Testing Change
Project Summary
2014-2023
Where we started

Started in 2014 by a small group of colleagues from around the world looking to fill a missing gap in approaches to significant change and be one piece of the puzzle.

It was the multi-year testing period, crucial to significant change, that was a missing piece and became the focus.

The project was designed to (1) develop and test new ways of operating that could be used by any civil society organization looking at how to adapt their organizational operations to address these significant changes; and (2) evaluate and share the learning as widely as possible in the global civil society community.

We wanted to look at the range of issues that civil society leaders need to navigate to re-orient their approaches in order to increase the impact from their efforts.

The Steering Group identified a number of issues we could potentially focus on.
Initially we thought to have 3-5 working groups run simultaneously (to simulate how executive directors need to deal with multiple challenges at once), however due to capacity challenges, we started groups as we had lead organizations and could manage the working groups activity.

**Over the course of the project we had three working groups on:**

- Youth integration
- Impact assessment
- Leadership.

Due to funding constraints and to be more globally inclusive, we worked primarily virtually.

In addition to many virtual meetings, we had two in-person roundtables (coordinated with key participants being together for other meetings) to start the youth engagement and impact assessment working groups; and one in-person meeting for the full project in 2019.
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The Steering Group membership changed a number of times over the life of the project with one member staying with the group the full time.

Approximately 12 organizations participated in the community with other participants from NGO support organizations and academia as well.
What we learned

Someone has to be the 'pioneers'. Focusing on collaborative global change efforts is now more common but at the time the Testing Change project started in 2014 it was not as 'mainstream'.

We were able to bond a diverse community virtually. It is not easy, but it is doable. Strategies we used included one-on-one conversations outside the working group meetings which helped participants build rapport with each other, and group work on collective documents online which also helped bring the working groups together.

Holding space to discuss change initiatives with peers is critical to learning and adaptation but it is hard to find the time to do. Collaborative projects like this provide the space for reflection that day-to-day work doesn't allow.

Paradigm change, like other types of changes needs practice to change our mind-sets and behavioral patterns. This may call for strong and creative facilitation to encourage people to not fall into accustomed tracks but continually step off of them.

Effective organizational and systemwide change needs to be supported by high level commitment (that is sustained through leadership changes), accountability to multiple stakeholders, and resources to allow for time to be allocated for change initiatives.
In multi-year projects people may change positions and you need to have ways to bring people in and out of the process. Even when there is continuity participants may need to miss meetings. A practice of regularly sharing notes and having them in an easily accessible place can help with continuity.

More resources for collaborative efforts are certainly needed to help make these types of efforts a priority. In collaborative initiatives someone needs to have as their focus keeping the momentum and priority level, and practitioners need to have the time they spend on these efforts valued.

A number of Testing Change participants reflected on their experience with the project:

Participants in the project noted the importance of shared learning, space to reflect, and having peers and partners outside of their traditional networks all to have been important to strengthening their own work as change leaders.”

~ Anabel Cruz, Founder Director of the Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo (ICD)

Having Testing Change as a thought partner to CIVICUS in its journey towards greater youth engagement over multiple years was a unique opportunity. It helped to stretch our limits and the possibilities for where we could go. Holding the time and space to engage with colleagues over the time it actually takes for change to happen was very important.

~ Amy Miller-Taylor, former Chief Strategy Officer, CIVICUS

Reflective spaces and sharing with others going through similar challenges is rare but yet so key. When there is more clarity around our work and systems are improved, new opportunities open up.

~ Janet Mawiyoo, former CEO of the Kenya Community Development Foundation
Our first effort, the youth engagement focus, led by CIVICUS, started in late 2016. The first working group's task was to generate ideas for CIVICUS to possibly test around how more effective youth engagement could impact its work.

Through a modified design thinking process (conducted virtually) eight ideas were generated and voted on by the group. Four ideas were sent to CIVICUS and one was chosen: *Consciously integrate youth perspectives into all products and services and the work of the organization.*

A second working group was created for this next phase of the initiative which included representatives of other groups working to implement something similar who could function as a peer learning group.

Some of the accomplishments and continued challenges after the five year multi-year testing period included:

- Youth had been a constituency that CIVICUS was serving, and now youth activists are themselves sought after for advice and are the ones requesting meetings and sharing information.

- CIVICUS is now systematizing the needed change and the whole organization is beginning to work differently. Cohesion throughout an organization can be hard and this has taken much effort, attention and years and continues to need effort.
After initial discussions around identifying new approaches to evaluation, the group helped the lead organization Global Giving think through an idea to test. Most of the focus was on further developing indicators to determine if organizations are indeed community led. For a number of reasons, this work stopped before the testing period.

Some take aways shared:

- Assessing impact and/or evaluating an initiative are broad concepts. They can focus on accountability and/or learning. We are often moved in the direction of accountability by our donors and other stakeholders, but we can choose how to balance our focus and develop processes to learn how improve our work to strengthen actual impact.

- There is less correlation between time invested (teaching, training, etc..) and impact than one might expect and it can be hard to assess impact. This argues for having a number of different pathways as you don't always know what will lead to the impact.

- It takes more time, but moving towards qualitative approaches such as individual interviews and focus groups can help to identify who may have changed behavior based on engagement with the organization and its programs.

Focused on the important bridging strength of the project noting that: “The stress and emphasis of this project in paradigm change and learning around impact assessment matches some of the most vital and present concerns of the evaluation community.”

Pablo Rodríguez-Bilella, professor at the Universidad Nacional de San Juan in Argentina.
Leadership specific

Our research and a roundtable of some of those involved in this field validated that although there are many excellent leadership programs that help leaders to strengthen their skills and broaden their approaches, few have a peer group go through the process together of applying these approaches directly to their leadership of their current organization and particular changes they may be trying to implement.

A global working group of five executive directors looked at the question of what new leadership approach they might want to test in their organization.

Some of our learning after the multi-year testing period was as follows:

- One needs to learn and relearn how much a leader's own actions, reactions and perspectives influence the team, especially during a change process.

- The importance of process ownership to successful change.

- The advantages of participatory decision making. For a leader, not having all of the responsibility can actually be uplifting.

- External factors (e.g., pandemic, elections, economy, civil unrest, etc.) play an important role in often disrupting the best of plans. The tests evolved and changed over the multi-year testing process depending on what was happening externally. Agility and resilience approaches are important to have and practice.

- In change processes, things can feel worse before they are better. This is where peer support can be very helpful.