

**RESTLESS  
DEVELOPMENT**

# State of Youth Civil Society

2025



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# Movement Building

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“A movement is a group of people who have a collective idea that is disruptive, challenging the status quo...”



## Introduction \*

Movements have historically been at the forefront of driving change, serving as powerful vehicles for mobilising young people to challenge the status quo and reimagine more just and equitable societies. From #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS in Nigeria, to Black Lives Matter in the United States, #NotTooYoungToRun in Kenya, #FeesMustFall in South Africa, and the global #MeToo, movements have played a vital role in amplifying silenced voices and elevating urgent community demands.

They significantly differ from non-profit organisations, arising from shared grievances and a collective vision for justice. Often, they do not require offices, registration, or formal leadership structures to function; instead, they are organic, people-driven and created by individuals and groups who believe that change is possible. Movements are fluid, adaptable, and prioritise collective ownership.

**“A movement is a group of people who have a collective idea that is disruptive, challenging the status quo...”**

**Movement Leader, Zimbabwe**

## Characteristics of movements

### 1. Context-driven leadership structure

Depending on the operating context, movements adopt either horizontal or vertical leadership structures. In authoritarian or repressive environments, loose and flat hierarchies become strategic tools for survival. The absence of rigid leadership frameworks helps movements avoid state surveillance and co-option. Instead, coordination is often managed through temporary, needs-based committees such as mobilisation, communications, coordination, and finance. Individual young people and those representing various like-minded organisations contribute resources, time, and expertise.

**“Committees were formed in response to a particular need... made up of existing youth organisations which forwarded representatives into the movement.”**

**Movement Leader, Nigeria**

**“We had many volunteers... young people who brought their different expertise to the movement.”**

**Movement Leader, Zimbabwe**

In contexts where vertical leadership is applied, the model minimises reliance on a single influential leader, instead emphasising the distribution of power across different levels within the hierarchy.

### 2. Decision-making is quick and collective

Young organisers emphasised that, in the absence of formal titles and rigid roles, decision-making becomes more collective, transparent, and responsive. Instead of waiting for approval from a central authority, members can act based on real-time needs, guided by shared principles and trust-based collaboration.

**“Decision-making is prompt—no red tape or bureaucracy. There is collective leadership, democratic leadership.”**

**Movement Leader, Nigeria**

### 3. Intersectional approach to leadership

A ‘leaderless’ structure creates space for a more inclusive approach to participation. Young people from diverse backgrounds, who are often excluded from leadership due to factors like gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, or education, are more likely to feel that their contributions matter. In many cases, coordination is task-driven and emergent: people step forward where their skills and energy are best utilised, and leadership is about action, not authority.



However, this flexibility is not without its tensions. Some movements have struggled with the absence of defined leadership. Reflecting on their own experience, one leader highlighted that their movement faced challenges because it lacked clear, accountable leadership roles.

**“We failed by being leaderless. Even the liberation movement had leaders.”**

**Movement Leader, Zimbabwe**

They further highlighted that accountability and collective decision-making can be integrated within the vertical leadership style, ensuring both collective and individual leadership.

## 4. New media technologies are equalisers

New media technologies have been an equalising force for youth-led movements. Strategic use of social media platforms, especially during peak public frustrations, allows for rapid mobilisation. Hashtags, real-time videos, memes, and symbolic dressing (for example, red bandanas for period poverty) create powerful visual narratives.

**“We occupied X (formerly Twitter) in a way that everyone was saying no to the Finance Bill... trending globally for four consecutive days.”**

**Movement Leader, Kenya**

## 5. Tactics must be agile

Movements do not rely on one form of action or intervention; they know that what worked last year may not work again. Some movements intentionally end after achieving their goals, understanding that longevity is not always the measure of success.

## 6. People-Driven

The foundation of any movement is people – their stories, their energy, their solidarity. Movements are sustained by a clear “why”: a collective vision of what needs to be

built or dismantled. From health professionals offering services, to religious institutions offering space, to diaspora communities sending funds, movements rely on shared commitment more than formal resources.

**“Some gave USD 1, others USD 1,000. Even parents gave money. Matatu drivers gave free transport.”**

**Movement Leader, Kenya**

## 7. Rooted in self-reliance and community trust

Movements’ resourcing strategies are rooted in self-reliance and community trust. Initial funding often comes from the movement members themselves. In some cases, transparent trust funds are created. As visibility increases, support may grow, but so does the risk of donor interference.

**“The money became the problem. Donors joined the gravy train... We had to tailor-make what happened into their template.”**

**Movement Leader, Zimbabwe**

This reflects a critical tension: movements need resources, but funding must not compromise autonomy. Institutionalisation can dilute political clarity and spontaneity. Movements call for alternative funding approaches that honour grassroots leadership and reflect local economic realities, particularly in contexts where young people are navigating poverty and structural debt.

## 8. Documentation is the key

Documentation plays a crucial role in sustaining a movement's narrative and memory, especially in patriarchal or oppressive systems that erase contributions by women and marginalised communities.

**“As a woman, you are 90% erased.”**

**Movement Leader, Nigeria**

Clear communication, transparent resourcing, and storytelling strengthen credibility and accountability. Movements insist on documenting their processes and victories to preserve history and claim their place in the public record.

## 9. Success is measured by the community

When it comes to success, movements do not rely on donor reports or metrics alone. Impact is measured by social and political shifts, laws withdrawn, communities mobilised, and mindsets changed.

**“Articulate what you are going out for. What is the minimum we want to come home with?”**

**Movement Leader, Nigeria**

Examples of success include:

- Withdrawal of oppressive finance bills
- MPs voting against their parties in solidarity with communities
- Local communities calling on movement leaders to intervene
- A generation remembering the campaign's name and purpose

**“Anyone who was 18 years and above from 2016 onwards will give you a summary of what that movement was.”**

**Movement Leader, Nigeria**

This is the legacy of movement-building, when political action becomes cultural memory.



## What Young People Need to Know...

### Start Small – Claim Early Wins

Begin with tangible, visible actions rooted in local realities. Early victories—no matter how modest—build confidence, credibility, and collective energy.

**“Action brings impact, and when there is impact, there is an audience.”**

Movement Leader, Zimbabwe

### Define a Clear Purpose and Shared Objectives

Anchor your movement in the lived experiences of your community. Be specific about what you stand for and who you serve. Clarity ensures relevance and prevents duplication.

### Understand the Ecosystem – Map the Terrain

You are not alone. Map out who is doing what in your area. Understand where your efforts complement others and identify opportunities for collaboration, not competition.

### Build a Collective Identity

Create a shared sense of belonging through symbols, language, or rituals. Movements thrive when people feel emotionally and ideologically connected.

### Define Core Issues Strategically

Be specific and intersectional. Identify the structural issues that matter most and use them to shape your narrative, demands, and alliances.

### Foster Inclusive Leadership, Not Personality Politics

Avoid movements that revolve around individuals or cliques. Promote leadership as service, not status. Make space for diverse voices and collective decision-making.



**“Everyone wants to lead and bring their own thinking, but we must allow others to lead us too.”**

## What Young People Need to Know...

### Encourage Shared Leadership and Trust the Process

Let leadership emerge naturally, but clarify roles and responsibilities. Shared leadership is not chaos—it's democratic, trust-based, and adaptable.

### Stay Dynamic and Open to Support

Remain responsive to change. Build partnerships across generations and sectors. Create regular spaces for reflection and learning.

### Gather Knowledge – Know What You Need

Educate yourself continuously. Understand the systems you're disrupting and what resources (skills, tools, networks) you need to sustain the work.

### Centre Community and Collaboration

Movements are built together. Celebrate the people you've worked with and give credit where it's due. Erasure has no place in collective liberation.

### Build and Protect Credibility

Be transparent, consistent, and accountable. People support movements they trust—especially when you show commitment beyond platforms and donors.

### Take Care of Yourself and Each Other

Activism is emotional and exhausting. Prioritise rest, healing, and care as part of your strategy. A burnt-out movement cannot sustain change.



**“There is no better time for social movements to emerge and grow.”**

Movement Leader, Zimbabwe

But they must be rooted in strategy, collective care, and radical hope.

## CASE STUDY

### “Occupy Parliament”

– A Feminist, Youth-Led Movement in Kenya (2024)

#### Background & Context

In 2024, the Kenyan government introduced a Finance Bill in Parliament, sparking one of the most significant feminist and youth-led movements in the country's recent history. Presented as a response to economic instability, particularly to meet the USD30.5 billion 2024/25 budget, the bill enacted new taxes on digital content creation, menstrual products, transport, and everyday goods, further burdening already economically strained youth, women, and traditionally marginalised groups.

Activists widely regarded the bill as punitive and indifferent to the needs and lived realities of young people, with no corresponding creation of jobs or public accountability. What followed the bill's tabling was a coordinated, spontaneous, and feminist-informed movement rooted in economic justice, digital organising, mutual aid, and civic resistance.

#### Adopting a Hierarchical Structure

The movement was described as hierarchical, defying the vertical form of leadership. Coordination occurred through spontaneous committees based on people's skills, such as mobilisation, finance, communication and safety, which allowed the movement to move quickly, with no bureaucratic delays.

“We didn't have defined leaders, more of people reasoning together.”

Youth Leader

This flat structure enhanced trust and ownership, especially among marginalised groups often sidelined in mainstream organising. The feminist ethos, shared decision-making, inclusive participation, and care, underpinned its operations.

#### The Role of Creativity & Digital Organising

The movement's strength lay in its agility and creativity. Faced with a government ready to use force, activists responded quickly. Tactics ranged from avoiding police through backstreets ("hide and seek") to impactful visual and symbolic resistance. Red bandanas highlighted period poverty, while branded T-shirts, placards, cartoons, and social media graphics amplified outrage.

## CASE STUDY

**“We occupied X in a way that everyone was saying no to the Finance Bill... trending globally for four consecutive days.”**

**Youth Leader**

Influencers, engineers, teachers, and students all came together under shared hashtags across platforms. Messaging was tailored for Gen Z and Gen Alpha audiences through TikTok, memes, and short videos, maintaining energy and accessibility. This aesthetic of resistance, rooted in feminist visual culture, fostered emotional connection and turned the protests into community spaces of expression, safety, and defiance.

### **Participation and Solidarity: Community Philanthropy in Action**

At its height, the movement engaged widespread participation across social classes, regions, and professions. Solidarity networks quickly mobilised. Legal aid, food, healthcare, and even transportation were freely provided by compassionate professionals, families, and faith institutions. A community trust fund was set up, with audited accountability, to support protesters injured by police and manage logistics.

**“Financially, the resources came from us... even our own parents gave money. Matatu (motorbike) drivers gave free transport. Mosques gave space. Doctors joined. It was natural.”**

**Youth Leader**

Women and queer activists played a crucial role in organising safe spaces, distributing information, and managing care logistics. Their labour sustained the movement. This feminist practice of mutual care as resistance provided the protests with longevity and moral legitimacy that state structures failed to undermine.

### **Achievements and Impact**

Although 204 Members of Parliament (MPs) voted for the bill and 115 voted against, the movement achieved its core objective: Kenya's President, William Ruto, revoked the Finance Bill.

The movement's wins included:

- Rejection of the Finance Bill.
- Wide public education on taxation, debt, and youth livelihoods.
- Intergenerational solidarity
- Elevated feminist and youth voices in national economic discourse
- A new political consciousness among young Kenyans

## CASE STUDY

Notably, the movement's intentional documentation of abuses, protests, and victories ensured its story could not be erased.

### Reflections: The Feminist Power of Knowing When to Leave

This movement also taught a rare lesson: knowing when to step back. After reaching its immediate goal, the core organisers did not attempt to institutionalise or maintain the momentum for its own sake. Instead, they recognised that the political landscape had shifted, and new strategies would be necessary.

Instead of chasing funding or creating a fixed organisation, they maintained the spirit of movement-building, rooted in purpose rather than permanence. This feminist ethic of impermanence and fluidity helped prevent burnout and co-option.

### Key Lessons for Youth Civil Society

- Movements do not require formal structures to be effective. Trust, decentralised coordination, and shared purpose can propel national change.
- Feminist values, care, inclusivity, and collective leadership strengthen organisation. They build movements that nurture rather than drain.
- Digital tactics can be highly political. When rooted in lived experiences and cultural expression, they rally across divides.
- Strategy should not be driven by funding. Movements flourish through mutual aid, volunteerism, and solidarity, not log frames.
- Success isn't always about longevity. Sometimes, the most strategic move is to step back and regroup.

### Conclusion

The 'Occupy Parliament' movement against the Finance Bill in Kenya stands as a landmark example of youth-led, feminist organising in action. It reminded a nation and the world of the power of young people as power shifters, disruptors, dreamers, and defenders of justice. Rooted in community, driven by rage and care, and free from institutional capture, this was a strong assertion of people over profit, and dignity over debt.