



Youth Civic Engagement Toolbox: 2

Getting to Grips with YouthBank

In this 'Q & A', Vernon Ringland, YouthBank Coordinator at the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, and Simona Serban, Executive Director, Cluj Community Foundation, describe their experiences of running YouthBanks and offer some practical advice on getting started

1 What is YouthBank?

VR The vision for YouthBank is of a network of local grant making bodies run *by* young people *for* young people (normally in the 14 to 25 age range). Local YouthBanks, easily accessible to young people, will make modest project funds available to groups *of* young people who want to take action in their own community on issues that matter to them. While the YouthBank should be led directly by young people themselves, a local partner (in most cases, an adult-led organization) is normally charged with creating an environment in which young people are supported to take on the task of grantmaking. This support normally includes training and professional and/or administrative support, as well as other resources to assist young people to fulfil their aspirations.

SS At Cluj Community Foundation, we see YouthBank as a way of stimulating youth entrepreneurship, empowering young people to become active citizens interested and involved in their communities, and developing philanthropic behaviour from an early age.

2 Simona, Cluj Community Foundation has been running its YouthBank programme for 6 years. Can you briefly describe how it works? What is a normal YouthBank 'cycle'?

SS Yes. Each year we recruit 10–15 high school students who commit to a one-year process. This group receives some basic **training** (month 1–2) in various areas including communication, fundraising, conducting a community needs assessment, financial management and grantmaking. A particular feature of the YouthBank programme that has developed in Romania is that participants are involved in *raising* money for, as well as selecting, grant-funded projects. So early on in the process (and with the help of CCF and others) the group organize **fundraising** activities such as special events, greetings card sales, gift wrapping etc. This is normally matched by contributions from other local funders/CCF (months 3–6).

With the funding secured, the next step is for the group to conduct some research into **community needs** so that grants can be targeted accordingly / most effectively (months

5–6). This is normally done through interviews and focus groups with young people and it is this information that helps frame the guidelines and the focus of the grants programme.

In the YouthBank **grantmaking** process (months 6–7), the group is fully involved, promoting the grants programme through posters, fliers and social media, reviewing proposals, interviewing applicants, selecting the grants and then publicising the results and drawing up individual grant agreements with successful applicants. As the grants are implemented (months 8–9), the YouthBank participants are also involved in **monitoring** and then **evaluating** the projects (which are usually quite short – 2–3 months). The annual cycle normally ends with some kind of **public event** where the results of the programme are shared with the community (months 10–11).

Over the last six years, our YouthBank fund has supported 84 youth-led projects on a wide range of issues, including music, the arts, the elderly, the environment, children with disabilities etc. Some of our ex-YouthBank members also have continued to remain involved in the activities of the Cluj Community Foundation: one of the founder members of YouthBank, for example, has worked with us on our youth cultural festival as well as our annual Swimathon, while others have remained involved as beneficiaries of the foundation's scholarship programme.

3 What has been the response to YouthBank in Cluj among the broader community, Simona?

SS It has been very positive. YouthBank has helped demonstrate that young people are an important asset in our community. The community foundation has been able to draw on its own networks and relationships in highlighting this initiative, while at the same time drawing attention to some of the most pressing needs of young people in the community. One of the best indicators of the success of YouthBank in Cluj can be found in the comments of some of our local donors. One told us, 'It is amazing to see that people are willing to get involved when they are given a real opportunity', and another said, 'We like YouthBank, the initiative of Cluj Community Foundation, because it brings into dialogue two basic categories of social responsibility themes: the ones who to do something today (let's call them "adults") with those who will need to do this tomorrow ("youngsters").'

4 Can you tell us about the recruitment process for YouthBank? How do you go about it and what are you looking for in potential YouthBank members?

SS Firstly, with recruitment, we have found that the best advocates or ambassadors for YouthBank are current and former YouthBank members themselves who can go into high schools, youth clubs, special events etc. and talk about their own experiences with YouthBank and the learning and personal development that they derived from it.

Interested candidates are invited to submit a CV with a motivation letter, describing what they are looking for personally and also what kinds of positive change they would like to bring about in the world. We normally look for different strengths, skills and personalities that can make a positive addition to the current team. Diversity in the group is important. We try to make sure that we get a good mix of members from different parts of the city (including disadvantaged areas), as well as in terms of gender, ethnicity, young people with disabilities etc.

VR Yes, inclusion is really important when we talk about YouthBank. Whether it is a community foundation or another partner running the YouthBank, they will be expected to seek the participation of young people from all backgrounds, abilities, educational attainments and minority groups, taking account of the youth population profile of the area of benefit. Particular attention will be needed to reach and involve young people who might otherwise be excluded from such opportunities because of the disadvantage and/or social exclusion they experience. This demands attention to how such groups will access funds, gain support for their ideas, undertake projects and themselves become involved in grantmaking in the longer term.

5 What does it take from an organization supporting a YouthBank-type initiative to get – and keep – young people?

SS We have been working with young people since 2006. I think organizations need to be good observers and evaluators of youth needs. They also need to be a bit intuitive as well as flexible when it comes to matching young peoples' expectations as they evolve and change.

6 What 'Top Tips' would you offer anyone interested in setting up a YouthBank?

VR YouthBank is more than just a way of giving out grants – it is about supporting and training young people to enable them to develop themselves and to benefit other young people and the wider community. It is about young people leading the way, whilst also recognising the valuable role that adults have in supporting young people to be able to do this. To set up a YouthBank it's important to think through a whole list of issues and find ways of fulfilling a range of functions. We know from the experiences of our pilot YouthBanks that there are a variety of ways to set up and run YouthBanks and we are keen to continue to try out new ideas. Some YouthBanks are hosted by one main organization, others by a partnership of local organizations, but whatever the arrangements, there are some common issues that all new YouthBanks will need to address. The following list is by no means exhaustive but includes the major factors in setting up a YouthBank.

i) A Coordinator

In our experience, we have found that a successful YouthBank needs one person to lead its development – this does not mean they have to do all of the work! Rather, someone needs to take responsibility to ensure the work gets done. The amount of time coordinators have to run YouthBanks varies enormously, from just a few hours per week up to a half-time staff post. We would strongly recommend the latter but recognise that this is not always possible (at least initially) and for smaller YouthBanks that meet less often, it may not be absolutely necessary.

ii) Young people

Of course you can't have a YouthBank without young people! But you will need to think carefully about how to go about recruiting young people and who they will be. We expect YouthBanks to be representative of the area they cover. Again, this may not always be possible at first but there needs to be a plan for targeting young people who might normally be harder to reach. A good way to do this is through the YouthBank grants themselves. Once the YouthBank is set up, the grants can be publicised in areas and ways

that would reach specific groups you may want to target and then you can begin to find ways of enabling them to become grant-makers themselves.

iii) Money for grant-making

You will need to identify a pot of money to be given out by your YouthBank as grants (and we normally recommend that funds are in place for a minimum of two years). We are often asked how much this should be but there is no fixed amount that is necessary. It will depend very much on the needs of the area the YouthBank will cover as well as what you can manage to get to start with. It needs to be enough to make setting up the YouthBank worthwhile but we have also found that a large pot of money, especially at the beginning can put unwanted pressures on a YouthBank. Some YouthBanks give out grants very early on but others have taken up to six months before they are ready to give out their first grants.

iv) Money for support and training

This is crucial for the success of a YouthBank. Young people will need support and training on a range of issues; from teambuilding and making decisions to equal opportunities and deciding on grant criteria. The YouthBank Toolkit is designed to help you deliver some of this, but there may be more that you want to do and there will be other costs involved including staff time and money for residential trainings. You may not need to raise money to pay for all of this directly but be able to find partner organizations that will contribute 'in-kind' support.

v) Somewhere to meet

You will need to find suitable premises for your YouthBank – somewhere the young people will find easy to get to and is appropriate and accessible to all young people. Again, you may find a partner organization to contribute this free of charge. Some YouthBanks have had to use different venues and this has made it more difficult to establish the identity of the YouthBank.

vi) Training for young people

We have already mentioned money for training and, of course, you will also need experienced people to deliver it. You may well need to bring in specialist people or organizations to do some of this – for example, grant-making or disability awareness training – but your YouthBank coordinator may well be able to deliver the bulk of what you will need.

vii) Finance and administration support

This is really important too and can be a nightmare if not properly set up and operated! As your YouthBank will be spending other people's money, you will need to be able to account for it properly, with appropriate administration systems to pay out grants and record how the money is spent. Over time, the young people will be able to do more and more of this, but you will need to make arrangements from the start of your YouthBank for this to be done. Do remember to check that any arrangements you put in place for the payment of grants are actually suitable for the operation of your YouthBank. In our experience, YouthBanks like to make decisions and pay out grants quickly so it is important to use an organization that will be able to meet these needs.

viii) Monitoring and evaluation systems

All YouthBanks have to monitor their work – to look at where and how grants are spent. We would hope that young people themselves will take this task on and so it is important to offer training to enable them to do this. You will also need to think about how you evaluate the work of your YouthBank: specific areas could include how grants are spent, the impact of YouthBank on those involved and the impact of the YouthBank on the community as a whole.

6 What kinds of organizational support are needed to ensure the success of YouthBank and other youth grantmaking efforts? What are some of the different models and can you tell us about some of pros and cons associated with them?

VR In our experience, there are two main models for developing and sustaining youth grant-making efforts, although there are obviously multiple ways to organize local YouthBanks to serve different geographic areas. The first of these, which we have found to be the most efficient, has been tested in Romania, Slovakia and will soon be introduced in Bulgaria. Here, a community foundation network or support organization (like ARC in Romania, WCIF in Bulgaria and the Slovakian Community Foundation Association) provide the coordination function and they effectively 'license' their local network of interested community foundations to develop the YouthBank approach.

In other instances, where there is no coordinating body (such as a network or association) a community foundation may choose to organize a YouthBank 'in house' or else it may look to identify an NGO partner to host the YouthBank (again, under licence). Both of these come with positives and challenges.

For a community foundation managing a YouthBank in-house, it can bring its reputation, visibility and leadership to bear when it comes to identifying local funding sources and YouthBank can quickly become integral to the community foundation's programme portfolio. From a resource perspective too, by managing the YouthBank in-house, the foundation does not need to provide additional resources to partner organizations, which may also be a factor.

However, working effectively with young people is specialised and often labour-intensive work, and not all community foundations possess the necessary in-house facilitation and development skills (or sometimes just the basic capacity) to nurture youth decision-making or indeed its potential implications for centralized management and decision-making systems: what happens, for example, if a YouthBank appears to be making 'the wrong decision'?! Essentially, it all comes to down to a foundation's attitude towards taking calculated risks and encouraging public service innovation, where young people can have a very real stake in the communities they are from. If a community foundation is worried about this type of risk, then it can build more checks and balances into its programme – but it should try to do so in an interesting, "Generation Y"¹, way – interactive, relevant, fast-paced and fun. In this context, YouthBank can be regarded as the 'research and design' wing of the organization, in which grants are a series of 'small bets' taken on proposals that may or may not work. It encourages young people to experiment with new levels of responsibility, while engaging their talents and goodwill. In order for this strategy to be successful, however, it is essential to secure sufficient

¹ Broadly speaking, 'Generation Y' refers to the age-group 30 years and under

resources for the YouthBank so that there can be a proper investment in assessment and review and so that the programme can be adjusted and improved accordingly.

Similarly, if a community foundation decides to outsource its YouthBank programme to an external (NGO) partner there are pro and cons here too. Firstly, youth-focused NGOs can often bring specialist and technical skills to YouthBanks (and in particular, YB coordinators), which more 'generalist' community foundations might not possess in-house. With this arrangement, the community foundation can also convene meetings of a broader cross-section of community representatives and other events to share learning and linkages across other programme and interest areas.

There can be downsides to this type of arrangement too: outsourcing YouthBank management to a third party can sometimes lead to confusion over the identity and ownership of the YouthBank and there can also be tensions around expectations/obligations and lines of accountability on the part of both the community foundation and the NGO. Furthermore, unless there is complete buy-in on the part of the NGO (and in particular in terms of subscription to the ethos and values of YouthBanks) there is always a danger that other programmes priorities may squeeze the YouthBank to the sidelines.

SS In our case, while the Cluj Community Foundation is the host organization for the YouthBank (providing the institutional framework), the YouthBank team are completely autonomous when it comes to decision-making and programme implementation. A YouthBank Coordinator, employed by CCF acts as the link between the YouthBank and the rest of the foundation. As Vernon has mentioned, in Romania, ARC (the Association for Community Relations) has played an important coordinating role around the development of YouthBanks nationally. With ARC also based in Cluj, we are lucky enough to have direct access to this source of support too.

I think there has definitely been a benefit to having the YouthBank hosted within the community foundation as it has provided it with a secure framework within which to develop. Not only has the foundation been able to provide expertise but it has also been able to bring its own relationships, trust and credibility to the process too. Within the community foundation, we are currently thinking of ways to expand our youth programmes and to integrate them into our broader programme of work. As this develops, we may need to think about how we can best preserve the independence of YouthBank while also deepening and expanding our broader youth programme. One option that we may consider in the longer term is that of spinning the YouthBank off as a stand-alone entity - again, that will come with its own set of pros and cons, I'm sure!

For more information on the YouthBank Toolkit and on the work of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and Cluj Community Foundation please address your inquiries to info@globalfundcf.org or send them directly to Vernon Ringland (VRingland@communityfoundationni.org) or Simona Serban (simona.serban@fundatiacomunitaracluj.ro).