



The Shrinking Space for Civil Society and its impacts on Young People and Their Organisations

An Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

In both classical and contemporary political theory, civil society plays a central role in discussions over the associational life of members of a polity [...]. Civil society organisations, including youth organisations, perform a number of functions that are necessary in promoting and safeguarding basic human rights and democracy. In fact, an open civil society is one of the most important safeguards against tyranny, oppression, and other anti-democratic tendencies.

As a sphere of free and non-coercive association, an open civic space enables civil society actors to pursue a number of roles. Civil society organisations provide a platform for dialogue between a diversity of voices and the free exchange of information between civil society actors and various other stakeholders. At the same time, civil society organisations also amplify the voices of minority and other at-risk groups by raising the visibility of the key issues (and related problems) they face. Youth civil society organisations that engage young people in civic life are particularly important, as these organisations target youth-specific issues, place issues on the policy and political agenda, and identify innovative solutions in the field. In fact, as ‘laboratories of democracy’, youth civil society organisations have been an important catalyst for many social innovations.

At the same time, in the era of increased commercialisation and gentrification of urban areas, open and safe civic spaces serve as unique safe havens for young individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate and build the competence they need to fully participate in various realms of public life. These places also facilitate links to decision-makers and other stakeholders.

Nevertheless, despite the centrality of youth organisations in promoting and safeguarding basic human rights and democracy for young people, the last few years have witnessed a persistent silencing of these voices – thus narrowing the civic space available to youth. The ‘global authoritarian pushback against democracy and human rights’, comprising anti-democratic and neoliberal tendencies including hate speech, fake news, populism, conflicting diversity and other phenomena

headed under the banner of 'uncivil society', contributes to the shrinking of civic space irrespective of the country's democratic tradition, prevailing social cleavages, wealth, human rights record, or geographical location. Changes in legal status, funding restrictions, disproportionate reporting requirements, bureaucratic obstacles combined with other administrative regulations, and smear campaigns that aim to undermine reputation or call into question their mission, are just some of the strategies from the vast governmental toolkit youth and other civil society organisations are facing. As a result of increasingly hostile conditions for civil, political and social engagement across the globe, youth is prevented from being an agent of social change.

Our research reveals that, in their quest to facilitate the abovementioned process – i.e. of youth becoming an agent of social change – youth organisations have to overcome significant challenges. These challenges, primarily imposed by governments, and the strategies to overcome them, can be broadly grouped into four categories:

Firstly, those that relate to freedom of information and expression. One in three youth organisations experience difficulties in accessing information from government; two in five have difficulties expressing themselves because of fear of retribution from the government; and one in ten is not even able to freely use the internet.

Secondly, challenges in exercising their rights of assembly and association: one in eight youth organisations experienced difficulties in organising or participating in public assemblies; and two in five of them do not feel certain that their organisation of, or participation in, such assemblies will not result in some form of retribution. Furthermore, one in five experienced governmental interference in the functioning of their organisation, while two in five youth organisations do not feel completely free from government interference. One in four also reports undue restrictions, while one third experience barriers to acquiring foreign funding. They also believe the presence of market indicators to evaluate their work is disturbing; one in four to a noticeable degree.

Thirdly, in their quest to secure and facilitate citizen participation, one fourth of organisations are not fully capable of engaging in advocacy activities due to their fear of retribution, and experience at least some difficulties in participating in the processes of deliberation and decision-making. What is more, two out of five organisations believe they are only moderately or to no extent able to influence the outcome of deliberation processes: to be precise, three out of four organisations are never, or very rarely, invited to participate in the formulation of solutions at local level, and three out of six at the national level.

A **Fourth** category relates to human rights and the rule of law: one third of youth organisations believe that human rights and the principles of rule of law are only moderately respected when it comes to youth. This is also shown by the fact that more than two out of five believe that youth is only moderately free from political pressures.

All in all, our study clearly demonstrates that there are serious obstacles to civic space when it comes to young people. This is also shown by the fact that one fifth of youth organisations believe that young people have limited access to civic space, and more than half of them perceive young people as underrepresented in a civic space.

The mission of redressing the trend of a shrinking civic space for young people and their organisations should focus on detecting, and the prevention of, anti-democratic legal and policy manoeuvres by government and other actors. However, to the extent that the definitions, aspirations, and acceptable expressions of democratic activity are determined through cultural and social processes, it has been—and remains—possible to pre-emptively shrink civic spaces by undermining its initial formation within each successive generation of people. To safeguard and expand the democratic project and its constituent civic spaces, it is essential to define shrinking space more broadly to also include early learning of democratic principles, such as in school curricula, and the impact of efforts to change the terms of reference upon which they are established and reproduced.

A credible agenda for safeguarding civic spaces for youth must also include analytical lenses and data that bring the stratification of access and agency across identities, cultures, and communities to the surface; and the strategies for reclaiming the civic space should thus be customised to the particular circumstances and needs of those affected.

While policy discourse prioritises the identification of pragmatic and technical intervention strategies, the ways in which policy questions are framed—including the semantics, underlying assumptions, and context—all shape what answers are found and what recommendations are made. If we are to protect and even expand civic spaces in which youth can develop and express their civic and citizenship identities meaningfully and productively, then the conceptual and theoretical lenses that guide the analysis and policy craft must be embedded with considerations of youth's particular psychosocial, physical, economic, cultural, and educational needs. Efforts to effectively determine and respond to the challenges, opportunities, needs, and wishes of any demographic group requires overt attention to the identities and cultures prevalent within that group.

In addition to discussions about the importance of disaggregating youth groups, the classification of their civic engagement activities can also be useful in terms of identifying areas of strength or limiting factors within a broader strategic effort to increase targeted engagement opportunities for youth. In order to evaluate the support within such environments, a matrix or analytical framework for conducting an inventory is a useful tool.