and other tensions, but facilitating the interaction of such diverse groups requires sophisticated skills. An experienced coordinator observes, “Participants’ sense of responsibility can translate into a whole trauma when they sit around the table and discuss projects, and all the projects are so different. And they are so emotional about it; it may happen that one likes a project and someone else uses quite unacceptable words to describe it, so there can be big discussions, sometimes there is crying and they want to go home... so it is not a simple dynamic to manage.” Yet YouthBank makes a deliberate effort to be inclusive. “During recruitment, we are very careful to ensure that teams are really diverse. Homogeneous groups may be easier, but diversity is essential to foster true community engagement.”

Adapt and tailor to different contexts. In terms of organisational and institutional arrangements, YouthBanks come in all shapes and sizes, even within the same country. Some YouthBanks are connected with community foundations, others with locally operating NGOs, others with national and local authority youth programmes. In most countries

with several YouthBank teams in different locations there is a centralised hub that performs a variety of functions. There is also an emerging international network that brings together YouthBankers, YouthBank coordinators, and funders from different countries.

Funds are needed for a YouthBank programme to operate; however, a little money can go a long way. In fact, one national coordinator remarks on the advantage of having limited financial resources, “The fact that [YouthBank teams] have small amounts of money creates a healthy pressure. They have to spend it as effectively as possible and they understand that when a project goes wrong, the community loses out.”

Many YouthBank programmes have a central sponsor who provides funding for the adult support, and for coordination. Resources for the grants made by the YouthBank team may also be provided by the funder, but many programmes work with a match-funding arrangement in which a sponsor matches the funds raised by the YouthBank team.

In some cases, the central sponsor of the programme is a national funder; in others, an international funder plays that role. Managing a variety of funding sources can be complicated. As one coordinator warns, “When local YouthBank teams raise funds, you have to watch out for conflict of interests with your central sponsor and you need to manage expectations.” However, fundraising adds an interesting dimension and the chance for young participants to gain a valuable set of skills. Praising their efforts, one YouthBank national coordinator says: “They organise special events to raise money. They have so many ideas for how to raise money.”

“The western part of our country is very conservative and issues like gender equality and women’s rights are not very developed. A young woman was telling us that after participating in a YouthBank, she decided to go to university and study.”

A few outcomes. YouthBank programmes normally generate two types of often overlapping outcomes:

- those that have an immediate impact on (members of) the local community, and
- those that have a more personal impact on the lives of the young people who are directly involved.

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A coordinator of a YouthBank programme says that the number of (good) proposals received could be one of the indicators of success. “If you work well, you get good proposals.” But the same coordinator also observes that the programme is more than the grants it gives. “We monitor in a general sense the number of community initiatives in which the YouthBank team is involved, because that speaks about their ability to go out and be engaged with the community.” He also mentions some indicators related to individual participants. “We look at the individual employment rates of young people who are or have been involved. Of course, this is not an employment project, but we see several former YouthBank members employed in all kinds of civic organisations.”

There is clearly more to it all than just numbers. Another coordinator explains, “In YouthBank, it is all about the quality of the process.” One key funder endorses this perspective: “In our monitoring and evaluation we focus on personal stories, how the programme has changed the young people involved and their communities. And we also track some numbers.”

There are creative ways to monitor programme progress, too. As one funder observed, “YouthBank Turkey has a Facebook page and many local YouthBank groups have Facebook pages so the funder can follow exactly what is going on.”

In the end, YouthBank is about engaging and empowering young people. As a young grantmaker observed, “People take a lot of decisions that affect us as young people without involving us, YouthBank teaches us how we can become the drivers of those decisions.”

JOEF, which stands for ‘Jeugd Ondernemen en Financiert’, is a YouthBank in Roeselaere, Belgium. Over the course of the last four years JOEF sponsored a talent festival at a local high-school, a group advocating for a space in their town where teens can hang out, the purchase of a keyboard for a children’s choir, two theatre productions involving disabled youth, the provision of a tent for a street-corner youth-worker, minor repair work to a youth organisation building; the development of an educational garden, a weekend outing for youth with special needs, and a metal rock fest, new banners, and pennants for a local youth organisation. (www.joef.be)

Webbed and networked. Interventions modelled after the original YouthBank pilot programme launched across the UK in 1999 have been spreading steadily across Europe and beyond since 2006. An emerging

movement of young people and professionals involved in YouthBanks, now encompasses twenty four countries ranging from Ireland via Romania and Kyrgyzstan to Turkey and Mozambique.

“In our city, it rains nearly every day. One of the young people developed a project about umbrellas. He used his grant to place umbrellas in all the shops in the village. Everybody could borrow them and you could leave them at any other shop.”

An observer notes, “The YouthBank model itself seems to be almost viral, it is really growing fast. I think it is because the model makes so much sense, it’s simple, relatively easy to run, not that expensive, and can be fit in relatively easily in any youth funding strategy. While there are shared concepts and values, there is no policing of the model: the movement is about common intent, not control.”

To connect individual YouthBanks across the world, YouthBank International was launched on 30 April 2013. It is currently establishing itself as an independent registered institution. This international network connects professionals involved in operating YouthBanks and it fosters exchange and learning in order to further develop and promote the YouthBank model globally.

YouthBank International identifies roughly three levels in the emerging movement: YouthBank teams and coordinators and their local host organisations, national hubs and coordinators, and YouthBank International as an international hub. YouthBank International will focus on connections among national hubs, but will also involve the local level teams and hosts on an ad hoc basis. Following the nature of YouthBank, the network will also have a youth-led element, as young people will be empowered to assume roles on the executive board of YouthBank International. YouthBank International has also just started issuing e-magazines. And its website is under construction: www.youthbankinternational.org

Considering the speed with which the network is growing, expect a YouthBank near you anytime. Or even better, contact the members of the network and get started!

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