



Desk research on the internal and external challenges facing international youth organisations in relation to their strength, resilience and strategic development

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# Table of contents

|                                                                           |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Table of contents .....                                                   | 3  |
| Executive summary .....                                                   | 4  |
| 1. Context and purpose .....                                              | 6  |
| Context of the assignment.....                                            | 6  |
| The mandate .....                                                         | 6  |
| The INGYO landscape .....                                                 | 8  |
| The challenge: participation in a polycrisis .....                        | 9  |
| 2. Landscape analysis: civil society in a BANI world .....                | 11 |
| A brittle political context .....                                         | 11 |
| A challenging funding context .....                                       | 12 |
| Effects for youth organisations .....                                     | 14 |
| A polarised society: shifts in youth participation .....                  | 15 |
| Responding to the historical moment.....                                  | 16 |
| 3. Specific challenges: the crisis of organising and representation ..... | 19 |
| Internal challenges .....                                                 | 19 |
| The “reach paradox”: breadth vs. depth.....                               | 21 |
| Structural dissonance: the bureaucratic stranglehold .....                | 23 |
| Operational realities: the capacity gaps.....                             | 24 |
| 4. Emerging horizons for resilience .....                                 | 26 |
| Bibliography .....                                                        | 28 |

## Executive summary

This desk research was commissioned by the Council of Europe Youth Department to assess the internal and external challenges facing International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYOs) in relation to their strength, resilience and strategic development. It responds to a political moment in which youth civil society is increasingly recognised as essential to democratic resilience under the Council of Europe's Reykjavík Declaration and the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

The analysis finds that INGYOs operate in an environment that has shifted from volatile to “BANI” — Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear and Incomprehensible. Political polarisation, shrinking civic space, funding instability and shifting participation patterns are reshaping both the operating context of youth organisations and their internal sustainability.

Externally, civic space is narrowing. Coordinated anti-NGO narratives, the spread of “foreign agent” legislation and increasing securitisation erode the legitimacy and operating conditions of rights-based organisations. At the same time, the funding landscape remains characterised by a persistent “starvation cycle,” in which project-based and restricted funding models hollow out governance infrastructure while incentivising short-term deliverables. This creates a structural asymmetry: pro-democracy youth actors must sustain democratic infrastructure with limited core support, while anti-democratic movements invest strategically in narrative influence and leadership pipelines.

Youth participation itself is also transforming. Young people are not apathetic; they are often hyper-mobilised in response to climate change, conflict and inequality. However, participation increasingly takes fluid, issue-based and digital forms that do not automatically translate into formal membership or sustained governance engagement. This produces a “formalism gap” between institutional structures and contemporary participation logics.

Internally, these developments translate into a crisis of organisation and representation. The traditional chain of engagement — from local activism to international governance — has been weakened by the pandemic, economic precarity and time poverty. Leadership turnover, professionalisation pressures and funding constraints strain the transmission belt through which grassroots concerns are transformed into collective mandates. Governance structures risk becoming procedurally intact yet socially fragile.

The paper identifies a structural “mobilisation trap.” Under project-driven funding conditions, organisations are incentivised to prioritise visible, short-term outputs over the slower work of organising, leadership development and constituency building. This weakens their capacity to build long-term democratic power. Regulatory burdens, compliance regimes and visa barriers further intensify the mismatch between the volunteer-led nature of youth organisations and the increasingly professional logic imposed upon them.

Operationally, INGYOs report recurring capacity gaps in fundraising, financial management, institutional memory, digital sovereignty and collective care. Yet the research concludes that addressing these needs alone will not be sufficient if the underlying structural conditions remain unchanged. These challenges are structural rather than generational.

Young people bring adaptive strengths — including digital fluency, networked coordination and collaborative leadership styles — that represent a resilience asset. However, current organisational and funding models often fail to unlock these capacities.

The central conclusion of the report is that traditional, deficit-based capacity building is no longer sufficient. Strengthening the resilience of international youth organisations requires systemic resilience: rebuilding leadership pipelines, protecting democratic governance as core infrastructure, countering short-termism, strengthening connections within the wider movement ecology, and investing in institutional memory, digital sovereignty and collective care.

Ensuring that international youth organisations can sustain their organisational reproduction, democratic legitimacy and long-term organising capacity will be decisive for their continued role as schools of democracy and connectors between young people and European institutions.

# 1. Context and purpose

## Context of the assignment

This desk research paper was commissioned by the Council of Europe Youth Department to inform the development of capacity-building and support activities for International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYOs).

This document serves as a literature review to help determine what future capacity building and support activities need to respond to. While this desk research paper adopts a structural framework designed to capture systemic challenges, it is structured to answer the following three questions:

- What are the specific internal and external threats facing civil society generally and INGYOs specifically in the current context?
- What are the main needs of international youth organisations in relation to their internal governance and external strategic development, including in relation to advocacy for democracy and human rights?
- How could the Council of Europe's support evolve to ensure the sector's resilience, strategic development and success in the face of today's challenges?

The paper is based on desk research conducted in November - December 2025, synthesising findings from four primary streams to answer the key questions regarding internal and external challenges:

1. Internal studies, such as consultations, surveys and desk-research carried out by the EU - Council of Europe Youth Partnership, European Youth Forum and the European Youth Foundation.
2. Academic and policy research, including foundational studies on shrinking space, democracy, youth participation, representation and organising.
3. Civil society and philanthropic data, i.e. a variety of recent reports and publications by organisations that are rooted in human rights and democracy movements.
4. Future-oriented research and findings of diverse research consortia and other academia that cover strategic foresights and provide thought leadership on emerging forms of political participation and organising.

The Consultative meeting on the resilience and strength of youth organisations, organised by the Youth Department in January 2026, has used and corroborated the findings and positions of this paper with the experiences and knowledge of INGYOs and experts, in view of new programmes for increasing strength and resilience of civil society youth organisations.

## The mandate

Freedom of assembly and association are enshrined as fundamental rights in the European Convention of Human Rights (1950). More recently, the Council of Europe's

commitment to civil society was unequivocally reaffirmed at the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government in Reykjavík (2023), when Heads of State declared civil society a "prerequisite for a functioning democracy", and pledged to protect the environment in which it operates, committed to including a youth perspective in the Organisation's deliberations. This high-level political mandate was translated into operational reality for the youth sector in October 2025 at the 10th Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth in Malta. By adopting a Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective, co-developed with young people, it welcomed four elements articulating the approach:

- Think with young people (inclusion in conceptual phases)
- Learn from and with young people (mutual capacity building)
- Participate with young people (structural co-management)
- Act with and for young people (implementation and delivery)

Crucially, the Malta Declaration explicitly invited the Joint Council on Youth to support member States by developing "practical tools including capacity-building efforts", building on decades of work carried out by the Council of Europe Youth Department, which provides training, funding and human rights education. This research aims to inform the evolution of this work by assessing internal and external challenges facing international youth organisations in relation to their strengths, resilience and strategic development.

As this research describes, the challenges affecting International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYOs) are multi-fold and complex. Shrinking space developments effectively undermine young people's ability to exercise their freedom of association, whilst the aftermath of COVID-19 has seen a decline in volunteer engagement. The war in Ukraine brought military conflict back to the region and led to the expulsion of the Russian Federation from the Council of Europe. Amidst all of this, INGYOs struggle with a shifting funding landscape.

The current historical juncture is politically recognised. The 4th Summit in Reykjavík was not a routine diplomatic event; it was only the fourth time in 75 years that Heads of State convened, explicitly acknowledging a "fundamental challenge" to the democratic order. The Reykjavik Summit was the basis for the Council of Europe's initiative for a "New Democratic Pact for Europe". Crucially, the Pact connects youth participation to democratic resilience by framing a vibrant, independent youth civil society as a frontline defence against disinformation and institutional distrust (Berset, 2025).

This aligns with broader institutional trends. Recently, the European Commission proposed a new European Union (EU) Civil Society Strategy to engage with civil society through mechanisms like the Youth Policy Dialogues and the Citizens' Engagement Platform. While the European Union's funding support offers high political visibility, they are frequently critiqued for a 'project-logic' shortcoming, which creates administrative burdens that can depoliticize grassroots activism (De Bruycker & Hanegraaff, 2024). Furthermore, as American private and public funding has increasingly withdrawn from Europe, the Council of Europe's European Youth Foundation (EYF) has become an even more critical, yet overstretched, player in providing the structural grants necessary for INGYO survival (Deželan & Yurttagüler,

2021). Various United Nations (UN) bodies are also seeking ways to strengthen youth participation through the Youth2030 strategy, though these global frameworks often struggle to penetrate the local level where the shrinking space is most acutely felt (Bárta et al., 2021).

It is critical to note that the research landscape backing institutional mandates has shifted. New findings from Horizon Europe projects (2021–2027) have moved beyond measuring participation rates to analysing democratic resilience. This shift requires a move away from purely quantitative metrics—such as voter turnout or organization membership—toward frameworks that measure democratic security. This involves evaluating the autonomy and sustainability of youth civil society as a frontline defence against backsliding (Council of Europe, 2024). Defining participation through this lens is essential for democratic resilience; it ensures that engagement fosters the 'social muscle' and institutional trust required to withstand disinformation (OECD, 2023). By framing young people as 'architects of future democratic models'—a shift championed by initiatives like Youth Decide 2040—institutions are challenged to move from reactionary policymaking toward strategic foresight (EURYKA, 2020).

International youth organisations, as the key interlocutors between young people and the Council of Europe, have a critical role to play in supporting these institutional mandates and ensuring that the political promise reach national and local youth organisations. Indeed, supporting their strength, resilience and strategic development is thus necessary for ensuring that they have the conditions and support to carry out their missions.

## The INGYO landscape

The ecosystem of international youth organisations provides a transnational civic infrastructure composed of international and regional youth organisations organised around a wide range of political interests, issues, constituencies and communities. INGYOs include umbrellas of umbrellas with national youth councils, national, regional and local organisations, as well as networks of youth organisations focusing on issues such as youth participation, democracy and human rights education. Some organisations have a global scope. For the sake of this paper, we focus on youth-led organisations, whilst acknowledging that there is a wider scope of organisations working with young people. Many international youth organisations are members of the European Youth Forum, which functions as European platform for youth organisations.

Whilst mandates of international youth organisations differ, they typically carry out a range of functions: community organising, representation and advocacy, multiplication, and watchdogs and innovation.

### 1. Community organising

A classical function of youth organisations in general is that of community organising, a term often described as bringing people together so that they can build the power to win change. Youth organisations bring together young people to organise around youth issues, build democratic competencies and train young people to represent their



issues and become active citizens. INGYOs typically organise communities of youth activists at the European level.

## 2. Representation and advocacy

A common function of INGYOs is to aggregate diverse voices of their own constituencies into shared positions. As noted in the *Study on the Landscape of Youth Representation*, they provide the essential connective tissue that translates grassroots concerns into high-level policy language. This not only allows for organised representation of young people's issues in general but also allows marginalised groups who may be silenced at the national level to find a platform for advocacy.

## 3. Multiplication

INGYOs disseminate the democratic value generated at the European level—training, standards, and solidarity—back to national and local contexts. Many build the capacities of their members through trainings, events and publications. This sharing back and peer learning ensures that lessons learned do not remain trapped at the international level but empower local activists.

## 4. Watchdogs and innovators

The Council of Europe youth sector strategy Agenda 2030 explicitly calls on INGYOs to fulfil broader democratic mandates. It envisages them as watchdogs, advocating for young people's access to rights (Priority 2); as innovators revitalising pluralistic democracy through new forms of participation (Priority 1); and as schools of democracy, promoting living together in inclusive societies (Priority 3). Historically, European youth organisations have innovated around issues such as non-formal learning, human rights education and equality issues.

International youth organisations differ from national and regional youth organisations in that they (generally) do not provide direct services to young people, they often represent other youth organisations. National and regional organisations often provide a range of educational and community building activities; they organise the 'grassroot level' youth. Typically, young people access youth organisations at national levels first and only become active in international youth organisations later.

## The challenge: participation in a polycrisis

The contemporary landscape for international youth organisations is defined by a 'polycrisis'—a convergence of interconnected shocks where the harms of the COVID-19 pandemic intersect with rising economic precarity and environmental instability (Council of Europe, 2024; UNICEF, 2023). Within this context, youth sectors across Europe are grappling with a significant decline in formal volunteering, which fell from pre-pandemic levels to roughly 17% in certain regions by 2024 (EU Youth Report, 2024). Research from the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership indicates that this is not merely a temporary lull, but a structural shift driven by 'time poverty'; as the cost-of-living crisis intensifies, young people are increasingly forced to prioritise immediate economic survival over the unpaid, sustained commitments required by INGYOs (RAY

Network, 2021; European Commission, 2025). This 'participation gap' is further exacerbated by a loss of institutional memory and a break in the 'chain of engagement' caused by the multi-year suspension of face-to-face activities, leaving organisations struggling to recruit a new generation of leaders into a harshening and increasingly restricted civic space (Deželan & Yurttagüler, 2021; Council of Europe, 2024).

However, this does not mean that young people are apathetic to the issues that they face. A narrow understanding of what democratic participation can entail limits the perception of the variety of forms in which young people are active and mobilised, including in protests; local civic life, but also voting (LSE, 2025). Indeed, young people are often leading the response to the polycrisis of climate change, conflict, and economic precarity. The European Democracy Hub also notes that the landscape of participation is shifting, with young people increasingly being active outside of institutions. There has been a surge in protests and digital activism, such as the recent student protests in Serbia. As noted in the study *Political participation in Europe*, while young people are engaging in new, non-institutional forms of political expression, they face increasing barriers to entering formal political arenas, including because of shrinking space (see chapter 2b). Another important reason is that young people have lost trust in the institutions that were traditionally a home for political participation (LSE, 2025).

The European Youth Forum's Membership Survey (2023) notes further tensions: while youth organisations are resilient, they are operating with diminishing resources that are increasingly earmarked for project work over governance work and deal with challenges on the engagement of volunteers, making it difficult to plan for the long haul and making it challenging to connect with youth that has different (non-institutional) ways of mobilising. The survey highlights that the pandemic years compounded chronic challenges rather than creating them. Whilst international youth organisations remain vibrant and active, these developments do raise questions for their capacity to organise leadership development pipelines and ensuring the inclusion of young people in all their diversity, all whilst avoiding operational exhaustion.

Deželan (2025) warns that without active reach-out mechanisms, INGYOs risk becoming gatekeepers rather than gateways. Consequently, they may no longer be able to effectively multiply knowledge towards the young people that are mobilised around matters such as democracy and human rights. As we will discuss later, this is not the result of a lack of will among INGYOs, but the result of external factors pushing INGYOs to professionalise.

## 2. Landscape analysis: civil society in a BANI world

While the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) framework, coined by the U.S. Army War College in the late 1980s, described a volatile post-Cold War landscape, the current environment requires a new lens. To understand the specific situation of youth organisations, it is more useful to apply the BANI framework. Originally coined by futurist Jamais Cascio (2020), this framework argues that the world has shifted from being merely volatile to being Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, and Incomprehensible. This happens against a backdrop of increased polarisation, which in this paper refers to more than just political disagreement. It describes a structural divergence of values and realities, cutting across societies, lived social and economic realities and geopolitics.

### A brittle political context

In a BANI world, systems appear strong until they suddenly break. The operational space for civil society is fracturing along geopolitical lines, and people increasingly feel that they are losing grip on the things that matter to them (Hullegie & Tabarki, 2025).

Several phenomena have an influence on the context in which INGYOs exist and carry out their mission.

#### 1. The weakening of multilateralism

The post-Cold War consensus on global cooperation is unravelling. For young people, this is a direct threat to their future. UNICEF (2025) warns that the international community's ability to enforce legal norms is weakening. Save the Children (2025) reports a 30% surge in grave violations against children in conflict zones, proving that the rules of war are no longer protecting the most vulnerable. Whilst institutions often remain a beacon of hope for some and an important place for dialogue, the question is how young generations trust multilateral institutions compared to generations that grew up in different times.

#### 2. The security vs. rights rift

Right-wing tendencies and rising global tensions have led some member States to prioritise national security and sovereignty over human rights obligations. This creates a divide where civil society organisations are increasingly viewed by some governments not as partners, but as security threats or "foreign influencers" (Carnegie Europe, 2025; LSE, 2025).

#### 3. The playbook of delegitimization

Youth organisations, alongside other civil society, are facing a battle for their reputation. This creates significant fragility in a context frequently described as "shrinking space". Legislative changes and public efforts to undermine civil society organisations in a member State can instantly sever a national branch from the

international network, collapsing years of investment overnight. Delegitimisation hampers the relevance and effectiveness of civil society organisations.

- The “foreign agent” frame: Funding and cross-border cooperation are no longer neutral. Financial flows from one country to the other are increasingly framed as acts of political interference rather than solidarity, leading to the contagion of foreign agent laws that criminalise the sector’s *raison d’être* (Just Security, 2025). In various countries, youth-led democracy work is branded as foreign interference. The Venice Commission has criticised such laws for stigmatising civil society. Similarly, the Court of Justice of the European Union has ruled that restricting foreign funding violates fundamental rights.
- The narrative war: Legal restrictions -such as the abuse of non-profit and tax laws and the application of foreign agent laws- are often preceded by what the Maecenata Foundation (2025) identifies as a coordinated anti-NGO narrative. It is a strategic attempt to delegitimise civil society actors by portraying them as elites or enemies of the state before any laws are even passed. This narrative warfare erodes public trust, making organisations brittle, their credibility weakens as public support shatters.
- Labelling: Anti-democratic forces increasingly seek to enforce public labels on social movements that delegitimise them. Queer youth organisers are labelled as terrorists. Legitimate climate anxiety is reframed as extremism. The “anti-woke” frame has been widely used to badmouth youth activism. Research by Sommer and Haunss (2023) documents how peaceful youth protesters have been criminalised and mocked in media framing to alienate them from the public.

For young people the question easily arises: why they would commit themselves to static structures of organisations instead of carrying out more free forms of activism?

#### 4. The relevance-security paradox

As Carnegie Europe (2025) argues, authoritarian crackdowns often succeed because they exploit a relevance gap: organisations are attacked for being foreign agents, and because they have prioritised donor reporting over community rooting, the local public remains indifferent to their closure. Thus, relevance is not just about engagement and impact; it is the primary shield against existential threats, because organisations without social rooting are the easiest to delegitimise and dismantle. Relevance can secure organisations against the harmful impacts of crackdowns.

## A challenging funding context

The funding landscape suffers from a profound trust deficit from donors towards grantees that threatens the very existence of many civil society actors.

#### 1. The withdrawal of transatlantic support

For decades, the US government and US foundations provided a safety net for European civil society, funding democracy and human rights work, even when national

governments would not. Most of this funding has been cut. The shifts have evoked a significant resource gap for rights-based advocacy (Amnesty International, 2025).

## 2. The cascade impact of global cuts

This fragility is exacerbated by a global contraction in development funding. As CONCORD (2025) reports, cuts to development aid funding by major European and North American donor countries is a major threat to civil society organisations globally. Together with the philanthropic shifts this causes a significant cascade impact on European civil society. Open Society Foundations (OSF), previously the sector's largest private donor, announced a radical redesign in 2023 to largely withdraw from the EU and shift resources to the Global South. Similarly, major US donors like Ford and MacArthur have pivoted strategies away from Europe.

## 3. The resource paradox

This starvation persists despite the philanthropic sector's immense capacity. Philea's *Fabric of Giving* (2025) confirms that European foundations hold €516 billion in assets and spend €76 billion annually. The crisis, therefore, is not one of scarcity per se, but of distribution: this vast wealth is often locked in 'patient' capital or reserved for restricted themes, failing to reach civil society in a time that this support is mostly needed.

## 4. The starvation cycle

The financial landscape for civil society organisations is trapped in a 'nonprofit starvation cycle,' a phenomenon where a chronic underfunding of indirect costs—specifically governance, human resources, and IT infrastructure—cripples the long-term health of the sector (Bacalso, 2024; Humentum, 2022). This cycle is fuelled by two major shifts in the sector: first, the withdrawal of flexible American funding, which historically covered more core operational expenses; and second, the rise of a 'utilitarian' institutional model where funding is increasingly earmarked for specific service delivery rather than the democratic mandate of the organisation (European Civic Forum, 2025; Maecenata Foundation, 2024).

## 5. Asymmetric funding

The financial precarity of the sector is compounded by a dangerous 'asymmetry of resources,' where progressive, rights-based organisations are increasingly outpaced by anti-democratic actors. While progressive actors such as human rights organisations are tethered to the 'starvation cycle' of short-term, project-based institutional grants, anti-democratic and anti-rights actors—including far-right populist coalitions and ultra-conservative religious networks—benefit from unrestricted, 'patient' capital with long-term horizons (Philea, 2025). According to the European Parliamentary Forum (EPF, 2025), these illiberal challengers have successfully mobilised over US\$1 billion in Europe to fund 'narrative warfare' and the cultivation of leadership pipelines. The \$1.18 billion identified in the report primarily originates from private foundations and some state actors within the European Union (73%), followed by the Russian Federation (18%) and mainly Christian anti-right groups in the United States (9%). This creates a structural disadvantage for the pro-democracy and human

rights landscape: while rights-based actors struggle with declining funding, anti-democratic groups can invest more freely in norm-shifting, litigation, and the creation of alternative community 'hubs' that act as recruitment centres for illiberal ideologies (EPF, 2025; Philea, 2025). For the youth sector, this asymmetry is not merely financial but existential; it allows anti-democratic movements to offer young people a sense of community and long-term belonging, while the formal, democratic youth infrastructure is left to struggle with the hollowing out of its governance and the systematic delegitimisation of its advocacy mandate (Maecenata Foundation, 2025; Bacalso, 2024).

## Effects for youth organisations

These phenomena have different effects for youth organisations:

### 1. Individualisation of funding

Research from the European Youth Forum (2025) reveals that while the Erasmus+ budget has nominally increased, it has shifted priority toward individual mobility at the expense of structural cooperation. In several member states, success rates for structural grants have plummeted to single digits, effectively stripping the sector of the resources needed to build networks.

### 2. Sectoral atomisation

There is a growing critique that current Erasmus+ funding mechanisms are actively atomising civil society and support the creation of new organisations that solely provide specific services for which funding is available (youth exchanges) but are not youth-led and lack governance structures that make them accountable to young people. Bacalso (2025) argues that by framing youth organisations as “service providers” they are stripped from other critical roles, such as being “political watchdogs”.

### 3. The taming effect of restricted funding

At the same time, evidence from EURYKA's analysis of youth organisations (2024) suggests a taming effect where reliance on state funding correlates with a decrease in political activity. The research warns that without explicit safeguards for advocacy, public funding can inadvertently lead to the depoliticisation of youth civil society, turning radical changemakers into service providers.

### 4. Professionalisation bias

Furthermore, complex application procedures and punitive reimbursement rules create a 'professionalisation bias', where only well-staffed, technocratic organisations can navigate the bureaucracy (Deželan; 2025 and Bacalso; 2025). This effectively filters out the volunteer-led grassroots movements the programmes aim to support, starving the core infrastructure of the youth sector while flushing it with restricted funds for project activities that respond to institutional rather than youth-led priorities.

Conversely, the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe remains a critical outlier for the funding of INGYOs, offering Structural Grants that explicitly fund the 'back-office' costs necessary for an organization to maintain its autonomy and sustain the leadership pipelines required for democratic resilience.

In response to these challenges, youth organisations may develop mechanisms of resilience and also make the best of the opportunity presented by the trust-based philanthropy.

## 5. Response mechanisms

New research by Sovner (2025) provides a taxonomy for how CSOs survive: Reduce (shrinking staff), Replace (finding similar donors), or – more sustainably – Reframe their work to find new bases of legitimacy. Only 10% of organisations successfully reframe, highlighting a skills gap. Whilst such responses can be relevant for some INGYOs, it raises the question of how youth organisations can act on this with boards that have short governance mandates and leadership that is involved for relatively short periods of time (MDPI, 2024), and how they can fund the costs required to renew themselves.

## 6. Opportunity: the shift to trust-based philanthropy

The Council of Europe's *Study on Donor Practices* (2025) and Philea (2025) identify a promising countertrend to address restrictive funding trends. Progressive public and private donors are increasingly piloting trust-based and core support models, recognising that resilience requires flexibility. The challenge for INGYOs is to build and sustain the networks, financial literacy, fundraising capacity and governance structures necessary to access these funding pools and to convince funders that the time to invest in youth organising is now.

## A polarised society: shifts in youth participation

The nature of youth participation is shifting based on larger societal trends.

### 1. The “formalism gap”

Research indicates that young people are less represented in formal political spaces. Eurobarometer (2024) finds that while 64% of youth want to vote, only 22% feel attached to political parties. Deželan and Bacalso note that young people are increasingly moving to 'liquid activism'. Their engagement is less rooted in formal structures and traditional civil society organisations, and more ad-hoc, issue-based and non-hierarchical.

### 2. The depoliticisation trap

EURYKA (2019) reveals a systemic shift where public discourse frames youth as vulnerable objects rather than political agents. This aligns with the phenomenon of shifting funding to service delivery (chapter 2b).



### 3. The “culture war” fracture

The assumption that youth is a naturally progressive category is collapsing. Analysis by Milosav et al. (2025) of the 2024 European elections reveals that while young women remain the primary drivers of progressive change, young men are increasingly drifting toward the far right and anti-rights frames, with gender equality and the rights of LGBTI people increasingly being opposed (Fundamental Rights Agency; 2025). This trend is corroborated regionally by the FES Youth Study Southeast Europe (2025) and data from the European Social Survey (2024) that point to a widening ideological gap. Research published by The Loop highlights how this divergence is weaponised by “anti-woke narratives” that frame the core values of the Council of Europe—such as diversity and gender equality—as ideological indoctrination.

### 4. Volatility or structural discontent?

The phenomenon of the ‘volatile voter’ among youth is often weaponized to argue against lowering the voting age. Yet research by Bacalso (2025) and the European Parliament (2024) suggests this is a symptom of systemic failure rather than individual caprice. Young people are increasingly attracted to the ‘extremes’ because these poles provide clear, high-contrast identities in an era of polycrisis, whereas centrist platforms are perceived as stagnant.

### 5. Values divergence

Consequently, we are witnessing a deepening values gap. The consensus on liberal democracy is being challenged by illiberal models within the Council of Europe’s own geography. This puts the strengths of the Council of Europe’s values at test and creates a significant challenge for INGYOs that work to strengthen democracy and human rights.

## Responding to the historical moment

As this research points out, INGYOs do not only find themselves in a moment of (external) polycrises, they also face significant internal challenges. This begs the question of where to go next and how to shift from responding to compounding challenges towards a proactive approach that strengthens their relevance and impact. There are several assets that might support this work.

### 1. Democratic insulators

According to the V-Dem Institute’s Resilience Capacity (ResCap) Framework (2025), CSOs are the primary actors capable of “shielding” democratic institutions when formal checks and balances—such as the judiciary or the media—begin to falter. This aligns with the findings of Haggard and Kaufman (2025) in *Global Challenges to Democracy*, who argue that civil society serves as the “lone true defence” in moments of state capture. The opportunity lies in moving beyond mere service delivery to reclaiming a watchdog mandate; by maintaining independent communication channels and mobilising to protect key democratic functions (like election integrity or judicial shifts), CSOs can trigger “democratic U-turns.” This represents a shift from



"defensive" participation to pro-active democratic security, where the agility of the sector is its greatest asset in neutralising the polarisation fuelled by illiberal actors. The role of civil society then is reframed to being "democratic insulators."

## 2. New European pacts

This resilience approach finds institutional weight in the European Democracy Shield (November 2025) and the Council of Europe's New Democratic Pact for Europe. Together, these initiatives offer a specific path out of the "project-logic" trap. The EU Strategy for Civil Society (2025), a core pillar of the Shield, explicitly acknowledges that fragmented, project-based funding is a strategic vulnerability. It proposes a transition toward stable, multi-annual structural support through the new €9 billion AgoraEU programme (integrating CERV and Creative Europe), which aims to fund the "backbone" of organizations rather than just isolated activities. The New Democratic Pact centres around learning, practising, protecting and innovation for democracy. Whilst it remains to be seen what these pacts mean for the funding and support to INGYOs, these developments are potentially promising.

## 3. The institutional demand for foresight

Research from Youth Decide 2040 indicates a shifting institutional appetite: governance bodies are actively seeking intergenerational intelligence to anticipate future crises. The Final Declaration of the 10<sup>th</sup> Council of Europe Conference on Ministers responsible for Youth (2025) explicitly mandates the sector to develop forward-looking and future-proof policies by ensuring "Youth Perspectives" across the organisation's deliberations. This mirrors the European Commission's shift toward strategic foresight as a core governance tool. It creates a need *and* opportunity for INGYOs to reposition themselves not merely as representatives of young people on current needs, but as providers of intergenerational intelligence, essential to future-proof European democracy. On the other hand, it also puts a big responsibility on INGYOs, running the risk that they need to become experts on a large range of tips without necessarily having the expertise and legitimacy to do so.

## 4. The "legitimacy vacuum" - from gatekeepers to architects

As described above, the formalism gap has created a crisis of trust. The Council of Europe and member States are in part addressing this through initiatives on Deliberative Democracy. The Reykjavik Principles (2023) and the recent Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)6 explicitly call on member States to complement representative institutions with deliberative processes (e.g., Citizens' Assemblies) to restore legitimacy. Whilst recognising that these processes are not always open to civil society and not all INGYOs directly work on democracy or necessarily support deliberative democracy, new projects in this area potentially provides an opening to those interested to evolve their own roles. On the one hand, learning from deliberative democracy tools may inform the ways in which INGYOs can strengthen their own governance functions to address the formalism gap and learn how to strengthen connection with disenfranchised young people. On the other hand, INGYOs could partner or advocate to ensure the representative inclusion of young people in such processes.

## 5. The resilience advantage

While the BANI context is testing the elasticity of established structures, it is the native environment of the current generation. Research from the Walton Family Foundation (2024) suggests that growing up in instability has fostered specific adaptive leadership traits—agility, digital intuition, and high empathy. This represents a latent resilience dividend that, if structurally unlocked, offers the exact skill set required to navigate the brittle political context described in section 2.a. Young people distinctively prefer co-creations above rigid structures (CIVICUS, 2025) and respond better to collaborative leadership than traditional top-down management (Horton International, 2025).

Research suggests that growing up in instability has fostered adaptive traits such as agility, networked thinking, and digital fluency (Walton Family Foundation, 2024; CIVICUS, 2025). These traits are not merely as coping mechanisms, but as necessary democratic innovations. They argue that the youth preference for non-linear problem solving, iterative approaches, and networked coordination is precisely the "operating system upgrade" that rigid international institutions need to survive in a complex world. This signals an important opportunity for cross-generational learning when it comes to rethinking democratic participation.

## 6. Digital competencies

Young people today are digitally socialised. Research shows that this generation navigates online spaces intuitively, understands platform dynamics, and is accustomed to rapid coordination through networked tools (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Walton Family Foundation, 2024). These competencies represent a strategic asset in a BANI environment: digital networks enable fast information flows, transnational solidarity, and innovative forms of participation that can strengthen democratic resilience (CIVICUS, 2025; European Democracy Hub, 2025).

However, digital fluency does not automatically translate into democratic capacity. As INCLO (2025) and Tactical Tech (2023) warn, digital spaces are also arenas of surveillance, polarisation, harassment and in-group validation. Research on connective action further shows that personalised digital mobilisation can struggle to convert visibility into sustained collective power (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Giugni & Grasso, 2021). Without intentional support for critical media literacy, holistic security, and dialogue across difference, digital ecosystems risk reinforcing fragmentation rather than strengthening democratic agency. The challenge for INGYOs is therefore not to teach digital skills per se, but to channel existing digital competencies into organising models that build trust, bridge divides, and sustain collective power.

### 3. Specific challenges: the crisis of organising and representation

Crucial to understanding the current crisis is the distinction Marshall Ganz makes in his recent work, *People, Power, Change* (2024). Mobilising is transactional (spending power): aggregating numbers for a moment, while organising is transformational (building power): developing leadership and constituency over time.

Ganz argues that organising (building leadership) is slow, relational, and messy, while mobilising (aggregating bodies/outputs) is fast and transactional. Uncertainty (BANI) creates short-termism. In a brittle environment where project-based funding is increasingly the reality and where in many places the space for civil society organisations is shrinking, the risk is that organisations retreat into *mobilising* (short-term wins) as a survival tactic, sacrificing *organising* (long-term power). The challenges thus are not just operational, but also political. Project funding risks driving the measurement of success of youth organisations to what they produce (youth exchanges, toolkits) instead of real impact on the lives of young people. The question arising is whether INGYOs can sustain the collective power necessary to effect change.

#### Internal challenges

Internally, international youth organisations are suffering from a tension between their democratic mandate and the restrictive logic of their funding structures and rigid operating model. For the ongoing work of international youth organisations, reliance on project funding (see chapter 2a) means that while 'activity budgets' may appear stable, governance costs—including salaries, costs for statutory meetings, legal compliance, and financial auditing—are being systematically hollowed out, endangering their democratic functioning and sustainability (European Youth Forum; 2025). Staff often works on short-term contracts tight to project funding, creating significant turnover and continuous loss of organisational memory.

- **The broken leadership pipeline:** A critical internal threat is the drying up of the leadership pipeline. Research from the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership indicates a structural break in the "chain of engagement"—the traditional pathway where activists graduate from local to national and finally international roles—caused by the multi-year suspension of face-to-face activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The RAY Network (2021) identifies "time poverty" as an additional driver of disengagement; as the cost-of-living crisis intensifies, young people are increasingly forced to prioritize paid employment over the heavy, unpaid commitments required by INGYO governance. Research confirms that young people's economic precarity is a primary driver of disengagement. According to Eurostat (2024), 9.7% of young people in the EU spend more than 40% of their disposable income on housing. Furthermore, the European Youth Forum's data reveals that 68% of young people cannot afford to work for free. The question rises how organisations can

sustain a healthy leadership pipeline that is accessible for all young people.

- **The structural “distance deficit”:** Emerging evidence points to a weakening value proposition for national members to engage internationally. Bacalso et al. (2025) describe a structural “distance deficit,” where professionalised secretariats inadvertently detach from grassroots realities, leading national members to perceive international structures as remote rather than supportive. This disconnect may be exacerbated by the survival mode of national organisations; domestic funding cuts and shrinking civic space could force national branches to prioritize local existence over international solidarity. When combined with the post-pandemic break in the chain of engagement, the question becomes what value national youth organisations currently place in INGYOs.
- **The “professionalisation paradox”:** There is a tension between professionalised secretariats with staff who have long tenures and transient youth boards. As youth volunteers age out rapidly, the secretariat becomes the only stable repository of memory, leading to technocratic displacement where staff hold the reality of accountability. MDPI (2024) research on board-executive dynamics confirms this structural tension in youth-serving nonprofits. Whilst the dynamic may be less present in youth-led organisations, the question rises how youth boards with short governance terms can effectively move their agendas forward.
- **The projectification of funding:** As reported earlier, funds are increasingly governed by action plan logic demanding deliverables rather than supporting democratic operations, which actively harms grassroot groups (Bacalso et al., 2025). Project-based funding creates a mobilisation bias: because NGOs must deliver rapid, predictable outputs for donors, they rely on professional staff (who can mobilise efficiency) rather than investing in volunteers (who require deep organising). In EU funding frameworks (Erasmus+), a prevailing ‘project-logic’ often forces NGOs to report lower administration costs than they incur, leading to a dangerous decay of internal systems. Furthermore, competitive funding calls for projects that are service-oriented force youth organisations to compete against professional organisations for tender-based funding. It raises the question whether the projectification and professionalisation suck out the dynamism and fun that youth organisations need to thrive?
- **The leadership style gap:** While GenZ does not encompass the entire contemporary youth generation, research points to a mismatch. Horton International (2025) notes that while INGYOs operate on hierarchical representative structures, Gen Z activists favour distributed leadership and decentralized organizing. This mismatch creates an authenticity barrier where institutional governance feels rigid and exclusionary to a generation accustomed to networked autonomy. An emerging question is what INGYOs can learn from new leadership and organising models to innovate their own governance models.
- **The short-termism trend:** The EU Youth Report (2024) confirms a structural shift across Europe: young people are moving away from long-term commitments in organisations toward short-term, activity-based volunteering. This mirrors national trends in mature civil societies (e.g., NCVO data in the UK) where formal volunteer frequency is declining. Consequently, the average tenure of engagement with organisations, including the length of board terms,

is likely shortening. Whilst the tenure of trained volunteers decreases and their turnover increases, INGYOs complex structures and institutional relationships demand long-term engagement. The question that arises is how INGYOs can organise young people in ways that account for challenges young people face and enables them to participate meaningfully.

## The “reach paradox”: breadth vs. depth

While INGYOs demonstrate massive reach, there is a growing participation mismatch that raises new questions about their agency and capacity to organise power.

- **Quantitative success:** The European Youth Forum’s 2023 survey counters the narrative of irrelevance, demonstrating significant scale. Among 71 respondents, 31 have over 100,000 members. There is no (known) data about whether this concerns paid membership, which may be seen as a proxy indicator to commitment and engagement with organisations. Crucially, 83% of the surveyed organisations states working with young people who are *not* their members, indicating that some organisations act as broad platforms rather than closed clubs. Commonly youth organisations also refer to beneficiaries; people who access services, but do not necessarily have a voice in the democratic deliberations of organisations. Some INGYOs claim reaching up to 57 million young people through their outreach, although it is not clear whether this is about active engagement or passive reach (such as social media consumption). Whilst the potential reach of youth organisations is significant, the question that arises in the context of a growing structural distance deficit is how organisations derive their mandate, and from whom.
- **The participation style clash:** This disconnect is rooted in a fundamental shift in the logic of participation. As defined by Bennett & Segerberg (2012), the digital era has birthed connective action (fluid, personalised, digital) which stands in stark contrast to the collective action (structured, membership-based, hierarchical) that INGYOs were designed for. This creates a friction with the more rigid structures of INGYOs, leading to a decline in formal membership. Giugni et al (2021) highlight that while youth excel at this connective mobilisation, the energy often dissipates because they lack the connections and infrastructure needed to translate online noise into offline leverage.
- **The engagement gap:** This results in a paradox where INGYOs have the *audience* (millions reached) but struggle to convert this into *agency* within their democratic structures. The risk is that INGYOs become service providers for a passive audience rather than spaces for young people to organise and exercise active citizenship. An emerging question thus is how INGYOs can design different engagement models that allow for fluid participation, whilst also strengthening their democratic legitimacy. It raises a deeper question about political efficacy: Is the disengagement a rational response to the understanding that joining a youth organisation does not necessarily lead to societal change, and what how can INGYOs address this trust deficit and rebuild collective power?
- **The validation trap:** This disconnect is exacerbated by what INCLO (2025) describes as a retreat into ideological purity. Their report warns that digital activism often prioritizes in-group validation (likes from other activists) over

influencing the persuadable middle. By speaking only to the converted, INGYOs risk creating an echo chamber that feels active but is politically isolated from the wider youth population.

- **The erosion of associative life:** Beyond representation and advocacy, the primordial function of civil society is "socialisation"—creating the social fabric where young people learn to live with difference. EURYKA (2019) warns that as participation becomes more individualised and digital ("connective action"), the sector risks losing its role as a "school of democracy." If young people only experience political engagement as a transactional click or a protest, they miss the "associative" experience—the slow, difficult, and often messy practice of negotiation, compromise, and community building that keeps the democratic fabric from tearing.
- **The mechanism of legitimacy:** INGYOs validate the needs of young people through deliberative governance (statutory meetings, general assemblies, membership surveys). This democratic overhead is not only the essential mechanism that transforms raw opinion into a collective mandate, but it also supports young people in exercising democratic citizenship. Bond (2022) identifies this connective infrastructure not as bureaucracy, but as the essential mechanism for international civil society organisations in maintaining culture and legitimacy across borders.
- **The transmission belt crisis:** The mechanisms of legitimacy function as the transmission belt translating grassroots concerns into collective political positions (Bond, 2022). However, as outlined in the sections on the broken leadership pipeline and the distance deficit, the leadership renewal and active membership is increasingly fragile. When funding logics hollow out democratic overhead (European Youth Forum, 2024) and engagement becomes more episodic and individualised (EURYKA, 2019), the belt does not merely become inefficient; it risks disconnecting from the constituencies it is meant to represent. Indeed, legitimacy relies on human relationships and trust and cannot solely be derived from mechanisms. The crisis is therefore not only administrative but reproductive: without sustained leadership renewal and active participation, representation may remain procedurally intact yet socially brittle, resulting in questions of legitimacy.
- **The efficiency trap:** However, donors increasingly view these democratic costs as inefficient overhead or are unable to cover these costs to avoid the impression of influencing the positions of organisations. As described before, some critical funders are shifting away from funding complex organisational structures in favour of project funding, mistakenly defunding the federal structures of youth organisations, the necessary architecture of representation.
- **The hollow crown:** The European Youth Forum's Strategic Plan (2024) explicitly links this funding gap to a governance crisis, noting that INGYOs can rarely use funding received from donors for statutory meetings and governance activities. This limits the deliberative process, creating dilemmas for representation and legitimacy, often forcing them to rely on smaller, less diverse groups of decision-makers. Furthermore, more limited resources for this work translate in reduced participation, creating further obstacles for the development of leadership pipelines.
- **The distance deficit:** At the same time, Bacalso et al. (2025) warns that this transmission belt is fraying. As governance becomes more complex and professionalised, a distance deficit emerges where seasoned activists may

prioritise policy wins that resonate with institutions rather than the actual needs of the grassroots. The distance risks creating a feedback loop where INGYOs represent the *needs of the organisation* (funding, survival) rather than the needs of their constituents.

- **The mobilisation trap:** This structural mismatch creates the mobilisation trap described in the introduction to this chapter. Deželan (2025) and Giugni et al. (2021) highlight a vulnerability that resembles a double deficit. INGYOs are often structurally too rigid to "mobilise" as effectively as fluid digital movements yet are becoming too project-driven to "organise" (build power) as deeply as the current moment might require. For international youth organisations this might translate into people coming to events (consuming), but not contributing back to their communities, let alone to INGYOs themselves. If INGYOs fail to organise—transferring skills and ownership to the next generation—they risk losing power and their capacity to bring about change.

The question is whether INGYOs are losing the capacity for *collective organising* (the slow, relational work of building the deep leadership and constituent power required for long-term change) (Ganz; 2024). Ultimately, the challenge for the sector perhaps is not to choose one over the other, but to build the infrastructure and governance systems that can anchor fluid actions and transactional contact into lasting infrastructure, allowing for transformational relationships.

## Structural dissonance: the bureaucratic stranglehold

Regulatory pressures and limitations to fundamental freedoms hamper the effectiveness of INGYOs.

- **Regulatory chill:** Fear of compliance failure (for instance foreign agent laws but also growing regulatory requirements and safeguarding policies) forces organisations to be risk-averse and audit-driven. For instance, research by NBER (2022) on the impact of GDPR confirms that the administrative burden to comply with regulation acts as a barrier to entry, disproportionately harming smaller civil society organisations. Given the transient nature of engagement in youth organisations, such compliance requirements are likely to affect youth organisations disproportionately.
- **The mobility wall (visa barriers):** For *International* NGOs, the freedom of movement is an operational prerequisite, not a luxury. However, the European Youth Forum (2025) reports that visa denials for youth activists from outside the Schengen zone (including Council of Europe member States) are rising. This creates a geography of exclusion, where the pan-European nature of these organisations is physically dismantled by border bureaucracy, effectively segregating the youth sector.
- **The invisibility crisis:** As described by Deželan and Yurttagüler (2021), the shrinking of civic space is often specifically targeted at youth, silencing critical voices through both explicit restrictions and implicit bureaucratic hurdles. This renders them politically invisible even while they are hyper-visible in protests. Consequently, the youth sector needs support to reframe and rebuild youth from beneficiaries to architects of democracy, which requires support models that prioritise agency, safety and long-term presence.



While youth organisations are defined by their transient, volunteer-led, and educational nature, the regulatory and funding environments increasingly, and probably unintendedly, require them to behave as, professional corporate entities. This mismatch creates a bureaucratic stranglehold where the administrative requirements of the system undermine their missions. It raises the question what supports are needed for youth organisations to sustain an organisational culture that aligns with their missions.

## Operational realities: the capacity gaps

Together, the bureaucratic stronghold, the shifting funding landscape and the transient nature of INGYOs create operational deficits. Data from the European Youth Forum's Membership Survey (2023) and other civil society reports reveal that civil society organisations alongside the wider challenges described in this research still experience concrete capacity gaps that require attention.

- **The technical need:** The European Youth Forum's data specifically highlights that organisations need capacity building support with fundraising strategies and reporting skills, financial management, human resources and organisational management in general. This is not merely about skill acquisition; but providing organisations with opportunities to learn from each other. The need for such support is likely to frequently recur, as leadership renews.
- **The institutional memory need:** High volunteer turnover creates a critical risk of losing institutional memory. Organisations identify knowledge management and documentation systems as prerequisites for resilience. Without support for "generational handover" and information retention, INGYOs risk starting from zero with every board rotation, preventing them from accumulating the strategic depth necessary for long-term advocacy.
- **The wellbeing and safety need:** RAY Network (2021) analysis indicates that the pressure of unpaid activism in a crisis-prone environment has turned burnout into a systemic threat that jeopardises impact. Furthermore, in an era of polarisation, Deželan & Yurttagüler (2021) warn that young activists increasingly face explicit hostility. Consequently, established security focused civil society actors like Tactical Tech (2023) argue that organisations urgently need crisis protocols and collective care mechanisms, framing care not as a soft skill, but as essential security infrastructure.
- **The digitalisation need:** Finally, there is a growing anxiety about the tools of democracy themselves. The need goes beyond basic digital skills toward "digital sovereignty". As Deželan & Yurttagüler (2021) note, the digital sphere has become a frontline for shrinking civic space, where activists face surveillance and harassment. Consequently, organisations require support on cybersecurity and critical AI literacy to reinforce internal structures. Frameworks like Tactical Tech's (2023) "Holistic Security" argue that this is not just IT support, but essential infrastructure to ensure organisations own their data and reduce dependency on corporate gatekeepers.

These demands are important and require urgent consideration. At the same time, the wider emerging research invites us to look beyond immediate fixes alone. It suggests



that satisfying these needs individually (e.g., a fundraising course or a stress-management workshop) is insufficient if the underlying system remains broken. The literature points toward a need for systemic resilience: the capacity not just to endure the current system, but to transform its failures into new forms of organising power. This is about organising the learning in ways that recognise the transient and evolving ways of youth activism. It is about learning with and from INGYO's, to reimagine the roles that they can play in the strengthening Europe's democratic resilience and human rights by addressing structural fragility.

## 4. Emerging horizons for resilience

The diagnosis of a "BANI" environment (Chapter 2) and the internal "mobilisation trap" (Chapter 3) suggest that the sector's challenges are systemic rather than merely technical. Whilst the immediate capacity building demands are potentially relatively easy to cater for, the question arises how support must evolve beyond such interventions. This chapter synthesises findings from emerging literature on civil society resilience in that regard, which may inspire support initiatives serving international youth organisations.

The diagnosis of the "mobilisation trap" necessitates a fundamental shift in how the sector conceives of influence. As Marshall Ganz (2024) articulates, there is a distinct difference between "mobilising" (spending power to achieve a transaction) and "organising" (building power by developing leadership).

Ganz suggests a return to "organising"—the slow, relational work of identifying, recruiting, and developing leadership within a constituency. The shift is from asking "How many people showed up?" to "Who did they become?" and "What power did we build?" Under organising models support mechanisms shift from focusing on the delivery of output to the development of movements and their leadership. Resilience lies in the depth of the constituency, not the breadth of the mailing list.

The fragmentation identified in the wider civil sector is often a result of poor "movement ecology." The Ayni Institute (2025) proposes that resilience comes not from individual strength, but from the quality of connections between diverse actors. Civil society organisations often view themselves as isolated entities competing for resources. Research from the Ayni Institute on "movement ecology" suggests reframing resilience as the capacity to "dock" with other actors—knowing when to lead, when to follow, and how to connect institutional stability (INGYOs) with grassroots energy (movements), as well as how to better recognise the different strategic capacities required to bring change to understand how different actors position in the ecosystem. Support mechanisms can facilitate this by focusing on ecosystem mapping in addition to focusing on organisational strategy and strength.

Ganz (2024) similarly suggests that to survive the project economy, INGYOs don't need more project management tools, but deeper relational frameworks that turn passive members into active leaders and a deeper collaborative approach with the ecosystems that they are part of. Crucially, this requires re-evaluating the definition of "work." Drawing on Viviana Zelizer's (2012) concept of "relational work," the primary value of international networks is not just policy production, but the continuous negotiation of trust and solidarity across borders. In this view, civil society networks function as what Holley (2012) defines as "weavers"—strategic actors who knit together disconnected parts of the system. This creates the "bridging social capital" (Putnam, 2000) that prevents civil society from fracturing into bubbles. The conclusion is that the invisible labour of coordination—often dismissed as bureaucracy—is essential political capital.

As noted in Chapter 3, the "starvation cycle" of project funding forces organisations into hyper-short-term thinking. Roman Krznaric (2020) identifies this "short-termism"

as a primary existential threat to democratic governance. To counter the projectification of the sector, civil society organisations need tools for "Cathedral thinking"—planning for a future they may not live to see. This for instance translates to specific support to design intergenerational strategies for governance structures that can withstand the test of time. As noted in the analysis, because the human capital (volunteers) of the youth sector leaves every few years, training investments often evaporate with them. Literature suggests that resilience requires shifting focus from training individuals to building infrastructure that creates resilient organisations.

Resilience requires creating safe, structured spaces where people and organisations can let go of obsolete ways of working (e.g., rigid hierarchies that alienate youth). Zaid Hassan's (2014) work on "Social Labs" suggests shifting from linear training courses (one-off skills transfer) to iterative laboratories. In a "BANI" world, support functions best as a cycle of prototyping, testing, and refining, allowing organisations to experiment with new governance models in a low-risk environment.

Machado de Oliveira (2025) argues in *Outgrowing Modernity* that resilient systems do not just build the new; they must actively process the decay of the old. Current challenges require more than efficiency; they require transformation.

Institutional memory plays an important role in building resilience. With high turnover being a structural reality, KPSOL (2025) argues that knowledge management must be treated not as an administrative task, but as a core democratic competence. Resilience relies on building "living archives that ensure institutional memory is retained when leadership rotates. This creates a "structural stabiliser" that allows new generations to stand on the shoulders of their predecessors rather than starting from zero.

Organisations currently operate on corporate platforms that act as gatekeepers to their own data. Frameworks from Tactical Tech (2023) suggest that future resilience depends on "Digital Sovereignty". This means moving beyond "digital skills" (how to use a tool) to "infrastructure ownership" (controlling the data and the networks). Support must therefore evolve to help INGYOs build independent, secure digital ecosystems that protect them from both censorship and the volatility of algorithmic changes and to embed digital tools into their missions.

Finally, resilience extends beyond the protection of organisations. Deželan & Yurttagüler (2021) note that in shrinking spaces, the distinction between "wellbeing" and "security" collapses. Emerging frameworks treat 'collective care' not as a luxury, but as essential security infrastructure—protocols that protect the mental and physical safety of activists against burnout and hostile narratives.

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