



6 Lessons from Young Leaders: Insights for Shaping the Future



From December 2023 to February 2024 the team of Ashoka in Poland, Czechia and Slovakia had conducted the scoping research, which prepared us to develop a program Youth Leadership for Emerging Future. The program is conducted in partnership with Save the Children and Humanitarian Leadership Academy.

In the broader probing exercise, we considered over 200 persons (65 from Poland, 65 from Ukraine, 35 Slovak and 40 Czech). Majority were between 20 and 30 years old. We had the privilege to talk to approximately 70 leaders to get an update about their current engagement focus, needs and plans. We've talked to people who have proved their motivation to change the world, who successfully implemented changemaking initiatives - with empathy and determination in collaborating with others for the common good. Their energy and impact are worth preserving, so we listened carefully to understand how effectively reduce obstacles of youth engagement.

LESSON 1:

Need for a true participation



**I have a word for it...
Youngwashing.**

We have found young changemakers in various roles. They launch their own initiatives in the topics coming from their hearts, work on transformational projects in established organizations and institutions, do research at universities to bring new knowledge in solving specific social problem and develop activities to create a support ecosystem across matters. They are among us. Young changemakers perceive social challenges and claim their share in solving them. But when it comes to solving problems on the organizational or societal level, they often hit a wall - “about us without us” or cooperation just for a photo with young people on social networks. We appreciate the bright exceptions, however, in most cases the door is closed to the young.

There is a deep need for more space to express how young people perceive social challenges and for more opportunities that allow true participation.



LESSON 2:

Pressing workload



I am constantly switching between school, work, theater and social activities. Just switching is exhausting in itself, and that's not even mentioning personal and family matters...

How busy are young people nowadays? More than most elders could imagine. Many young changemakers combine school or university with regular jobs to sustain themselves financially, and all their social activism and changemaking come in addition to the other roles. There are no paid vacations and no limits of overtime in unpaid civic engagement. For example, one of the young leaders of several successful national campaigns in Poland also works a 2/3 job in marketing, and studies at a medical university; another one works 18h a week, studies law, and additionally coordinates several social projects a year, engaging dozens of schools. All this at an age when they start their personal lives with everything that goes with it – experimenting, finding who they are and what they are good at, finding a life partner, living and more, not to mention the specific situation of Ukrainian changemakers due to the war. Their schedules are packed. Lot of young changemakers were talking about "finding their place in the world", motivation and energy to make a social impact are high. But time is a very limited resource, often insufficient.

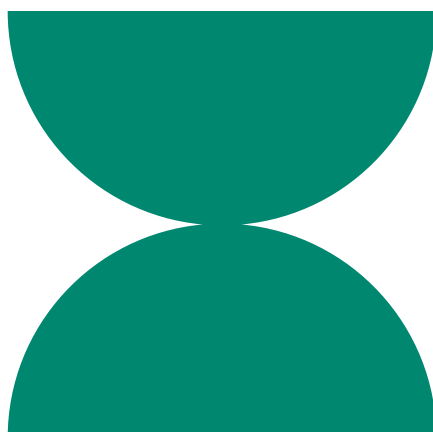
What is the need here? We hear the key need – to be understood what young leaders need to deal with. Intergenerational dialogue, mutual understanding and acceptance are necessary. Other specific needs are described in related issues below.

LESSON 3:

Financial challenges



I can't pay the rent with a good feeling, I also need money to live.



Young people face the assumption of elders that they should be grateful for the opportunity to work for free as part of their learning and gaining experience. Young changemakers don't question it, but it has its limits which tend to be overlooked. As mentioned earlier, they often struggle with juggling time between their education, paid work and searching for jobs and temps to secure a living and civic engagement. And regarding changemaking activities, they are often locked into unpaid work, which in some cases leads to burnout. Individual struggles correspond with the struggles of youth initiatives and organizations. On one side, they face the same problems as the entire social entrepreneurship sector. On the other hand, for young changemakers it is more challenging. Existing financial support is often available for established organizations but not for emerging ones that need professionalization, both to pay for the serious involvement of young leaders and to pay for people with the necessary hard skills. Young people also have a limited work experience and contacts to bridge this gap. All this combined with the pressing workload creates a challenging cocktail for the young leaders.

To ignite change, we need to take few steps forward:

- 1.** Create opportunities for changemaking and youth involvement in paid roles in existing organizations and institutions.
- 2.** Create opportunities for changemaking within the formal education - although it is unpaid, it gives young people an opportunity for changemaking and personal development, while leaving time to deal with financial matters outside of school.
- 3.** Ensure financial support for emerging youth initiatives to fund the professionalization.



LESSON 4:

Burnout and mental health struggles



It's like a tightrope, from which you can fall left into depression about the state of the world or right into burnout from trying to make the world a better place.

The constant time pressure, overload of expectations and obligations, not balanced with opportunities to rest and to learn emotional regulation in a safe space, are taking a toll on all young people. Young leaders also suffer activist burn out, and it happens even among teenagers. This problem affects with highest intensity those working on climate issues, because that thematic field is specifically complex, results are decades away and individual influence is not tangible to tackle, so it's hard to feel satisfaction from one's actions. Some young changemakers also realize how deep social changes are needed in general, but they cannot imagine a path that would lead to these system changes, which is frustrating for them.

We see several needs here:

- 1.** Intergenerational dialogue, mutual understanding and acceptance - without underestimating the situation.
- 2.** Young leaders need support especially in learning how to rest, deal with pressure, build psychological resistance and regularly find joy that would sustain them in the long-term work on overbearing social problems.
- 3.** A visibility of system change initiatives in important topics and success stories or noticeable progress or at least a description of the way for system changes in society - both for mental health and to be able to join.

LESSON 5:

How to work together



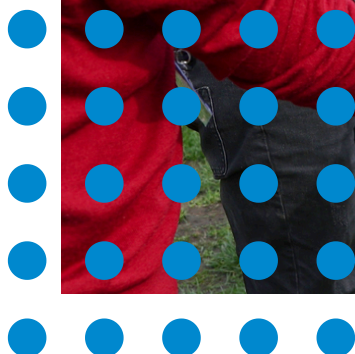
I have experience with my topic, but not with building an organization and management.



Young changemakers have the energy and determination to be active in solving social challenges. However, when they reach a situation where they need to collaborate with more people, they run into a number of practical problems. How to lead projects, teams and organizations? How to find the right people with specific skills they need to move forward (marketing, fundraising, graphics, accounting, law and more)? How to cooperate on a daily basis, whether with a boss or without a boss, however functionally? How to use time effectively and work with volunteers? So many questions here that they meet for the first time. This matter seems even more emerging when the crisis arises (i.e. pandemic or when the war in Ukraine fully escalated). We observe motivation to act, initiate the ideas and implementation. At the same time the urge to work in a dynamic way makes it even more difficult to learn from others on how to build and lead teams.

We see a number of needs here:

- 1.** Clearly explained basics of cooperation and knowledge transfer in student organizations, not starting from scratch again and again.
- 2.** Thematic workshops connecting know-how to their project or organization.
- 3.** Having a chance to ask more experienced ones, ideally as a variety of mentors with whom specific things can be solved.
- 4.** Identify talented young individuals with specialized skills who deliver quality work.
- 5.** A general call for people who operate from the “level of love”, have not given up on changing the world for the better and have the ability to collaborate, jump on the bandwagon and get involved.
- 6.** Building this set of skills before it is even necessary to use.



LESSON 6:

Need for a changemaker community



Sometimes I feel like Robinson Crusoe.

Young changemakers often feel alone. We observed three reasons. First, a social innovator is usually the first one who develops an activity and has skin in the game. Second, there are bubbles of support around big cities that are not available to those who live far away. Third, the topic addressed can be specific. Young changemakers do not always have people around them who share their vision of the world. It can have implications for their perception of self-worth and health. That's why they need a community. This may be characteristic of changemakers in general but may be more challenging for young people to overcome – they are at the beginning of their journey and their relationship building has been affected by the covid pandemic. We see that the community can help not only personally and practically, but that it can bring an inspiration and ignite changemaking, especially in the case of international contacts.

We hear the need to have a support group of peers who share a changemaker view of the world and are in leadership roles. Being able to be and speak with people who are dealing with the same things and to share good practices and tips. They are primarily looking for human relationships, long-term, something more than meeting for a coffee or a program that ends after three months. They would appreciate a stable platform for young people. But it's enough for them to get to know each other and connect, they can handle the next steps themselves. It is important to find inclusive ways to overcome geographical and personal barriers.

Supporting youth initiatives through understanding and collaboration

Understanding these challenges should help to be more supportive towards youth initiatives. Decreasing the pressure of expectations and increasing appreciation seems like a good way for improving intergenerational cooperation. Similar conclusions were published in our report on mapping the ecosystem supporting young people in Poland where the interviewed youngsters asked to be taken more seriously in dialogues, stated the need for financial recourses to sustain their initiatives instead of just advice, and admitted their struggles with pressure alongside the need for possibilities to simply relax and feel joy in peer groups. [Ashoka's Engaging Young People Policy](#) supports responding to these needs and challenges and our project partners from Save the Children and the Humanitarian Leadership Academy also recognize the need to work on strengthening psychological resilience and provide several educational recourses that are useful not only to humanitarian workers, but all social leaders. We also believe that Youth Leadership for Emerging Future project is a place where we address many of the mentioned needs and challenges and where we create a space for youth to be heard and truly participate as well.



About Ashoka: Our world is changing in profound ways. While we don't know which problems will appear tomorrow, we do know that they will be increasingly complex and interconnected. That's why more than ever we need people to jump in, work together, and solve problems in imaginative ways. [Ashoka](#) is a global organization that identifies and supports the world's leading social entrepreneurs, learns from the patterns in their innovations, and mobilizes a global community that embraces these new frameworks to build an "Everyone a Changemaker" world: a world where all citizens are powerful and contribute to change in positive ways.

Want to know how we support young changemakers? Visit the [Youth Leadership for Emerging Future](#) program website.



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