

EXPANDING
S P A C E

LSU

Expanding space

The democratic space is shrinking throughout the world. Globally, the possibilities to organize and have your voice heard is being hindered by different political forces.

Why is this happening?

How is it taking place?

What are the effects?

This text is produced by the organizations that represent the youth movements in Belarus, Turkey, Kenya, Myanmar, Sweden, Lebanon, Zimbabwe and the Philippines. The experiences are, although from different contexts and political situations, that the situation for the civil society is deteriorating. That the democratic space is shrinking. The purpose of this text is to share our experiences and show what we do to counteract this negative development.

We, the global youth movement, try to give young people all over the world opportunities to express their opinions, to be part of decision-making processes, to organize for what they believe in. We do this by being experts, by strengthening the capacity of young people, by advocating for our rights, by being leaders. But we face obstacles.

Shrinking Space

How is the civic space shrinking for the global youth movement?

The eight organizations, representing the youth organizations in their respective countries, have identified four categories of different ways the space for civil society is shrinking.

The irony of “Youth Inclusion”

Young people make up the majority of the population in the world,¹ more so in the developing countries. Logically, young people are not only the future of the world, but more importantly the present.

The discourse on youth participation states that it is vital, that youth should be included in all levels of decision-making. However, in reality governments do not take youth voices' and recommendations into consideration.

In **Lebanon**, a national youth policy has been drafted by young people from a process starting in 2000, it has been endorsed by the Council of Ministers in 2012 but the content has not been implemented yet.²

In **Myanmar**, the National Youth Policy was launched on January 5th 2018 after a long process started since 2012.³ Young people are only included at the table when international organizations organize conferences in the country, but forgotten as soon as the conferences are over, when the government have gained its media mileage.

¹ <https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population-dashboard>

² <http://www.youthforum-lb.org/>

³ <https://www.dsw.gov.mm/en/node/1832>

Young people face unique challenges in accessing resources and opportunities such as employment, access to and quality education, health services, among others. Youth are seen as the future but are not included in the development paradigm of the present.

This neglect of young people is reflected in the budget for youth programs and in the institutions for youth participation. In **Lebanon** the budget for the Ministry of Youth and Sports is less than one percent of the overall national budget, and it is spent only on sports, not youth.

In **Zimbabwe** there is a low overall budget allocated to the Ministry of Youth, Sports, Arts and Recreation coupled with dwindling funding or resources for youth programming from international development agencies.⁴

The young **Swedish** civil society has experienced a shrinking financial support in real terms since 2006.⁵

The number of young people in government and in elected offices is also highly disproportionate with regard to the huge youth population.

Government restrictions and interference

Youth serving and youth led civil society organizations (CSOs) have been facing resistance from governments for a long time. This is because young people have been at the forefront of different revolutions, independence struggles and rights movements. Young people are a contending force in shaping history, progressive development and effecting change in societies across many

⁴ <https://www.dpcorp.co.zw/assets/2019-budget-final.pdf>

⁵ http://xn--dubblastdet-yfb.se/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ungdomsrorelsenisiffror_redigerad.pdf

nations. It is because of this that governments are restricting, suppressing and interfering with the work of youth civil society organization.

Government arms are interfering with CSO-operations in different ways. The youth movement have experienced this in different ways too many times.

- In **Turkey** LGBTQI+ CSOs are not recognized and given due registration status. LGBTQI+ organizations do not have the right to organize meetings in Ankara since 2017.⁶
- The year 2017 was hailed the deadliest year for Human Rights Defenders in the **Philippines**.⁷
- There were several arrests of activists and journalists which show that even under the ‘democratic’ government, human rights violations persist in **Myanmar**: activists even from National Youth Congress (NYC) were detained and charged for assembly. More so, the military adjusted the scope of law according to their interest and used to repress opposition and dissent.⁸
- In **Zimbabwe**, the youth organization called “Community Tolerance Reconciliation and Development” was accused of contributing to the state of unrest during January 2019 and was consequently shut down by the government.⁹
- In **Belarus**, The Belarusian National Youth Council (RADA) lost registration in 2006 due to not accepting governmentally led youth organizations’ application for membership.
- In **Lebanon**, a country that enjoys relative freedom in its

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/14/turkey-end-ankara-ban-lgbti-events>

⁷ <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/their-faces-defenders-frontline/#chapter-1/section-1>

⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/26/myanmar-surge-arrests-critical-speech>

⁹ <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2019/03/govt-suspends-masvingo-ngo/>

Arab surrounding, the freedom of expression has been lost bit by bit, as several young people were arrested over the past year for expressing their political views on social media.¹⁰

Media freedom and disinformation

In many of the countries, media and the right to information and expression has become increasingly difficult, especially with media outlets either owned and controlled by the state or a private sector that is heavily regulated by the state.

In **Belarus**, national media (TV and Radio) are state owned and hence, there are no opportunities to get the agenda of youth organizations broadcasted. Similarly, in **Kenya**, access to information from governments on public information is a challenge for young people. Young people are perceived as troublemakers and should thus should not be given access to information.

Only internet media are available for CSOs to express positions and make calls in society. However, moves to restrict information and free speech online has also been done by several governments. For example, in **Belarus**, websites are obliged to ask their visitors and commenters to give their full names and phone numbers.

“Free” Speech and Media Repression

There is a clear development where journalists are facing ever more threats. In some contexts, the rights and freedoms stay unhampered, but what is happening in practice is that being vocal

¹⁰ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/7/25/lebanon-questions-activists-over-social-media-posts>

on certain sensitive issues implies threats, harassments and even deaths. For example, in **Myanmar**, journalists who investigated the human rights violations against Rohingyas were arrested.¹¹ In the **Philippines**, cases of website attacks, revoked registration or denied franchise renewal, verbal abuse, strafing, and police surveillance of journalists and media agencies have increased during the last couple of years.¹² In **Sweden**, the threats to journalists are also an everyday occurrence.¹³

In **Turkey**, people get arrested because of their posts on social media and sometimes they switch off the internet in instances of big rallies, accidents or even elections.¹⁴

Fake News and Social Media

Another development is the increasing difficulty of getting factually correct information. Fake news is used to attack CSOs and to skew the “opinion” of the people. Paid trolls are used to move the discourse in a direction that does not serve the civil society or the youth.

The Kenyan government has passed a cyber-crime law that restricts sharing of information on social media platforms with violations of this crime being imprisonment. The targets have generally been independent media stations, bloggers but also CSOs.¹⁵

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/03/myanmar-reuters-journalists-sentenced-to-seven-years-in-prison-rohingya>

¹² <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/206017-attacks-against-philippine-press-duterte-second-year>

¹³ <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2017/03/safe-world-swedish-journalism-death-threats-everyday-reality/>

¹⁴ <https://monitor.civicus.org/newsfeed/2017/12/04/arrests-detentions-and-murders-crackdown-media-continues/>

The legislation paradox (Laws against Civil Society and Marginalized Groups)

We can see that there are laws now being used to violate human rights and ‘legally’ restrict the registration and operations of CSOs.

There is a legislation in Myanmar that effectively prohibits public assembly (e.g. the “Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law”).¹⁶ The same law is being used to charge and detain youth activists. Furthermore, CSOs in **Myanmar** have to secure a permit from local authorities for the conduct of meetings, without such police officers may come to interrupt or stop the meeting/activity.

In the **Philippines**, the government released new guidelines for the supposed protection of government registered NGOs from money laundering and terrorist financing abuse, a guideline seen by many to be used by government to regulate CSO movement.¹⁷

In **Kenya**, while some legislations to promote human rights are put in place, these laws are either not implemented or circumvented. A concrete example is the operationalization of the Public Benefit Organization Act of 2013 which is constantly stalled in different ways. The 2010 Kenya Constitution’s provision for equal female participation is another case of unfulfilled legislation.

In **Zimbabwe**, the PVO/NGO Act reform is being pushed for by



¹⁵ <http://theconversation.com/kenyas-new-cybercrime-law-opens-the-door-to-privacy-violations-censorship-97271>

¹⁶ <http://freeexpressionmyanmar.org/peaceful-assembly-and-peaceful-procession-law/>

¹⁷ <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2019/02/07/ngos-ask-sec-to-halt-money-laundering-rules/>

the government to infiltrate the CSOs and compromise their autonomy.¹⁸

For years, CSOs and political parties in **Belarus** have seen several new laws to decrease their opportunities to function. The most important examples are: (1) criminal responsibility for acting on behalf of an unregistered organization, (2) a compulsory grant approval process for CSOs by the government, and (3) increasing red tape for securing public places for demonstrations (organizations need two weeks to get permit for securing the space for the demonstrations, with the exception of a few places in Minsk).

In **Sweden**, paradoxically, laws that promote human rights, such as freedom of expression and the right to organize/freedom of assembly are now being abused by extremist groups to express hate, promote fear, and intimidate and threaten other marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQI+ and migrant communities as well as religious minorities. The organizations of these groups (e.g. fascist organizations) threatens and intimidates other minority groups.¹⁹

¹⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-association-under-threat-new-authoritarians-offensive-against-civil-society/zimbabwe>

¹⁹ <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6992984>

Expanding Space

How is the youth movement contributing to expanding the civic space?

As seen above, there are powerful actors who in different ways try to shrink the civic space, that try to make it even more difficult for youth to organize and to express themselves. The youth movement works in the other direction. Below we give you some examples of what we do to contribute to another development.

Youth experts build capacity

As representatives for the youth movement in our respective countries, we are strengthening young CSOs, enlarging the civic space and making the current ones more efficient. Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT) in **Zimbabwe**, The National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations (LSU) in **Sweden** and RADA in **Belarus** have all organized successful capacity-building academies that focus on giving youths tools to create and run projects and organizations. The Center for Youth Advocacy and Networking (CYAN) in the **Philippines** are providing capacity building for elected village youth councils. The Youth Organisations Forum (GOfor) in **Turkey** is working together with its member organizations to improve the advocacy work on the local level in rural areas.

In **Kenya**, Youth Alive! Kenya (YAK), is training its member organizations to be Trainers-of-Trainers in areas of community development, governance and leadership to equip a bigger mass of the population with the same knowledge. This ensures that information reaches all the levels of the community and thus spread of the relevant knowledge for an activated citizenry who are able to advocate for their own issues and hold their leaders accountable. The strategy has enhanced youth participation in

civic processes through their interest in research and seeking relevant information.

Our joint efforts to strengthen youths already organized in CSOs but also to include youths previously far from political power and influence widens the civil society and deepens democracy.

Connecting for common goals

We create networks and join together through diverse coalitions in order to strengthen the role of youths all over the world. We see that the impact of our efforts and the achievements of our goals increase when we join forces and work together with other actors. We give a chance for more initiatives to be implemented thanks to the partnerships that we create.

The Youth Forum (YF) in **Lebanon** gathers CSOs and youth wings of political parties from the different sectarian and ideological groups across the country. The forum overcomes divisions in a complicated political context (as opposed to the shortcomings on the governmental and national level) and works issue-based on the implementation of the youth policy. Similarly, The NYC in **Myanmar** provides a common platform for youth organizations in the different parts of the country, to work for the implementation of the recently adopted youth policy. The NYC also gives the **Myanmar** youth a regional voice through the ASEAN Youth Forum.

LSU in **Sweden** is the umbrella organization for the youth movement and counts 86 national youth organizations as its members. RADA in **Belarus** is present in all six regions of the country and is considered the voice of the young civil society in the country. YETT in **Zimbabwe** provides a platform in which the youth movement can participate in the national budget process, with recommendation being adopted into the final budget.

We represent the broadest networks of youth organizations in our respective countries, coming together with a common agenda (that includes e. g national youth policies, human rights and democracy, youth empowerment).

Our experience in building networks and working together show that in unity there is strength, there is power. By working together we can achieve more and go further.

Advocacy (securing youth rights)

We hold a unique position as the voice of an aggregate of the youth in our respective countries. The grassroot work that we do is being scaled up through advocacy to reach the policy level and sensitize the decision makers over youth issues.

We also conduct evidence-based advocacy in order to gain legitimacy for our causes. When we advocate for issues, it originates from research and comes out of a democratic process where youths have formed the suggestions.

Both YAK in **Kenya** and YETT in **Zimbabwe** have advocated for peaceful elections. NYC in **Myanmar** and CYAN in the **Philippines** are outspoken on human rights violations and for freedom of expression.

The YF in **Lebanon** has organized lobbying meetings with members of parliament affiliated to 8 political groups in 2018 with the aim to seek their support over the National Youth Policy implementation.

We sit at the table and discuss with decision makers in order to promote the desires of youths, based on the actual needs of youth.

Youths as leaders

That “the youth is the future” is commonly said, but young people have to participate and take leadership now. Youth should take the lead in identifying their issues and agenda. Youth should take the lead in coming up with national youth policies and youth-related legislations.

Young people should be partners of government and not mere beneficiaries of government actions. They can be partners in planning, program implementation, monitoring and evaluation, especially in policies, programs and projects that concern young people.

Representatives of young people in government, in the bureaucracy and elected posts, at the grassroots, national, and international levels should be increased proportionally to the number of young people.

Conclusion

The discussion on shrinking space is heard more and more. It is a development that is experienced in all parts of the world. It takes many forms and shapes the political landscape in various ways. The concept is sometimes almost described as a natural phenomenon. The space is shrinking, the ices are melting, winter is coming.

Our first common hope with this text is to have showed you that this is not the case. The shrinking space of civil society is not a natural phenomenon. It is done step by step by certain political forces that do not want youths or citizens in general to make their voices heard, that do not want to see organizations coming together and demand what is rightfully theirs.

Our second common hope is that we have proven that there is another way forward. We, the organizations behind this text, want you to know that we work relentlessly for another society and another future.

Through capacity building, by connecting with others and by shaping joint suggestions we turn the development in the opposite direction.

We expand space. Join us.

Youth Alive! Kenya

Kenya

National Youth Congress

Myanmar

The Belarusian Youth Council

Belarus

The National Council of Swedish Youth Organisations

Sweden

The Youth Organisations Forum

Turkey

Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust

Zimbabwe

Center for Youth Advocacy and Networking

the Philippines

The Youth Forum

Lebanon

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