Occupy Movement and the Future of Youth Activism – Improving Young People’s Civic Engagement in the NGO-World between Ambition and Reality

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Young people have been treated as being uninterested in politics and civic engagement for quite a while. However, not only numerous findings but even more movements like Occupy Wall Street have shown that this is far from being true, at least regarding certain sections of youth. Furthermore young people are civically engaged within various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), although here their engagement is mostly mobilized and canalized by the respective NGO they identify with and whose goals they share.

For some years now there is a raising awareness within (big) established NGOs that young people’s involvement in civic activism and their approach towards participation and membership are changing. The Arab Spring, Occupy, Indignados and other social movements have confirmed this change in perception and attitude towards political and civic engagement of young people and affected at least parts of the NGO-world to update their approach to youth and take concrete measures as soon as possible. The new social movements and their main characteristics can serve as a kind of check list to what extent current youth strategies developed by established NGOs actually meet the needs of young people regarding civic engagement and political activism. In addition, traditional NGOs need to outline vital characteristics of Occupy and other social movements and elaborate to what extent they are eligible to be copied by an established NGO. NGOs have to use the chance to analyse the movements thoroughly and adapt their approach and strategies to youth participation and activism if needed.

They need to stop applauding and start supporting and learning. Here again, we first need to get clear about who actually took part in the recent youth-led social movements. Who are we applauding and who is missing?
Stop applauding, start supporting

Movements like Occupy Wall Street seem to indicate a growing political awareness and concern within young people. In particular the Occupy Movement and the Spanish Indignados movement, both partly inspired and influenced by the Arab spring and the Portuguese Geração à Rasca (Portuguese for desperate generation) movement, proved that even the ‘Generation Facebook’ is not only capable to protest politically but to do it actually physically present on the streets and squares of their cities and not only by signing online petitions or posting messages of protest or solidarity on Facebook. Finally the general belief in the apathy and indifference of the youth towards politics seems left behind.

While it is definitely important to symbolically support the youth-led movements and honour their dedication, commitment and courage. It is now time to dampen again the popped up euphoria and sort of proudness towards the youth and its politicalization. This needs to be done for three main reasons.

Youth isn’t youth

First of all, this may sound simplistic but is still valid: there is no one youth. Young people are disparate concerning their socio-economic backgrounds, cultural preferences, political beliefs, etc. (Heinzlmaier 2012:1) – and regarding their age. But when it comes to movements like Occupy, youth is likely to be defined rather general regarding inter alia socio-economic backgrounds and quite diffuse concerning its age band width. There are significant differences existing between a teenager being 13 or 14 years old and a young adult with the age of 21, 26 or even up to 40. Sure, for a variety of reasons (i.e. individual variations regarding intellectual, emotional and sexual maturation, occupational, educational or family status, social change, regional and cultural differences etc.) in particular the phase between pre-adulthood and young adulthood cannot be exactly defined and has become highly elastic. But still: we have to be at least a little bit clearer here. When we talk about youth politically protesting for a better world, who are we talking about? Not only according to the German political scientist Wolfgang Kraushaar it have been mainly well-educated but hard-pressed ‘middle class’ young adults aging between 20 and 40 who were basically occupying public streets and squares again (Kraushaar 2012: 204 in Heinzlmaier 2012: 7).
Regarding Occupy, early on the protesters were mostly young, in their teens or 20s, but many were older (Buckler and Kleinfield: 2011). As the protest grew, actually continuously older protesters became involved too (Noveck 2011).

By the middle of October according to a study initiated by Costas Panagopoulos, a professor of political science at Fordham University in New York, the average age of the protesters was 33, with people in their 20s balanced by people in their 40s (Panagopoulos in Goodale 2011: 2). This shows that Occupy launched with a group of mostly young activists very soon morphed into an umbrella movement of people of varying ages and life circumstances. Furthermore, the financial support of the movement mostly came from so-called ‘average, middle-class donors’ too – with some few very large donations (Bill Clerico in Goodale 2011: 2).

Sure, there have been exceptions too: Occupy Oakland for example has been far less academic than Occupy Wall Street.¹ However, this is not meant as criticism towards ‘middle class’ young adults but to take a closer look who and why is actually protesting and who is missing in the picture – and why.

For a study published in January 2012 the Austrian Institute for Youth Culture Research (Institut für Jugendkulturforschung) surveyed in November 2011 the view of young Viennese aged 16 to 19 towards political protests such as Occupy movement. Although being a top topic only 41 % of the 400 surveyed persons had at least heard of Occupy. 60 % of those knowing Occupy stated that it is an important movement while almost 31 % noted that ‘they don’t care’. Many had heard of Occupy but did not really understand what it is all about (Großegger 2012: 3).

Now we get closer to the actual problem, a very persistent one. Various studies show big differences regarding the engagement of young people in Austria. Family background, parenting style, (school) education and membership in organisations are affecting one’s approach to civic and political engagement (Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz 2009: 108). In Austria young people with a high level of education are significantly more often civically engaged than young people with a lower level of education.

¹ Depending on if one defines the riots in Great Britain in 2011 and the frequent riots in France and Greece as political protests or not, one has to list these events as not middle-class driven political protests too.
In addition they are more likely to start self-organised projects and initiatives. The same applies comparing young people without migrant background with those with migrant background (ebd.).

If Occupy couldn’t mobilise (young) people less inclined to education, who can? What does it take to sensitize these social group towards the importance of civic and political engagement? How do we foster this sparkling new sense of political activism and civic engagement within young people of all social groups? And beyond sensitising, what concrete support do they need to be more likely politically and/or civically engaged?

Demographics of youth activism within the ‘western’ sections of Amnesty International look quite the same: higher educated young people are not only above-average to be found but even almost exclusively. At the same time it is the women who numerically by far dominate Amnesty Austria’s world of youth activism. Approximately 80% of all youth activists within Amnesty International Austria are female. The same applies to the “Youth in Action”-programme of the European Union (Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz 2009: 108).

Let’s start taking the protests serious

“If you give me a fish you have fed me for a day. If you teach me to fish then you have fed me until the river is contaminated or the shoreline seized for development. But if you teach me to organize then whatever the challenge I can join together with my peers and we will fashion or own solution.” (Northland Poster Collective in The Barefoot Collective 2009: 6)

While it seems no doubt that the political establishments in Europe and United States have not taken the social movements and their general demands, needs and hopes really seriously, with the governments still being mainly focused on consolidating state debts and strengthening security measures. It is just as important to ask to what extent established – in particular big and worldwide operating – NGOs have done enough to support the movements while they needed it most. What have they done to help the movements build sustained and sovereign structures; to learn, grow and adapt in order to meet the needs of our complex world? Without attempting to import models of organisation from the outside they could support them to learn how to endure over time and stay strong.
Traditional NGOs even could ask parts of the movements under their umbrellas – leaving them a strong sense of sovereignty under defined principles. This would help them to continue working even when support from the public is waning and learn how to use other political venues than the streets to advocate and push forward their demands. Possibly there are many groups, initiatives and projects under the Occupy movements “that hold great promise if they can adjust or transform themselves towards incorporating a more directly organisational approach” (The Barefoot Collective 2009: 14). In particular attac, itself being structured as a network of various political groups, could play here an important role.

**We need to learn from Occupy**

Finally, now as we have spotted significant forms and venues for political activity and civic engagement again, we need to foster those channels apparently being consistent with today’s youth perceptions of politics and civic activism within (big) traditional NGOs too. The NGO sector needs to seek out all the movement’s *best practises* and study them, being ready to adapt their structures and strategies towards youth activism if needed. In particular regarding mobilisation and attractiveness towards young people, traditional political actors (unions, political parties, etc.) and NGOs can learn a lot from the big youth-led movements appeared on the stage in recent years.

**What can traditional NGOs learn or copy from Occupy?**

After the eviction of the Occupy camps the euphoria too seems blown away. Many comments from science and media proclaimed resumptively that the revolution has failed. But keeping both euphoria and frustration under control is crucial.

Yes, Occupy and Indignados have not overtaken the state. So far, so true. But all the movements, in particular if you understand them as related to each other and part of ‘*something bigger*’, might have changed a lot more than some authoritarian regimes in Arab countries. First, it seems like perceptions of what is crucial in politics have changed: for instance debating about system alternatives to neoliberal capitalism has moved quite a bit from the very edges of society more towards its centre (Heinzlmaier 2012: 9).
Occupy not only made it to slingshot topics like pauperisation, lack of prospects for young people and social justice into US-mainstream again (Piper 2011). Beyond that it opened a lot of people’s eyes regarding the socio-economical dynamics of grievance like poverty, discrimination and social injustice. The same fits to the Indignados movement. Likewise the 2008–2009 protests against the Bologna Process, having it’s epicentre in Austria with massive and countrywide student protests (Odenhal 2009) led to a broad discourse on education policy and the quality, goals and social function of (university) education.

Furthermore, Occupy seems to have become a kind of formula for similar kind of protests in the future and in most of the world. In addition, it seems like in particular Occupy and the Arab Spring have initiated new scientific perspectives on social (political) movements and protest.

Let us now outline some vital characteristics of Occupy and other social movements and elaborate to what extent they are eligible to be copied by traditional NGOs. In addition Amnesty International’s youth strategy for 2010-2016 will serve us an example in what direction big traditional (worldwide operating) NGOs are intending to move – which in turn gives us some information where they stand right now too.

Close-to-one’s-life issues exist in ‘Western countries’ too
There seems no doubt that current political challenges and realities, in particular repressive regimes and corrupt politicians, socio-cultural discrimination, growing socio-economic deprivation, uneven distribution and injustice as well as political measures attacking the freedom of Internet and unrestricted open Internet access, affect young people seriously fostering fear and feelings of insecurity among them. All this are potential factors for collective mobilization, for civic protest and for civic resistance leading to the observed recent surge in activism – which, considering all these, becomes less surprising and spectacular but more a necessity. If generations in the 60ies and 70ies had to fight against social and political barriers, against the rule of authority and self-satisfied babbitry, it seems like present-day (middle-class) adolescents and in particular young adults have to fight against pauperization and precarization.

Very likely the vast majority of Occupy protesters joined or supported the movement due to the deep disillusion that playing the neoliberal game and accepting its rules, conforming and
subordinating oneself to the system, would save them from existential material troubles. But being a “pragmatic individualist” (Heinzlmaier 2011: 7) doesn’t pay off automatically any more.

Apart from the far-left wing networks and groups who were fighting for years against the system, other political active groups who later joined the movement and individual exceptions, most of Occupy protesters had at one time enough of supporting a system without getting any key personal benefit out of it. Very likely freedom and self-determination haven’t been the driving forces for them to protest but rather frustration, anger and concrete material interests like proper-paid jobs, education free of charge or at least affordable, a bourgeois existence etc. (Kraushaar 2012: 209 in: Heinzlmaier 2012: 7).

Don’t misunderstand: protesting for existential material needs is more than legitimate. This even should be a signal for the traditional big NGOs too. It seems like there is a huge need and interest of young people in the ‘Western world’ to work on issues like pauperisation and social injustice affecting their own lives and societies. Thus, besides the traditional charity activities, for instance for homeless people, poor and marginalised children, etc., established NGOs should likewise create and strengthen opportunities for socio-politically activities for young people: awareness raising, petitions to societal policies and measures, etc.

In particular attac, with the network already working for years on the respective topics and understanding activism and political protest as important tools, could intensify its work by focusing on the mobilisation of young people ready to join the network, either as individuals or with self-organised groups and local grass-roots initiatives. Attac has been leading in organising Occupy Germany and Blockupy and could act as a collecting pond for Occupy protesters offering them sustainable structures.

Oxfam and even Amnesty International could strengthen their work on poverty and related injustice in ‘Western countries’ too. Both are campaigning continuously on issue with particular relevance to young people in the ‘Global South’. While this is of highest priority, it seems like both NGOs need to strengthen or even (re-)start campaigning on issues gravely

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2 The same applies to the support of Occupy by the public. As long as the pent-up feeling of being betrayed by the political establishment and the banks was powerful enough, the support was impressive too. But the feeling has dulled over time, even in Spain, where a high youth unemployment rate and social cuts still keep the people under strong pressure.
affecting young people’s lives in ‘Western countries’ too. According to it’s youth strategy 2010-2016 Amnesty International is aiming to identify which human rights issues affect young people disproportionately and to further develop organisation’s research agenda “to analyze the best way to campaign for the protection of young people in these contexts and how to work with young people to achieve change” (Amnesty International Youth Strategy Summary 2011: 16). As mentioned, in particular Occupy and Indignados have shown us that these intentions have to include young people in European countries and the United States too.

In Austria, further Caritas, one of the major actors in the fight for social justice and against growing pauperisation, and Südwind, an Austrian NGO campaigning inter alia for social and ecologically sustained (economic) development, could likewise play an important role in sensitising, mobilising and involving young people when it comes to civic and political engagement against poverty and social injustice. YoungCaritas for instance, Caritas youth network, is currently focused on charity activities and events. Possibly there is potential for political activities organised with or by young people too. Südwind could raise its profile as a platform for young people burning to civically and politically engage for societal progress.

Concrete demands are not always needed

Mainly demands by traditional NGOs are of concrete nature, which usually makes sense. But Occupy showed once again that concrete demands aren’t obligatory and sometimes even irrelevant for the protesters. The vast majority of occupiers at Zuccotti Park seemed to have more or less only one as clear as general demand: for a better world. This is reflected in one of the main chants too: “We are unstoppable, another world is possible!”

According to Mark Greif, maybe the most important annalist of Occupy Wall Street, actually exactly this lack of a program and concrete demands helped the movement to become so popular and a place where people with different political beliefs could solidarise. Central topics all could agree on have been more than enough to mobilize the masses: stricter control of the Wall Street, social justice etc. Later debates on poverty and racism became more central too (Haas 2012).

3 Compare with http://wien.youngcaritas.at/mitmachen/
This helped to keep the movement diverse and attracted various first-time protesters to join Occupy. In an interview for Associated Press Patrick Bruner, one spokesman for Occupy Wall Street, stated that the organisers not only hoped for such a diversity but took specific measures to foster it (Noveck 2011).

Occupy and Indignados offered those people not willing to demonstrate for an ideal or against the capitalism itself the opportunity to challenge the system. It felt like you didn’t have to be part of a certain political family or to be in favour of one particular political ideology – both many young people do not consider appropriate anymore – to be respected as an equal and important part of the movement; to be part of the community.

Big traditional NGOs should copy that from time to time and try out running campaigns based more on general feelings of injustice or the wish to make the world better without having concrete demands in the first place. Particularly in joint campaigns big established NGOs could focus on sensitising and raising political consciousness of young people. Although it has been linked to concrete demands and a concrete case, to some extent ‘Against injustice – Children don’t belong in prison’ (Gegen Unrecht: Kinder gehören nicht ins Gefängnis!), a big joint initiative by Caritas, Amnesty International, Diakonie, SOS Kinderdorf, Volkshilfe and many others, having it’s peak in autumn 2010 and with over 116.000 signatures collected so far, has been exactly this kind of campaign using the momentum and calling on the general sense of justice of the public.⁴

As powerful as a lack of concrete demands can be regarding the mobilisation of masses and irritation of the (political) establishment as dangerous it is concerning the band with of allured supporters and seriousness of a campaign. While Occupy could deal with having far left-wing groups or even conspiracy theorists being part of the movement – and this relativism probably bewared it of being undercut or taken over by any political group – a big traditional NGO fears exactly this as it is most likely that it will damage its reputation gravely. The same applies to the concreteness of goals and demands. Being part of the formal system, established NGOs at least to some extent have to respect the formal venues of social policy disputes.

⁴ Compare with: http://www.gegen-unrecht.at/
Here in future youth-led social movements similar to Occupy and big established NGOs could *unofficially* work together and support each other. While the movements could build the momentum, established NGOs could use it to push forward important concrete socio-political demands through traditional political channels. Probably here lies great potential of youth-led activism and movements: hitting the nerve of the public and hence prepare the ground so that established NGOs can make use of it and bring forward societal change, which in turn could give the youth activist new courage and strength and attract even more young people to civically engage and/or protest.

*(Social) Networks are modern and efficient*

There seems no doubt that social media helped pull together protesters around the globe in 2010 and 2011. However, the organization of the 2011 Occupy protests and the collaboration between the activists has at least rested in part upon the innovative use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – in particular in the beginning, as a tool to mobilise and when encampments were torn down. The same applies to the Arab Spring, the Indignados movement and ‘*unibrennt*’ (Riedl 2009: 1).

But the movements didn’t only use social networks, they constituted themselves as networks, where people could exchange ideas and express their disapproval and rejection of the current political status quo. With this constitution as a network, and due to massive and effective use of social networks, the new movements were able to bring together thousands of individuals, groups and smaller networks very fast. Together they formed a kind of swarm, which made it not only difficult to identify who was leading and to what extent but even really made the impression of sustained collective leadership. Spanish political theorist Raimundo Viejo, who was active in the revolts across Europe last year, put it this way:

"The anti-globalization movement was the first step on the road. Back then, our model was to attack the system like a pack of wolves. There was an alpha male, a wolf who led the pack, and those who followed behind. Now the model has evolved. Today we are one big swarm of people." (Viejo in Sharlet 2011: 1)

It is exactly this progressive interaction between individuals and masses which is characteristic for today’s networked world and seems to have become a necessity for successful social mobilisation. Therefore Amnesty International and other big traditional
NGOs must establish and/or strengthen opportunities and pathways that allow people to engage in different ways at different times and to transit between types of participation.

Until recently organised activism within Amnesty International has been mostly linked to volunteer groups being more or less enclosed. In particular youth activism within Amnesty has been so far mainly based on groups at schools and universities. Some sections are now likewise trying to build up networks of individual (youth) human rights activists across the county. These sections have realized that in order to reach young people and bind them to the organization they need to move towards more individualized and non-formal ways of engagement. Hence, the structure of networks becomes more and more important within Amnesty International.

Amnesty USA is running a project aiming to foster so called centers of human rights activism. The goal is that Amnesty’s activists and local partners come together to provide an open space for achieving human rights impact. The focus here has shifted to growing the base of individual supporters who again are building Amnesty’s grassroots movement in their local communities. In 2010 Amnesty Austria has started to build up a student network likewise based on individuals who can either start collective activities or individual actions. So far in Vienna, Graz and Innsbruck monthly meetings are taking place with differing response – with Vienna being the strongest centre of student Amnesty activism in Austria by now. The experience so far shows that those network members meeting others regularly are most active too. Individuals not joining the meetings are significantly harder to mobilise. As the network is growing the number of members more disposed to individual activism is growing too. Likewise within 'Amnesty YOUTH' there is a tendency towards 'individual activists', who either aren't been able or don't want to start or join a group but still very often feel more comfortable launching activities together with others than solely on their own.

Finding most effective ways to support and mobilise these individual activists constitutes one of the biggest challenges for Amnesty Austria in the coming years. So far, (social-) network-based activism seems to be the right answer.

5 Regarding young people of school age this group-based activism applies to Amnesty Austria too – at least so far. The majority of countrywide more than 300 students are (self-) organised in school groups, launching apart of the mainstream media more or less regularly activities concerning human rights issues.
Active participation and grass-roots-efforts

Strongly linked to networks of self-organised and empowered individuals and/or groups are horizontal structures. Here, Occupy and Indignados have shown that grass-roots efforts and decision making are not (anymore) solely appreciated by far left-wing activists.

Regarding Occupy it seemed like the resistance to organised leadership that for many began as a tactic – leaders are targets and weak links, subject to prosecution and co-option – by the time has really grown into a principle. The movement is built on the idea that everyone can speak for themselves. The same applies to unibrennt. Here the protesters kept up consensual democracy too. It seems like rituals from the late 60s and 70s are back to live again.

This characteristic of latest social movements could even be of greater political impact than the activities intended to influence actual political outcomes. The way of civic engagement seen at Occupy could very well be of great relevance for e.g. future manifest political action.

In particular those protesters occupying and/or joining the rallies over weeks, but likewise those young people following the movements via news and articles, probably got the feeling that to bring about change you don’t rely on big traditional organisations with hierarchical structures anymore nor need you to follow charismatic leaders. It seems like, horizontal structures are not only more equitable but can lead to powerful political actions too (Heinzlmaier 2012: 9).

This could also change the way young people experience their civic engagement and participation within big traditional NGOs, with some having a quite strong hierarchical structure. To what extent will young people in future accept to support campaigns without being invited to help designing or planning them? How will they react when a planned activity does not get approved by the respective NGO staff? Will they even ask?

However, this is something that traditional membership-driven NGOs should keep in mind when adjusting for the future. Studying for instance Amnesty International Youth Strategy for the coming years this seems the case. While Amnesty can’t change the fact that it is a big traditional NGO it seeks to foster empowerment, active participation and self-organisation of young people. The overall aim is to strengthen young people’s active participation in civil society decision-making and social change processes (Amnesty International Youth Strategy
Summary 2011: 12). “This involves supporting the development of skills such as working in a group and strategic campaigning, as well as enabling their confidence to communicate and interact with a range of audiences” (ebd. 13.).

Here again one can recognise the will to build up a network of self-organised and empowered youth activists playing an active role within their communities. The priority of Amnesty International is of course to support young people to become human rights activists. However, as in the last ten years Amnesty International has started to work more and more on economic, social and cultural rights too, the field of activity has become so diverse that it covers a broad range of youth initiatives and interests. This again will be quite important when it comes to let young people work on issues they want to and support them doing so. Here NGOs like Greenpeace being often criticised for their rather undemocratic structures could become less attractive for young people (Bölsche and Kohl 1995: 38ff). The same could apply to NGOs working on very specific issues.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the NGO-scale, Avaaz, “the largest-ever global web movement bringing people-powered politics to decision-making everywhere” (Avaaz.org) not only has little problems with ‘limited mandates’ but furthermore has come up with an interesting approach to involve their members in initiating and designing campaigns. Launching this summer their so called ‘community petitions’ Avaaz provides now with apparently big success people around the world a web platform “to start and win campaigns at the local, national, and international levels” (ebd.). Furthermore Avaaz is periodically surveying its members on which campaigns the NGO should run in the nearer future, which current global issues it should place emphasis on, what kind of initiatives (e.g. community petitions) and projects Avaaz should start, etc. In doing so, Avaaz not only gives its members the possibility to choose between pre-selected options but rather encourages them to propose themselves campaign issues, initiatives, etc. And again the (social-) network-formula seems to be crucial for the big success of Avaaz, at least according to Avaaz itself: “The Avaaz model of internet organising allows thousands of individual efforts, however small, to be rapidly combined into a powerful collective force” (ebd.).

On the other hand there seems no doubt that traditional big membership-driven NGOs, aiming at least in equal measure to mobilise and/or organise their members online and ‘offline’, are
probably going to have a much harder time strengthening grass-roots decision making while trying to stay effective, fast and independent.

Keeping this in mind Amnesty’s goal to increase the number “of young people from diverse backgrounds working with Amnesty International in different roles – as members, activists, staff or advisers who are integrated into the organization at all levels as equal partners” (Amnesty International Youth Strategy Summary 2011: 12) makes more the impression of a vision or tremendous challenge. So far Amnesty is still in the process of identifying the roles young people can play, “addressing youth perspectives on human rights issues” (Amnesty International Youth Strategy Summary 2011: 16) and removing formal barriers such as (compulsive) membership, fees, age limits, etc. – which is already a big progress. Furthermore, aiming to improve “young people’s access to Amnesty International’s governance” (ebd.), Amnesty International likewise has to reform its decision-making venues and processes. However, while progress is already evident there is still a lot to do.

Mostly progress has been made at the level of national sections and structures but to some extent Amnesty-wide too. In Austria for instance some youth activists are already part of advisory groups. In addition, (youth) activists are getting more and more involved in designing activism ideas and toolkits during campaign planning. This is a positive development but now the next step needs to be taken: involving young people not only in designing activism strategies too but even giving them an equal part in strategy committees deciding which way to go, where to invest, which priorities to set for the future, etc.

However, in particular concerning youth participation it is crucial that the decisions made are binding and realized, since nothing contributes more to alienation and political apathy than participation without consequences. Not surprisingly so far new forms of youth participation in political decision-making processes have been implemented mostly on the local level. According to Austrian political scientists Sieglinde Rosenberger and Florian Walter

“[p]robably the best area to implement new forms of participation within the existing polity is on the local or regional level as only at this level can real decision-making power be guaranteed and the pitfalls of size and lack of expertise on part of the citizens be avoided. These forms of participation can and must not ersetzen representative forms of governance, but they can contribute to empowering individuals and making decisions better and more legitimate.” (Rosenberger and Walter 2009: 12)
Most likely and at least in the medium term this assessment will apply to the big international NGOs too.

Finally, when fostering more horizontal structures, greatest possible autonomy and trust in activists’ rationality and respect of the rule of law and organization's principles and mission/mandates will be crucial. But that actually might be the biggest challenge for established NGOs whose success is gravely linked to their reputation and credibility as professional and serious organisations. In horizontal structures, debates and conflicts with network members about what still lies under the mandate of the respective NGO or what kind of working methods and activities are appropriate could become even more likely and intense and probably not easier to solve.

Creative activism is a good thing

Occupy brought together collective and individual forms of political activism. It felt like one could really choose how to get involved and to what extent. However, in particular Occupy events seemed to be so creative, innovative and humorous that they themselves attracted thousands of people to join the movement – at least for the rallies, at least for a short time.

‘The people’s mic’ is such an illustrative example for the creative defiance of the occupiers. On the fourth day of the Zuccotti Park occupation the police moved in, started collecting megaphones while citing a law prohibiting the use of electronic amplification.

“Without conventional means, the occupiers would have to figure out a new way to hear one another. [...] One person speaks, all repeat, the words rippling through the crowd. ‘Mic check!’ it begins with a single voice. ‘Mic check!’ thunders the assembly. [...] ‘My concern’ / ‘MY CONCERN’ / ‘is deeper’ / ‘IS DEEPER’ / ‘than sleeping bags!’ / ‘THAN SLEEPING BAGS!’” (Sharlet 2011:2)

‘The people’s mic’ not only allowed the protesters to communicate over a long distance without electronic amplification but even became a unifying force.

In particular when it comes to creative activism it seems clear that young people have to be involved in designing campaign activities and new forms of activism. Their keen and ‘natural’ sense of innovation and creative defiance is a never ending source for creative activism.
Looking at young people’s civic engagement within social movements like Occupy and Indignados it seems evident that not only habits of perception are changing noticeably but also cultural techniques as well as forms of communication and political participation. Young peoples’ ways to define politics and to influence and change policies may not only point to new forms of political participation but likewise to new and effective ways of civic engagement, protest and resistance.

Actually, for some years now there is a raising awareness within (big) established NGOs that young people’s involvement in civic activism and their approach towards participation and membership are changing. 2011 the Arab Spring, Occupy, Indignados and other social movements have confirmed this change in perception and attitude towards political and civic engagement of young people and affected at least parts of the NGO-world to update their approach to youth and take concrete measures as soon as possible. NGOs like Amnesty International have realized that in order to reach young people and bind them to the organization they need to move towards more individualized and non-formal ways of engagement. In addition, they started to take self-organization of young people and youth participation serious involving – so far mostly at the local level or the lowest level of hierarchy – young people more and more often in decision-making processes and advisory groups. However, there is still a lot to do in particular concerning active participation and (social-) network-based activism. Thereby the new social movements and their main characteristics could serve as a kind of check list to what extent current youth strategies developed by established NGOs actually meet the needs and challenges of young people and a more and more network-based world.

Therefore current strategies aiming to improve youth civic engagement have to stand for discussion and new forms and characteristics of activism and political protest, as seen particularly in the Occupy movement, have to be scrutinized in more detail. NGOs have to use the chance to analyse the movements thoroughly and adapt if needed their approach and strategies to youth participation and activism. They need to stop applauding and start supporting and learning. Beyond that in particular all membership-driven and through activism supported NGOs have the responsibility to not only think solely of their own growing pool of youth activists but help creating a societal environment in which young
people can reach their full potential to be civicly engaged on whatever socio-political issue. NGOs need to foster the evolution of a ‘Generation Occupy’ we could already gradually perceive. In Austria potentially the ‘Special Interest Group of Austrian Non-profit Associations/NGOs’ (Interessensvertretung Österreichischer Gemeinnütziger Vereine, IÖGV)\(^6\) could take over this role. The IÖGV could be provided with additional resources to lobby for a better social framework for youth civic engagement or even start campaigns promoting youth civic engagement within NGOs.

However, NGO officials and policy makers have to consider the patterns seen within Occupy and other social movements when it comes to the creation of new venues for political and civic activity.

A study published in January 2012 by the Austrian Institute for Youth Culture Research (Institut für Jugendkulturforschung) indicates that 37 % of young people aged 16 to 19 and living in Vienna believes their “lifestyle to be compatible with participating in protest movements” (Großegger/Institut für Jugendkulturforschung 2012: 6). Some 25 % stated that they “prefer being active in a political party” (ebd.). About 40 % cited that neither protest movements nor political parties fit to their lifestyle (ebd.). Unfortunately the survey answers haven’t been linked to the participants’ level of education. However, in order to foster youth activism across all social groups, policy makers and NGO officials particularly need to focus on strengthening the resources facilitating civic engagement and political participation within so far less active social groups. Not only the *willingness* but even more the *preparedness* of young people to become active and participate have to be taken into account.

In particular the factor education seems to be of crucial importance, thus an extension of civic education programs in and outside schools could contribute to a reduction of cognitive barriers to political and civic participation of young people with a lower level of education. Knowledge about duties among different state institutions and information how to become active and who to turn to if one wants to express his or her interests could lead to a boost of engagement within all social groups.

\(^6\) Compare with: [www.iogv.at/](http://www.iogv.at/).
Here again it has to be kept in mind that young people need the independence to express their own concerns – to speak for themselves – and to take action on their own but still, in particular concerning decision-making processes and active participation measures they need appropriate and effective counselling, support and chaperonage too. According to Martin Schenk, one of the initiators of the Austrian initiative ‘Hunger for Art and Culture’ (Hunger auf Kunst und Kultur) „[ha]ving access does not mean using it yet […] access also means support, assistance and participation“ (Martin Schenk 2011). Although this statement refers to people with intellectual disabilities, people with mental illness or asylum seekers, this also applies for all people whose civic and political participation we would like to support and/or improve. Another import measure in order to improve both civic engagement and resistance within politically passive young people and those already (frequently) civically engaged could therefore mean to build up networks of facilitators supporting young people with their civic engagement. In particular big NGOs could work together and use existing structures to create such activism support networks. Actually, within the EU-programme ‘Youth in Action’ a similar project already exists. ‘Cultural Coaches’ are supposed to build bridges between a cultural minority and the Youth in Action programme. They assist, advice, and/or coach minority communities and groups „that face difficulties to access public services in general and to be part of the Youth in Action programme in particular“ (salto-youth.net).

So far studies, strategies and debates about how to improve civic engagement within young people are still rather insufficient. Here again, we have to raise the question how deep our knowledge about the recent social movements actually really is. There is great need for both deeper research on Occupy, Indignados, Arab Spring and others and a new scientific perspective on social (political) movements and protest.

Finally, it is not enough to ask ourselves – being representatives of NGOs and advocators of civic engagement and political participation – to what extent Occupy and others may point to new, effective ways and forms of civic protest but rather we need to go further and (self-) reflect what we can do to, and where we need to change, to enable civic engagement, activism and resistance best possible. To close with Mahatma Ghandi:

“Be the change you want to see in the world.”

Are we ready to change?


