

YMCA North Star 2044 |

Interview insights summary

Context

The World YMCA is working to develop a guiding vision, or North Star, that will unite all regions and countries in working towards common goals to achieve significant impact by the year 2044, when we will celebrate our 200th anniversary. We are working with Forum for the Future in planning this process. In preparation for our work, Forum interviewed 12 key stakeholders in the YMCA, past and present, internal and external. The interviews were conducted under Chatham House rules, enabling interviewees to speak freely in the knowledge that their identities will not be shared and their insights will not be attributed. Please find the key findings summarised here.

Key Findings

1. The ambition to empower young people unifies and strengthens the movement.
2. There is an opportunity to build the YMCA's brand, profile and influence on the global stage as the significant 'glocal' movement for youth.
3. The YMCA needs to put youth in the driving seat, and challenge them to lead programmes that combine local impact with global connections.
4. The current structure of the YMCA inhibits its mission to empower young people, by not placing them in leadership positions and granting them decision-making power.

Part 1 | Looking to the past

We asked interviewees about significant changes affecting the YMCA's work and its working context over the past 25 years.

Significant internal changes

- The agreed ambition to empower young people is widely seen as a unifying factor for the YMCA as a global movement, tying together a vast variety of activities across the regions under a common objective. It is also seen as a strength in setting the YMCA apart from other mission-led organisations.
- The participation of young people and women in the YMCA has increased dramatically in the past 25 years, but this is not always reflected at the local level, particularly in parts of the world where it is customary for older men to take the lead.

Significant external changes

- Mission-led organisations face greater competition for funding and are subject to more scrutiny in their proceedings and impacts.
- The environmental crisis is now a focal point for all mission-led organisations: continued support depends on addressing it.
- Globalisation has been amplified through technology and connectivity. While this has benefits for communications, it also means that problems spread more rapidly, and creates a digital divide that can leave communities and countries behind.
- Equality gaps are widening in terms of income and access to resources, due to forced migration, climate change, corruption and other factors.
- Young people have many options in how to spend their time, and are less keen to volunteer.
- Disintermediation - driven by activism, the internet and global connectedness - is empowering young people to say what they think, rally around it. Organisations need to respond by giving young people a platform to lead - or risk becoming irrelevant.

Part 2 | The YMCA today

The YMCA's role today

- It is the most significant movement for young people in the world.
- It works on the ground with young people to tackle critical issues and serve communities.
- It supports young people to develop in mind, body and spirit.
- It builds safe spaces for young people, and invites them to belong.
- It works with and advocates for disenfranchised people: homeless, abused, stateless.
- It can act as a bridge across different and even divided communities.
- It builds capacity in young people to be effective and responsible agents in society.

The YMCA's current strengths

- It has a niche in children “coming of age”, understanding they have voices, that their opinions matter.
- It is well-respected by its partners, known by governments, and trusted by local communities.
- The number of young people involved has grown rapidly over the past decade.
- It has strong local roots, thanks to its presence in some places for over a century.
- It operates with a simple but effective “Space-Transform-Impact” model on the ground:
1. provide a youth-friendly space; 2. develop a team and nurture values; 3. produce positive impacts for the wider community.
- It is united by its Christian faith, bringing it identity, passion and strength.
- It has a long history of delivering significant impact on the ground, across the world.
- It now serves 58 million people in 128 countries.

- It is open to all, and brings people together on equal terms to collaborate.

The YMCA's current weaknesses

- The current decision-making structure, including at board level, is not adequately representative, and particularly lacks the contribution of young people and women, inhibiting new ideas, approaches and perspectives.
- Funding can be an obstacle to progress at the local level. Meanwhile, some work is transactional (eg. the way in which certain sports centres are run) and does little to empower communities or young people.
- Its brand profile is weak beyond communities it impacts directly: associated with men rather than youth and communities, with hostels rather than community empowerment.
- The YMCA has insufficient influence at national and international levels eg. govts, UN. It is not seen as a peer on the global stage by other international organisations.
- Christian culture sometimes forgotten, including the mandate to serve.
- The dominance of a single religion can exclude some young people.

Part 3 | Visions for the YMCA

2044 Visions

- The YMCA is a leader in global advocacy for young people's needs and rights, giving young people a voice on current issues: migration, climate, countering extremism etc.
- It has a global community of 45,000 young leaders: trained as social change agents, and in the driving seat, implementing local programmes as part of a global network.
- It is active in areas prioritised by young people - such as climate change; civic engagement; skills and jobs; physical and mental health - and able to respond in an agile manner to local needs and crises.
- It counters social isolation by providing safe spaces for community connections and community-led action in age of digital disconnection.
- It offers equal opportunities regardless of gender, religion, age etc.

What can enable these visions?

- A connected global community of young people with strong local influence and sufficient training and skills, leading the movement rather than 'advising' on it.
- A healthy structure so that it can renew itself to handle the issues communities face.
- Sufficient funding, because comprehensive, quality data shows results.
- More connections and partnerships with other professional groups: NGOs and corporations - welcoming them in as co-creators from the start.
- Stronger communications, more agile in telling stories of human impact.
- Greater visibility and presence on the global stage.
- Goals and milestones to unite the global movement and chart progress.

What are the potential barriers to these visions?

- Governance: young leaders are essential if the YMCA wants to stay relevant. Traditional ideologies can prevent us from adapting rapidly enough to changes.
- Institutional funding can prevent young leaders from the freedom to pilot programmes. The YMCA needs to develop financial sustainability and resilience to new competition through a great variety of funding sources: venture philanthropy, public money etc.
- Poor IT, both due to local infrastructure and insufficient global platforms for exchange.
- Insufficient data collection and management to demonstrate our impact and build trust.
- Insufficient training for young people to assume leadership responsibilities.
- Attracting young people to engage and commit, given more opportunities for them to lead elsewhere. We need to understand what will motivate them in the future.

What other questions should the YMCA consider for the future?

Diversity and inclusivity:

- How can we be more inclusive? And how do we deal with inclusivity in cultures averse to it?
- How can we adapt our youth empowerment mission to benefit ageing populations?
- How can we apply our Christian values in non-Christian contexts?

Partnerships:

- How can we be better collaborators with other organisations, public and private, and bring them in as co-creators from the start?
- How can we work more nimbly, locally and globally, and be more open to social innovation?
- How can we work constructively with non-state actors, where states have failed?
- How can we embrace the global wave of youth-led activism?

Competition and sectoral changes

- How can we maintain our leading position as other organisations emerge that work with youth?
- How can we rapidly build the infrastructure to remain in touch with young people?
- How can we maintain a focus on communities, as interest in stories of impact at the individual level grows, driving direct person-to-person funding?