



Ms. FOUNDATION for WOMEN

# culture and context

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COLLABORATIVE FUND  
FOR YOUTH-LED  
SOCIAL CHANGE

spring 2006

## Introduction

*“...with struggles come resilience — the ability to become stronger due to hurdles. People here do this through a sense of humor, a connection to the land, firm ties to family and friends, and spirituality. In addition, creativity and creative solutions are embraced here where voice takes many shapes and resistance many forms.”*

— Michelle Gaines,  
Appalachian Women’s Leadership Project.  
Taken from “Voices from Appalachia:  
Telling the Stories of Class, Poverty,  
and Pride in Rural West Virginia.”

Launched in 2000, the Collaborative Fund for Youth-Led Social Change (CFYS) grew out of an effort of funders and youth practitioners to support work at the intersection of youth development, youth organizing and gender. The Ms. Foundation was known for understanding the importance of gender in the lives of young women and men, and as one of the first foundations to promote the merging of youth development and youth organizing strategies, the Foundation found itself ready to learn and share stories about how youth organizations were combining youth development, youth organizing and gender-based programming in their work.

As part of a five-year cycle (2000-2005) of grantmaking, capacity building, networking and learning, CFYS raised \$2.8 million and engaged 12 youth organizations (represented by staff and youth leaders) and 20 donors in this collaborative partnership. Grantee partner organizations received three-year grants, as well as additional in-kind assistance for capacity building and networking; annual meetings to advance learning among staff and youth of grantee organizations and donor partners were also convened.

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the Collaborative Fund for Youth-Led Social Change’s final report titled, “Culture and Context.” This summary is divided into three sections:

- **Stories and Lessons from the Field** identifies themes and knowledge gained from the project
- **Capacity Building for Youth-Led Social Change** describes the intensive capacity-building effort undertaken by CFYS partners and offers key suggestions for the field on structuring supportive capacity-building
- **Recommendations** summarizes key recommendations for the field and donors

The full report of “Culture and Context” contains in-depth and informative pieces – *Voices from the Field* and *Ideas in Action* – that are crucial to understanding the complete scope of this work. *Voices from the Field* are stories written by CFYS grantee and donor partners, describing key elements of their work and approach. *Ideas in Action* offer specific examples of the ways CFYS programs addressed key issues and concerns.

To request a complete “Culture and Context” report, please contact Julia Beatty at the Ms. Foundation for Women: 212-742-2300 or [jbeatty@ms.foundation.org](mailto:jbeatty@ms.foundation.org)

*“The intersect with the Ms. Foundation allowed GSMA to go beyond the normal of leadership development and community service, and moved our programming options further towards preparing girls for social action.”*

— Tammy Rivera,  
Girls Scouts of the Milwaukee Area. Taken  
from “Girls Scouts and Social Change:  
Community Action Teams.”

As part of their involvement in the Collaborative Fund for Youth-Led Social Change (CFYS), participating organizations engaged in a learning laboratory over the last three years of the cycle, testing new ideas and refining approaches. Through this effort, two overarching themes surfaced: the importance of recognizing cultural context to successful program implementation; and focusing on gender, race, and age identities in the work. These themes create the “backbone” of the work, and, thus, the backbone of CFYS’s learning.

### Cultural Context as a Framework for Youth-Led Social Change

Cultural context emerged as an overarching framework for CFYS and has functioned as a foundation from which other key themes have arisen. “Cultural context” reaches beyond an appreciation of diversity to a fundamental change in organizational culture and program design.

This work was unique as it recognized that to truly engage young people requires understanding, (1) how they identify themselves; (2) the strengths (and limitations) of the organizational model; and (3) the context of the community in which

the youth live. Brought together, these became powerful motivators for change; they also shaped the kinds of programs and social change work that each organization undertook.

There are three major identities that shape youth-led social change work:

- **Individual Identity:** Identity is influenced by how youth and program staff see themselves and each other, as well as how they view (and are viewed by) other people and institutions. Their identity is reflected in the words they use, their patterns of interaction, and their own sense of what is important. Rather than using this notion as a backdrop for the work, CFYS grantees consciously integrated these explorations into their programs and social change approaches.
- **Organizational Identity:** Organizational identity is influenced by the historical developments, activities, and mission of an organization. CFYS programs found that defining organizational identity (for example, by asking questions such as, “Does this organization see itself as part of a larger network or is it a stand-alone organization?” “Is this a service or activist culture?” “Is this organization adult-led or youth-led?”) affected not only program practices, but was also a critical factor in determining issues and approach. In short, the culture of the organization determines what social change approaches are possible.

Additionally, CFYS programs found that among organizations that embrace youth leadership, there is a tendency for youth leaders to question and reshape the organization’s culture. If the organization was not historically youth-led, however, moving toward giving youth a greater voice

can create tension within the organization. Nevertheless, CFYS demonstrated that organizations that value youth contributions must be prepared to move in new directions.

- **Community Identity:** To be successful, local social change work must be in tune with local community culture, which is influenced by the historical and current dynamics of a location and people. CFYS found that to truly understand community conditions and identify appropriate responses, the organization must have a deep understanding of the current and evolving community culture. The culture of the community that they are part of and trying to engage shapes how the program and its youth participants are viewed, as well as what activities are possible. (For example, the kinds of activities young women participants in a rural community are able to pursue are different than those of young women participants for urban, immigrant communities.)

### Focus on Gender, Race, and Age Identities

Individuals, organizations, and communities bring multiple identities to social change work. The challenge for organizations is learning to value all identities while focusing on those that are most critical to the particular social change efforts at hand.

- **Gender and Identity:** Though the term gender means different things to different people, for CFYS, gender means gender identity and sexual orientation, including male, female, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and gender questioning. This concept of gender also incorporates race

and class identities, as CFYS has found them to be inextricably linked in the lives of youth and their allies.

CFYS wanted to move away from using “gender” as a code word for talking about girls and women, and towards a real understanding of what gender means to youth and how it affects youth programs. This work provided insight into how young women lead, their need for single-gender safe spaces, and their relationships with adults and with other young women and young men. To better understand how young women and young men work together, CFYS expanded this work to include mixed-gender programs.

- **Race and Identity:** Comprehending how race – like gender and age – affects the lives of young people and adults provides the awareness necessary to understand how the world works and how social change happens. The race/identity work, particularly for people-of-color based youth organizations, drew on how youth experience institutions and systems based on their racial identity.

A number of the programs in CFYS encouraged youth to think critically about issues of race, class, and gender by engaging in exercises that rely on their own, personal experiences—and an analysis of the role institutions play—to get at the root cause of problems the youth face. For example, some organizations use popular education strategies that seek to dissect, question and re-frame history and current events as told by the dominant culture. Others used political education and a critical race analysis to frame the issue campaigns that the youth organizing programs chose

to take action on. Youth participants were encouraged to do research and think critically about a particular event through the lens of their lived experience and the experiences of their family and community.

- **Age and Identity:** CFYS provided organizations an opportunity to explore age identity and its impact on building effective adult-youth partnerships. As adults have continued to work alongside youth to make decisions and lead projects and organizations, there has been a not-so-subtle shift from a focus on “youth-led” to a focus on “intergenerational partnerships that work.” CFYS partners understood that intergenerational partnerships are necessary for youth-led social change efforts to be effective. New learning emerged regarding the key factors for success, including recommendations to:

- **Help youth gain and sustain power and leadership:** Youth often inhabit a world where decisions are made *about* them and *for* them with very little input *from* them. CFYS partners found they needed to use an approach that develops the critical thinking, planning, risk-taking, and respect skills necessary for youth to assume power appropriately and effectively.
- **Help adults share power:** Adults engaged in youth-development or youth-organizing work often are comfortable being in decision-making positions. CFYS partners realized that unless youth participants are actively engaged in developing the vision of an organization or its programs they will never fully embrace it as their own and commit to its success.
- **Create the partnership:** CFYS partners explored the balance of youth and adult

roles in developing new partnerships for change. Because each organization’s cultural context was different, each needed to find its own balance and approach to youth-adult partnerships. Groups explored the different ways to support all partners – youth, younger staff, older staff – to do the work effectively.

### Conclusion: New Approaches to Youth-Led Social Change

By exploring a combination of youth development, youth organizing, and identity-based work, organizations involved in CFYS discovered that creating a new approach to youth-led social change is about more than simply adding youth organizing activities to youth development work, or adding a youth development focus to youth organizing work. Because this work is grounded in multiple identities, it is something wholly new, though deeply rooted in both traditions. This discovery has led to a refining of youth-development and youth-organizing tactics, and the exploration of new approaches to youth-led social change, including ones that:

- Address youth-identified needs
- Link individual development to larger societal issues
- Use the arts and youth popular culture as a means of creative political expression
- Work more deeply and broadly with youth
- Work to change power structures, societal values, and community culture.

Finally, CFYS demonstrated that the work of integrating youth development and youth organizing can happen in many different kinds of organizations and can take many different forms.

*Capacity building is done program-by-program and peer-to-peer in ways that have meaning for the participants within the cultural context of their lives – whether that be family, race, gender, neighborhood, orientation or expression based.*

— P. Catlin Fullwood,  
On-Time Consultants

## CFYS Capacity-Building Approach

The Collaborative Fund for Youth-Led Social Change’s approach to capacity building was designed to reflect the same values, and to engage in the same kind of critical analysis, as the programs themselves. CFYS positioned the program and its constituents at the core, realizing that their experience and knowledge should determine the approach so that the training or consultation could be integrated into the ongoing developmental work of the organizations, and sustained for as long as it proved relevant for the organizations.

Each organization required a unique set of capacity-building support, but each included:

- **Leadership development:** How to operationalize leadership development while framing and defining it within the principles and processes of the program; integrating constituency-building work into every aspect of program building and development.
- **Leadership transitions:** How to address the leadership transitions all programs face. Youth-led programs face the complexity of youth leaders and founders aging out of the program.
- **Incorporating gender, race and class analysis:** How to incorporate political

education on gender, race, and class into the organizing and other program work in ways that are generative and non-blaming.

- **Planning:** How to develop processes for planning that are dynamic and can live and grow with the organization; creating and keeping processes that are accessible and inclusive of youth and community constituencies.
- **Power, control, and empowerment:** How to deal with issues of power and control, and how to develop organizational structures that are reflective of authentic intergenerational partnerships.
- **Organizational models and change:** How to define and refine organizational models that represent the multi-level, multi-strategy change work being done by the program.

## Lessons from the Field

This work helped to crystallize what CFYS knew to be essential support for organizations and to expand our understanding of what these organizations need in order to be successful. What was learned has implications for those seeking to strengthen the youth development and youth organizing fields and can be divided into three broad areas:

- **Focus on multi-level strategies:** Organizations use strategies to affect change at multiple levels and need capacity building that recognizes the supports necessary for work in these different domains. The capacity building work done with groups needs to be able to address each of these levels and to focus on the places where change is possible in the life of the organization. This is often a staged developmental process, beginning with the

individual and program and expanding into the organization and community, with the focus on institutional change coming when the others are feeling strong.

- **Recognize the key elements of capacity building:** Based on this capacity building work, CFYS has developed an initial compilation of “learnings” to guide understanding of what youth programs need in order to create and sustain programs that integrate elements of youth development, youth organizing, and identity based work. Key elements include:
  - *creating balance* within an organization
  - *providing clarity* to the vision, purpose and method of the work
  - *building equity* and power sharing into the internal and external processes of the program
  - *using inquiry* as a process for developing and evaluating the program and its effect on individuals and communities
  - providing time and tools for *reflection* on individual development and program approaches
  - encouraging *creativity* in expression and thought
  - facilitating the *transformation* of the program and its participants
  - creating structures to *sustain* the effort in the long run.
- **Understand the organizational challenges of building a youth movement:** Each of the programs engaged in CFYS is heroic in its efforts to create new types of programs and organizations that listen to and follow the lead of youth and community members—organizations that

share power and decision making between youth and adults. These programs are creating new structures and opportunities for involvement of youth in all aspects of the organization. And while there was diversity in their needs, these programs did face a few similar challenges, including:

- *Establishing effective management structures* that allow for working with youth staff who have come up through the program and transitioned into staff positions.
- *Engaging youth in organizational management* and helping overcome feelings that structures and processes are dull and seem either compromising or like a waste of time (i.e., sitting on boards of directors, writing reports or grants, meeting with funders who patronize them or try to tell them what their programs should be doing).
- *Working with disenfranchised youth* who are constantly confronted with the many issues in their personal lives that have to do with race and class and oppression and the spoils of disenfranchisement (arrest, drug issues, and families in crisis), with siblings and parents caught up in systems that define the parameters and quality of their lives.
- *Creating new organizational models* and the structures to support the work. These programs are leading the learning curve in working within a cultural context where multiple identity issues influence the agenda and dictate the approach, in a new kind of community organization building.

## Recommendations

The Collaborative Fund for Youth-Led Social Change engaged in a five-year cycle of learning, grantmaking, and collaboration aimed at charting new territory in the youth development and youth organizing fields. What emerged from this effort was a keen awareness of the critical nature of cultural context. Viewed through this lens, the work of youth development and youth organizing comes into sharper focus and leads to new models of social change – ones that fully embrace youth leadership, link individual development to larger societal issues, and work to create and renew structures and values.

1. **Recognize that Program Staff and Participants are Experts.** Youth development and youth organizing efforts are experts in youth work. Because of their real-life experiences, they often have deep insight that can help shape the field. Too often, they are not granted the time or opportunity to share these insights.
2. **Provide Consistent Learning and Networking Opportunities for All Partners.** The value of learning from each other – organization-to-organization, donor-to-donor, and organizations and donors together – cannot be underestimated. This is key for strengthening our shared work and for building a field of knowledge. Ongoing learning and networking opportunities help all partners share information, build knowledge and reduce their sense of isolation.
3. **Create Safe Spaces for Different Constituency Groups to Find Support.** Youth organization staff, executive directors, youth leaders, and funders are some of the different constituency groups that form a larger national partnership. While it is important that these groups learn from one

another, it is also important that each group have separate spaces in which to discuss common issues and problem solve with their peers.

4. **Practice What You Preach.** For example, if your learning centers around the importance of youth-led approaches to social change, youth-adult partnerships, and the intersection of gender, race and class issues, then make sure that your internal practices reflect this learning as well.
5. **Promote Leadership at All Levels.** Youth-led social change is founded on the principle that youth must be part of creating the solutions to the problems they, their families, and their communities face. Promoting leadership is more than simply ensuring that some young women and men are involved in making some decisions. Promoting leadership is about ensuring that young women and men (from the youngest to the oldest youth in the group) have real decision making roles, are engaged in creating and refining the program model, and have adequate support to use their voices.
6. **Think Holistically.** The individuals and institutions that we work with take a holistic approach that often combines elements and strategies of youth development and youth organizing as well as drawing on other disciplines. Explicitly combining youth organizing and youth development in grantmaking and organizational planning enables groups to bring to bear the multiple strategies that help engage and empower youth.
7. **Acknowledge Cultural Context.** The strategies and approaches organizations take are shaped by their cultural context: the interaction of the identity of the individual

staff and youth participants, the identity of the organization, and the identity of the community. While some strategies and approaches can be transferred from one successful effort to another, it is critical to recognize that they must be passed through the filter of cultural context.

**8. Provide and Support Capacity Building that Offers Long Term and Culturally Relevant Assistance.**

Capacity building does not happen in a vacuum, nor is there a formulaic approach that is going to meet the needs of all programs. Capacity building is a dynamic process that takes a variety of factors into account, including stage of development and the cultural context of the effort, as well as specific assistance and support needs.

**9. Develop Ways to Capture Broader Impact.**

Many youth development and youth organizing efforts work with a core group of youth to create real change. This smaller group of youth in turn reaches out to and involves a greater number of youth, though less intensely. In order to convey the true impact of this approach, it is critical to develop ways to document the broader impact of this work.

The Collaborative Fund for Youth-Led Social Change (CFYS) is a national partnership in every sense of the word. Youth organization staff, youth leaders, donors, and Ms. Foundation staff and consultants shape who we are and what we represent. Our cultural context is defined by a holistic approach to youth work – one that understands and respects the individual, organizational, and community cultures and identities that form and shape this partnership. We are local and national, individual and group, and multi-cultural and multi-faceted. We are about grantmaking, capacity building, networking and learning. We promote new approaches to youth-led social change that integrate youth development and youth organizing strategies, incorporate multiple identities such as gender, race and class, and promote youth-adult partnerships.

The Ms. Foundation would like to thank the authors of this report for their creativity, commitment and collaborative spirit: P. Catlin Fullwood, Ami Nagle and Marisha Wignaraja. A very special thank you to the “Voices” authors who took time out of their busy lives to write down their stories: Michelle Gaines, Stacy Kono, Lily Wang, Soyun Park, Tammy Rivera (with Sonny Ost), and Marlene Sanchez, and the youth in their organizations who lent their time and expertise to help shape these stories. The Ms. Foundation would also like to thank “Ideas in Action” contributors and the numerous partners who made all of this possible.

**Donor Partners and Sponsors:** Your significant financial and intellectual commitments enabled us to launch this fund, guarantee multi-year grants to grantee partners, and document our learnings. Thank you to our donor partners, who represent a diversity of giving—from individual donors, to women’s funds, family foundations, and corporate and independent foundations.

**Grantee Partners:** It is your work in local communities and regional settings that is at the heart of the national partnership and makes the learning possible. Thank you to both staff and youth leaders for your commitment to peer learning and to building a movement for youth-led social change.

**Ms. Foundation Staff and Consultants:** From communications to development to capacity building and program, we are a collaboration within a collaboration. Thank you for holding the partnership together through expertise, hard work, and a sense of humor.

#### CFYS Grantee Partners

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- Appalachian Women's Leadership Project, Hamlin, WV
- Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, Oakland, CA
- Blocks Together, Chicago, IL
- Center for Young Women's Development, San Francisco, CA
- Girl Scouts of the Milwaukee Area, Milwaukee, WI
- Khmer Girls in Action, Long Beach, CA
- Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health, Dorchester, MA
- One Nation Enlightened, Denver, CO
- Pearls for Teen Girls, Milwaukee, WI
- Sista Il Sista, Brooklyn, NY
- Sisters in Action for Power, Portland, OR
- The Young Women's Project, Washington, DC

#### Funder Partners

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- Brico Fund, Inc., Milwaukee, WI
- Susie Tompkins Buell Foundation, San Francisco, CA
- The Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund (no longer in operation)
- Dobkin Family Foundation, New York, NY
- Ford Foundation, New York, NY
- Girl's Best Friend Foundation and Cyndie McLachlan, Chicago, IL
- Greater Milwaukee Foundation and the Women's Fund of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Milwaukee, WI
- Polly Howells, Brooklyn, NY
- Liss Foundation, Summit, NJ
- Martin Family Foundation, Milwaukee, WI
- Moriah Fund, Washington, DC
- Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Flint, MI
- Ms. Foundation for Women, New York, NY
- Starry Night Fund of the Tides Foundation, New York, NY
- Surdna Foundation, New York, NY
- Three Bridge Trust/Woodcock Foundation #3, New York, NY
- Women's Foundation of Colorado, Denver, CO

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- George Gund Foundation, Cleveland, OH
- W. T. Grant Foundation, New York, NY
- Levi Strauss Foundation, San Francisco, CA

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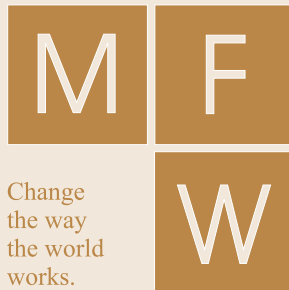
*During the writing of this report, Cyndie McLachlan, the founder of Girls' Best Friend Foundation in Chicago, passed away. Cyndie was a wonderful friend and partner of the Ms. Foundation for Women. She brought Girls' Best Friend into the Healthy Girls/Healthy Women collaborative fund nearly 10 years ago, and continued our partnerships with her support of the Collaborative Fund for Youth-Led Social Change.*

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**The complete "Culture and Context" report was written by consultants Marisha Wignaraja, P. Catlin Fullwood, and Ami Nagle with the assistance of Ms. Foundation for Women staff Margaret Hempel and Julia Beatty.**



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