



A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
NAVIGATING POWER.

THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE
AROUND THE WORLD LEARNED
ABOUT PARTICIPATION,
INFLUENCE, AND POWER.

REAL STORIES.
REAL STRATEGIES.
REAL IMPACT.

UNLOCK THE RULES.
BUILD YOUR STRATEGY.
CREATE CHANGE.



REAL TALK

NO JARGON.
NO FLUFF. JUST
WHAT YOU
NEED TO KNOW.



GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

LEARN FROM
OTHERS. ADAPT TO
YOUR CONTEXT.



YOUTH-CENTERED BY DESIGN

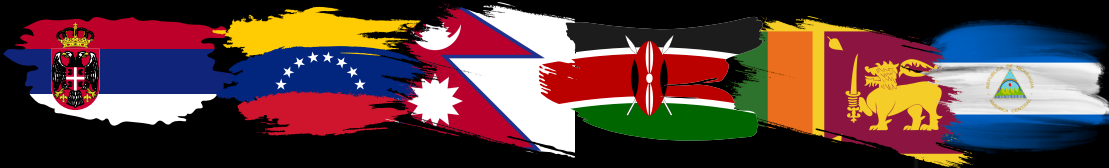
BY YOUNG PEOPLE.
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.



FROM KNOWLEDGE TO POWER

BECAUSE UNDERSTANDING
IS NOT ENOUGH. ACTION
IS EVERYTHING.

SERBIA | VENEZUELA | NEPAL | KENYA | SRI LANKA | NICARAGUA



6

COUNTRIES

6

CASES OF
YOUTH-LED
MOBILIZATION

+20

LEADERS
INTERVIEWED

1

PRACTICAL
PLAYBOOK

WHY THIS HANDBOOK?



Young people are often told that civic space is open to them.

- Vote.
- Volunteer.
- Attend consultations.
- Join organizations.
- Speak up.

Yet many discover that participation does not automatically lead to influence.

THIS HANDBOOK IS NOT ABOUT THEORY.

It is about lessons learned in practice.

Through conversations with young organizers, activists, and civic leaders across six countries, we identified patterns that appear again and again.

Across different countries, young people repeatedly encounter the same challenge:

NOBODY EXPLAINS HOW POWER ACTUALLY WORKS.



Different contexts.



Different risks.



Different political systems.

Yet remarkably similar lessons.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND INSIDE



REAL STORIES

Experiences from youth movements and civic leaders across six countries.



HIDDEN LESSONS

The informal rules that shape participation, influence, and access in ways most people never explain.



PRACTICAL TOOLS

Simple frameworks and templates that help you understand your context and act strategically.



REFLECTION EXERCISES

Guided questions designed to help you think deeper and apply these lessons to your own reality.



APPLY & ADAPT

Ideas and approaches you can adapt to your community, depending on your context.

DIFFERENT CONTEXTS.

SHARED CHALLENGES.

TRANSFERABLE LESSONS.



LESSONS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE. → STRATEGIES FOR REAL CHANGE. → POWER IN OUR HANDS.

HOW THIS HANDBOOK WAS BUILT

This handbook is based on **real** conversations, **real** experiences, and **real** challenges faced by young people pushing for change in tough contexts.

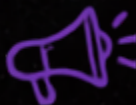
➔ We listened. We asked hard questions. We looked for patterns. And we turned those lessons into **practical tools** that you can use in your own context.



6

COUNTRIES

Serbia, Nepal,
Kenya, Sri Lanka,
Venezuela,
Nicaragua



6

YOUTH
MOBILIZATION
CASES

Diverse movements.
Different tactics.
Shared purpose.



10+

YOUNG LEADERS
INTERVIEWED

Organizers.
Activists. Students.
Community leaders.



1

PRACTICAL
HANDBOOK

Synthesized
lessons and tools
for your context.

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

YOU CAN READ IT START TO FINISH. OR JUMP TO WHAT YOU NEED.
USE IT ALONE. OR USE IT WITH YOUR TEAM.

01



EXPLORE
THE STORIES

Real experiences from
young people navigating
civic space in complex
environments.

02



IDENTIFY
THE LESSONS

Understand the
unwritten rules behind
power, influence, and
participation.

03



APPLY
THE TOOLS

Use practical frameworks
and templates to analyze
your context and design
your strategy.

04



REFLECT &
ADAPT

Work through reflection
exercises to strengthen
your approach and
decisions.

05



TAKE ACTION
TOGETHER

Share, discuss, and act
with others. Change
happens collectively.

This handbook will not give
you all the answers. But it
will help you ask better
questions, see more clearly,
and make smarter moves in
your context.

THE RULES ARE UNWRITTEN.
BUT NOW, YOU KNOW
WHERE TO LOOK.



“

POWER IS NEVER JUST ABOUT
WHO'S IN CHARGE. IT'S ABOUT
WHO UNDERSTANDS THE
RULES THAT OTHERS DON'T
TALK ABOUT.

”

THE PROBLEM WE KEEP RUNNING INTO

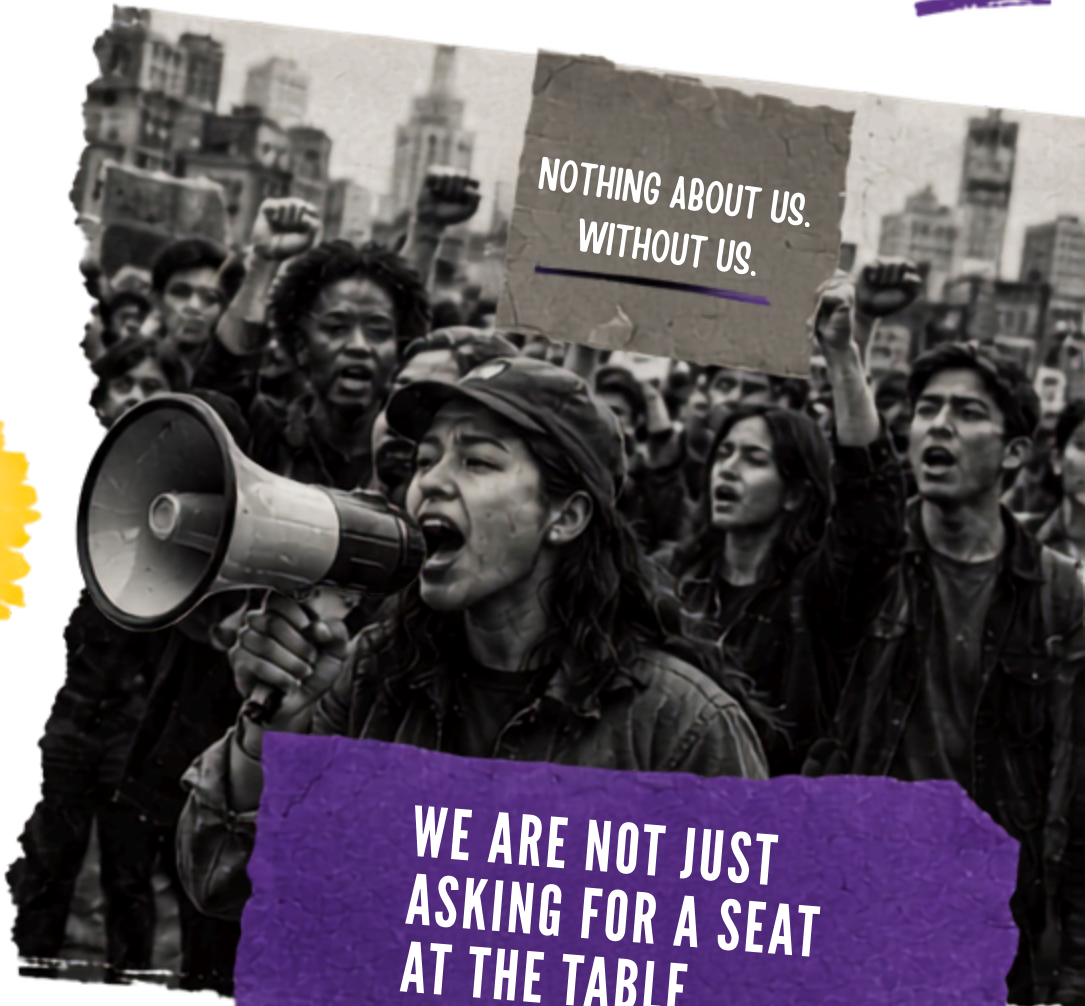
Young people show up.
They organize. They speak up.
They do the work.

But the doors to real
influence stay closed.

Why?

- ✗ **POWER IS CONCENTRATED.**
Decisions are made in spaces where young people are rarely present.
- ✗ **RULES ARE UNWRITTEN.**
There are no clear instructions on how to get in, speak, or be heard.
- ✗ **RISKS ARE REAL.**
Speaking out can mean backlash, exclusion, or even danger.

This handbook is our response.
Because change doesn't happen by chance.
It happens when we understand the game.



WE ARE NOT JUST
ASKING FOR A SEAT
AT THE TABLE.

WE ARE BUILDING
NEW TABLES.

These six lessons show up across countries, movements, and contexts. They won't look the same everywhere—but they are **always** there in the roots.



01 UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

Know how power works, who holds it, and how decisions are really made.



02 MAP ACTORS & POWER

Identify key actors, their interests, relationships, and points of leverage.



03 FIND ENTRY POINTS

Look for openings—formal or informal—to bring your voice into the conversation.



04 BUILD CREDIBILITY & TRUST

Relationships and trust open more doors than passion alone.



05 ENGAGE STRATEGICALLY

Use your influence in ways that are timely, relevant, and rooted in facts.



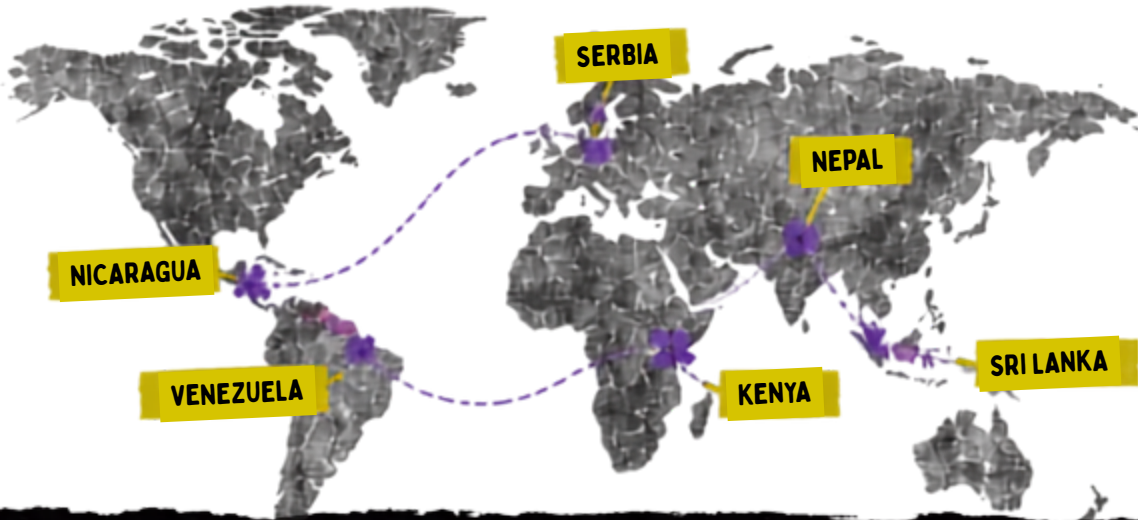
06 DRIVE CHANGE TOGETHER

Sustainable change takes collective action, not individual effort.

WHY IT MATTERS

When young people understand the rules, they stop asking for permission—and start shaping what's possible.

KNOWLEDGE IS THE FIRST
STEP. STRATEGY IS THE
NEXT. ACTION IS WHAT
MAKES IT REAL.



DIFFERENT
CONTEXTS.

SHARED
CHALLENGES.

TRANSFERABLE
LESSONS.



REAL TALK

No jargon. No fluff.
Just what you
need to know.



GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Learn from others.
Adapt to your
context.



YOUTH-CENTERED

By young people.
For young people.



FROM KNOWLEDGE TO POWER

Understanding is
not enough.
Action is everything.

RULE #1

YOU DON'T NEED PERMISSION TO PARTICIPATE



CASE STUDY:
SERBIA
STUDENT MOVEMENT (2024–PRESENT)

WHAT HAPPENED?

On November 1, 2024, a newly renovated railway station canopy collapsed in Novi Sad, killing 16 people.

What began as demands for accountability quickly evolved into a nationwide student-led movement against corruption, impunity, and democratic decline.

Students organized assemblies, occupied universities, and coordinated 100,000 peplemarches across the country.

What started on campuses became a broader civic movement supported by teachers, lawyers, artists, workers, and citizens.

By 2025 and 2026, the movement grew into a sustained demand for accountability, electoral reforms, and democratic renewal—with students remaining at the center of organizing efforts.



“ THE UNWRITTEN RULE

CIVIC SPACE EXPANDS WHEN PEOPLE ACT AS IF THEY ALREADY BELONG IN IT.

Students did not wait for an invitation. They created their own civic space in their universities.

”

✓ WHAT WORKED?

- ✓ Decentralized leadership
- ✓ Student assemblies and collective decision-making
- ✓ Clear anti-corruption demands
- ✓ Nonviolence agreement
- ✓ Building alliances beyond campuses
- ✓ Keeping the movement non-partisan
- ✓ Turning local outrage into a national conversation



✗ WHAT DIDN'T WORK?

- ✗ Assuming institutions would respond quickly
- ✗ Relying only on moral arguments without political pressure
- ✗ Underestimating government attempts to discredit and attack the movement

💡 WHAT WE CAN LEARN

The Serbian students were not the most powerful actors in the country. They did not control government institutions. They did not control major media outlets. They did not have access to formal power.

Yet they succeeded in placing accountability, corruption, and democratic governance at the center of the national conversation.

Their experience reminds us that civic space is rarely granted from above. It is claimed from below.

★ BEST PRACTICE

START WITH A CONCRETE CLAIM.



The movement did not begin by demanding abstract democratic reform. It began with a tragedy that people understood and felt personal.

Demanding accountability became the entry point.

📝 REFLECTION CHALLENGE

Think about your community. What issue already affects people around you?

What problem creates frustration, anger, or shared concern?

Could that issue become an entry point for civic engagement?



RULE #2

COLLECTIVE ACTION OUTLASTS INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS



CASE STUDY:
VENEZUELA
SUSTAINED DEMOCRATIC ADVOCACY
(2014-PRESENT)



WHAT HAPPENED?

For more than a decade, Venezuelan youth have been at the forefront of the country's democratic movement

University campuses became some of the first spaces where students organized demonstrations, documented abuses, defended civic freedoms, and demanded democratic change.

As civic space shrank, many young activists faced intimidation, arbitrary detention, surveillance, and forced exile. Yet repression did not stop the movement—it **changed how it organized**.

As thousands of young Venezuelans joined the diaspora, they continued supporting civic action through advocacy, election observation, humanitarian initiatives, and international awareness.

Rather than weakening the movement, these connections transformed it into a resilient civic network sustained by young people both inside and outside Venezuela.



BEST PRACTICE

BUILD A NETWORK THAT CAN OUTLAST MOMENTS

The strongest movements are built on trust developed over time, not only during moments of crisis. Invest in relationships across organizations, communities, and even borders. When challenges arise, those connections become your greatest source of resilience.



REFLECTION CHALLENGE

If you couldn't continue your work tomorrow...

- What knowledge should already be shared?
- Which relationships would keep the movement alive?
- What networks would support this work?



WHAT WE CAN LEARN

The Venezuelan experience reminds us that resilient movements are measured not only by what they achieve today, but by their ability to prepare the next generation to continue the work tomorrow.



“ THE UNWRITTEN RULE

THE STRONGEST MOVEMENTS AREN'T THE ONES WITH THE LOUDEST VOICES, BUT THE ONES THAT KEEP ORGANIZING, EVEN WHEN THE SPOTLIGHT FADES.

Repression can silence individuals, but it is far harder to silence a community connected by trust, shared purpose, and collective action.



WHAT WORKED?



Building trusted networks during crisis moments.



Turned the exile into international advocacy.



Student-led organizing across universities and communities.



Creating youth led movements in every city around the globe.



Connecting local initiatives with the Venezuelan diaspora.



Using creative visuals, social media, and independent media to amplify the voice

WHAT DIDN'T WORK?



Allowing distance between the diaspora and local activists to weaken collaboration.



Losing momentum after major protest cycles.



Depending on spontaneous mobilization without long-term organization.



RULE #3

DIGITAL SPACES ARE CIVIC SPACES



CASE STUDY: NEPAL STUDENTS PROTESTS (2025)

WHAT HAPPENED?

In early 2025, a viral trend exposing the lifestyles of politicians' children, Nepo Babies trend, sparked a huge wave of frustration among young Nepalis. Videos, memes and posts on TikTok, Instagram, Reddit and X, revealed deep corruption, inequality and political privilege. This trend went totally viral. On September 4, 2025, the government announced a ban on 26 major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, X, Reddit, Signal and Snapchat, claiming it was necessary to curb "misinformation" and regulate online content. Young people rapidly responded and understood that this was an attempt to silence a generation. Using Hashtags like #WakeupNepal, #NepoBabies, #EndCorruption, #GenZRevolution they trended the protests across platforms like Discord, Telegram, Viber, Reddit and even other gaming communities. Throughout these they reorganized, shared real-time information and coordinated actions. Even elected their new Prime Minister.

BEST PRACTICE BUILD CIVIC SPACES WHERE PEOPLE ALREADY ARE.

Digital spaces are not just for entertainment. They are places to learn, organize, protect each other, coordinate action and create collective change.

REFLECTION CHALLENGE

- Where do young people in your community already spend time online?
- How could one of those spaces become a place for civic action?
- If your favorite platform disappeared tomorrow... Where would youngs go to? How would you stay connected with them?



THE UNWRITTEN RULE YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T SEPARATE THEIR DIGITAL LIVES FROM THEIR CIVIC LIVES. MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE.

The most powerful digital platforms are the ones where communities already trust, communicate and use commonly. Not necessarily those built for activism.

WHAT WORKED?



Used platforms and spaces young people already trusted.



Creative content, memes and art to amplify messages.



Coordinated across Discord, Telegram, Viber, Reddit, Instagram, etc.



Turning online outrage into peaceful nationwide action.



Created moderators instead of hierarchical leaders.



Combined online coordination with offline action.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK?

- ✗ Depending only on one social media platform
- ✗ Confusing viral content with real organizing
- ✗ Leaving groups without moderation or purpose
- ✗ Sharing unverified or misleading information



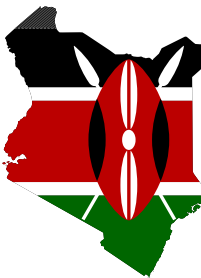
WHAT WE CAN LEARN

Technology can be used both to silence us or to connect us. Young Nepalis showed us that digital spaces, when protected and used with purpose, can become our best tool to defend democracy.



RULE #4

IF PEOPLE CAN'T UNDERSTAND IT THEY WON'T FIGHT FOR IT



CASE STUDY:
KENYA
FINANCE BILL PROTESTS (2024)

WHAT HAPPENED?

In early 2024, the Kenyan government proposed a Finance Bill that would have introduced new taxes on everyday essentials.

Young people quickly analyzed the Bill and exposed how it would hurt ordinary Kenyans the most.

But what turned their ideas into national influence was access—to digital platforms, independent media, content creators, and communities online and offline.

Through hashtags, live streams, memes, explainers, and street protests, young Kenyans reached millions, shaped the national conversation, and forced the government to listen.

Young Kenyans began breaking down the Bill through these many tools and channels to explain how the proposed measures would affect transportation, food, digital services and the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

BEST PRACTICE

SPEAK HUMAN, NOT POLICY



Before explaining the policy, explain what changes if it passes and how it affects people's everyday life. People connect with outcomes before they connect with legislation.

REFLECTION CHALLENGE

Imagine you have 30 seconds. Can you explain your cause to:

- A friend
- A parent
- A neighbor
- A stranger



THE UNWRITTEN RULE
NO ISSUE IS URGENT UNTIL IT BECOMES PERSONAL

Young Kenyans translated Finance Bill into a conversation about food, transport, jobs, and opportunity, making the consequences impossible to ignore.

WHAT WORKED?



Digital organizing
Social media helped mobilize hundreds of thousands quickly.



Cross-sector alliances
Students, workers, professionals, and civil society stood together.



Break down information
Translating technical issues into everyday language



Decentralized communication
No single leader, no single point of failure.



Citizen journalism
Live updates and real-time reporting bypassed gatekeepers.



Turning outrage into action
Clear messages, creative content, and consistent pressure.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK?



Underestimating the speed of government response and misinformation campaigns.



Relying only on online pressure without sustaining on-the-ground organization.



Assuming decision-makers would listen without economic and political pressure.



WHAT WE CAN LEARN

Knowledge becomes power only when it becomes understandable. Kenya showed that the most effective communicators are not always the ones who know the most, they are the ones who make others care.



RULE #5

PEOPLE NEED MORE THAN A CLAIM
THEY NEED A VISION



CASE STUDY:
SRI LANKA
ARAGALAYA MOVEMENT (2022)

WHAT HAPPENED?

In early 2022, Sri Lanka faced its worst economic crisis in decades, soaring prices, fuel shortages, power cuts, and widespread corruption.

Young people, many of them university students, took the streets. What began as small protests grew into a nationwide movement: **Aragalaya**.

For months, protesters camped outside government buildings, organized teach-ins, created art, coordinated solidarity networks, and refused to leave.

Young people developed detailed proposals, discussions, citizen forums, and visions for what Sri Lanka should become.

Their sustained pressure forced the President to flee the country and the government to resign.

BEST PRACTICE
DON'T JUST IDENTIFY THE ISSUE, SKETCH THE FUTURE

The strongest movements help people visualize a better alternative. Criticism creates attention, but a based vision creates commitment.

REFLECTION CHALLENGE

- What change are you asking for?
- What would success actually look like?
- How would people's lives improve?
- Can you explain your vision in three sentences?



“ THE UNWRITTEN RULE
SUSTAINABLE MOVEMENTS OFFER
ALTERNATIVES. NOT LIMITED CRITICS.
Anyone can identify a problem.
The movements that endure are the ones that help
people imagine **what comes next**. ”

WHAT WORKED?

- | | |
|---|---|
| Mass, peaceful, sustained public pressure | Decentralized coordination across the country |
| Occupying symbolic spaces until institutions had to respond | Broad coalitions: students, workers, professionals, artists, religious leaders |
| Clear, simple demands that resonated with everyone | Using creative visuals, social media, and independent media to amplify the voice and civic education. |

WHAT DIDN'T WORK?

- ✗ Relying on political parties to lead the movement
- ✗ Waiting for international actors to solve the crisis
- ✗ Fragmentation after the peak of mobilization
- ✗ Difficulty maintaining unity once immediate goals were achieved



WHAT WE CAN LEARN

Many movements know what they oppose. Far fewer know what they are building.

Protest can spark attention, but vision sustains momentum. The Aragalaya movement reminded us that people are more likely to stay engaged when they can see a future worth building.



RULE #6

MOMENTUM
FADES.
BUILD CAPACITY
TO ADAPT



CASE STUDY:
NICARAGUA
STUDENTS PROTESTS (2018)



WHAT HAPPENED?

In 2018, young Nicaraguans first mobilized to protest the government’s handling of the Indio Maiz wildfire, demanding transparency. Peaceful demonstrations began on social media and the streets.

Days later, the government announced social security (INSS) reforms. Students immediately took the streets into a nationwide movement demanding democracy, justice and the end of authoritarianism.

The government responded with extreme violence, arbitrary arrests, censorship, massive assassinations, and attacks by police and pro-regime armed groups.

Thousands of young Nicaraguans were forced into exile. But far from quitting their cause, the movement adapted through decentralized networks, international advocacy, documentation of human rights abuses and long-term civic organizing that continues even today.

BEST PRACTICE

DON'T JUST BUILD MOMENTUM.
BUILD CAPACITY

Invest in people, systems, and tools that helps your movement can adapt, survive pressure and keep advancing toward lasting change.



REFLECTION CHALLENGE

- How will your movement adapt when challenges increase?
- How success actually would look like for your movement?
- What systems are you building today so the movement can last?



“ THE UNWRITTEN RULE

MOVEMENTS RARELY FAIL BECAUSE THEY LOSE MOMENTUM, BUT BECAUSE THEY NEVER BUILD THE STRUCTURES NEEDED TO SUSTAIN IT.

The goal is to build the people, relationships and structures needed to keep creating momentum.

”

WHAT WORKED?



Universities became organizing hubs.



Students quickly assumed leadership during National Dialogues



Citizen journalism documented abuses when independent media were silenced



International advocacy to amplify voices inside Nicaragua



Decentralized NGO’s and networks kept the movement alive after arrests and exile



Students transformed a spontaneous uprising into long-term organizing through exile networks.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK?

- ✗ Relying on visible leaders made the movement vulnerable to repression
- ✗ Limited contingency planning before the crackdown
- ✗ Spontaneous organizing without long-term structures
- ✗ Depending on physical spaces once civic space was violently closed



WHAT WE CAN LEARN

Movements have to be prepared to face pressure. The real test for them will be answering what comes next.

When ordinary people organize, they become a extraordinary force institutions cannot ignore.



FROM RULES TO REAL IMPACT

The 6 Rules capture the **mindset and principles** behind strong civic movements. The **Playbook** shows you how to put them into practice, **step by step**.

The journey doesn't end with **the rules**. It continues with action guided by the **Playbook**.

