

HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT CHILDREN & YOUTH AFFECTED BY SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Approaches to navigate risks with young activists

CHILDREN AND YOUTH AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

As society confronts pressing global challenges such as climate change, gender inequality and LGBTIQ+ discrimination, children and youth are joining the front lines and becoming changemakers, raising their voices and taking action. In doing so, they are exercising their fundamental human rights as central actors for change towards development and democracy. However, their opportunities for meaningful participation and influence are generally limited. Often they are met with resistance towards their agency, as their participation is considered immature or as a potential threat to power-holders. At the same time, globally, we are witnessing the worrying trend of shrinking civic space as a threat to activism. As a consequence, this decline in safe civic spaces available to youth, restricts their civic rights and freedoms even further.

The shrinking of civic spaces presents unique challenges to young people and understanding these specific civic space implications and related

risks is essential in order to better support children and youth in claiming their civic spaces and finding appropriate avenues for self-expression and activism.

Against this background, Plan International commissioned a research study, “Civic Space Implications for Children and Young People within the Generation Change! Programme” in order to explore the implications of shrinking civic space on children and young people. The study, which primarily consulted young people ages 15 – 25, seeks to advance the understanding of the role Plan International, and other INGOs, can play to better support and collaborate with children and young people so that they can safely, and effectively, engage as civil society actors. It is foreseen that this brief, informed by the study’s findings and proposed recommendations, can serve as inspiration for others who are also striving for a world where children and young people may better exercise their rights to organize, speak out and take action. Read more about the study at the end of this brief.

What is civic space?

Civicus defines civic space as the place, regardless of whether it’s online or offline, where people exercise their civic rights to freedom of association (to organise), freedom of expression (to speak out) and the right to peaceful assembly (to take joint action). A healthy civic space allows democracy and society to thrive and is one of the most important safeguards against tyranny, oppression and other anti-democratic tendencies.

Generation Change!

Through funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Plan International Sweden's Generation Change! programme works in 21 countries and in partnership with more than 140 civil society organisations (CSOs). The programme, launched in 2019, aims at contributing to a vibrant, dynamic and inclusive civil society as well as the fulfilment of children's and young people's rights and equality for girls. The programme focuses across three impact areas: sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), child protection and participation and governance with the aim to support children and young people, and their organisations, as agents of change.

SAFEGUARDING YOUNG PEOPLE AFFECTED BY SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Children and youth – especially girls, young women and other marginalised groups – are disproportionately affected by the risks and incidents resulting from shrinking civic space. One reason is that the legal, political, economic, social and cultural conditions are most often less beneficial for youth organisations. These organisations generally have fewer financial means and resources, sometimes operate as informal groups or movements and are less connected with the established civil society arenas and protective social networks. Their organisations may also have limited capacity to identify and manage risks, though often times have more capacity to for example mobilise peers and create change.

Any development organisation or agency working with youth, their families, their communities and the wider society has an ethical and legal responsibility to take all reasonable measures to ensure that the risks of harm – both intentional and unintentional – are minimised. This can be difficult working across multiple contexts that are unstable and changing, and requires a proactive approach in understanding the risks faced by children and youth, in all their diversities. It is also complex to balance safeguarding of young people, while at the same time supporting their agency and ability to take their own decisions as civil society actors. This calls for a general need for international development actors working with, and for, children and young people, to further understand how we can improve our collaboration with young people affected by shrinking civic space to be safe – but also as actors in their own right.

Plan International's approach to safeguarding:

At Plan International it is our priority is to keep children and young people we work with safe and protected, as described in our global safeguarding policy, Say Yes to Keeping Children and Young People Safe. Whilst Plan International has put child safeguarding at the core of our work for many years, there is recognition that our approach to safeguarding needs to better reflect the different type of risks that children and young people, in all their diversity, face from their involvement with our work – particularly as we work to promote equality and challenge discrimination. This includes taking an intersectional approach, and it recognises the importance that all people who work for, and engage with organisations like Plan International, are skilled, confident and well-supported in meeting their responsibilities in safeguarding children and young people. It is equally important that the children and young people we work with are aware of the organisation's responsibilities to prevent and respond to any harm against them arising from actions and behaviour of staff, associates and visitors. They should also be familiar with the routes for reporting such incidents.

SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT ON CHILD AND YOUTH ACTIVISTS AND THEIR ORGANISATIONS

Common risks faced by child and youth activists¹:

A non-enabling environment, charged with risks both offline and online, obstructs youth-led organisations and their collective actions for democracy and human rights. The Plan International study asked children and youth to assess the risks that they perceive are prevalent in the context of their work (most common to least common):

- **Sexual harassment:** The most common offline and online risk faced by children and youth activists, especially for girls and young women, is sexual harassment. Many respondents shared their own and others' experiences with online sexual harassment and/or sexual violence such as non-consensual sharing of intimate messages, photos or videos, and unwanted sexual attention intended as tools of coercion and intimidation.
- **Pressure from the governments and/or political actors:** In most countries, it was recognised that the government has the ultimate say in which organisations and activists operate and the overall success of their work. Some activists feared being penalized by the government and also being at the mercy of the government or political actors in their work. Most try to maintain a harmonious relationship with the government and abide within the laws, but that outcome is not always positive. As one respondent in the study said, "society calls girl activists un-African, for daring to challenge oppression towards them."
- **Persecution by law enforcement agencies:** When referring to law enforcement agencies, the police and military are seen as the actors that pose the biggest threat and risk. In some contexts, this can take the form of repressing activists' rights to free association by means of brutality when they are protesting on the streets, and even imprisonment.
- **Persecution by other individuals:** Persecution can take the form of destruction of property, incitement to hate, beatings, arson, or vandalism. However, the risk of persecution by other individuals can also take the form of activist communities antagonising youth and their work, especially for activists working on SRHR (sexual reproductive and health rights) and LGBTIQ+ related issues.

- **Intentional restriction of social and economic activity:** Another risk identified by activists and their organisations is freezing of funds and other financial assets and economic resources including preventing their use, alteration, movement, transfer, or access.

For online activism, children and youth face additional risks:

- **Cyberbullying:** Youth activists consider cyberbullying to be the most common online risk that they are currently facing and takes place on social media, messaging platforms, and mobile phones. It is repeated and willful behavior aimed at scaring, angering, or shaming those who are targeted. One respondent shared that: "There is a constant online risk of harassment of your dignity for being a young LGBTIQ+ activist."
- **Threats on social media:** Youth activists, especially girls, young women and LGBTIQ+ activists, also face threats on social media. Activists are reporting, informing, and denouncing action on social media and, as a consequence, they are attacked by third parties that are against their works and values. There have been incidents, for example, in which abortion-rights and LGBTIQ+ activists have received death threats through social media.
- **Reputational damage:** Youth activists also face reputational risks through adversaries spreading rumors or making false statements that expose activists to hatred, ridicule or contempt, and general defamation. Fake profiles are also created to attack their work. For girls and young women working on sexual reproductive health and rights, this is a common online risk. "If we talk about abortion on TV or social media," said one respondent, "people start calling us prostitutes and that we are encouraging free sex." This has a detrimental impact on the girls and, as a consequence, their parents and families often prohibit them to continue their work and activities in order to avoid this reputational damage.

Facing or fearing these risks – whether they materialise or not – has had a negative impact on youth in many ways and hindered their activism. It has slowed down the progress of their work, affected their self-confidence and the way they organise, campaign and advocate for the causes in which they believe. It has also had an impact on their health – physical, as well as mental. Anxiety, depression, low-self-esteem, discouragement, helplessness, and isolation are some of the psycho-emotional consequences of youth facing or fearing these risks.

¹The study defines an activist as: "A person who believes strongly in political or social change and takes part in activities to try to make this happen; youth or community leaders, influencers, volunteers, active participants in children or youth groups or other networks/movements".

MAIN CAUSES FOR SHRINKING SPACE

Political instability is one of the main causes for shrinking civic space for children and youth. Children and youth activists, living in politically unstable contexts, are generally more affected and face more risks in connection to their activism, even to the extent that it endangers their overall wellbeing. Government interference can hence be seen as a critical factor in understanding shrinking civic space and its implication on child and youth activism. However, the political situation, on its own, is not a determining factor.

The influence of social norms is evident in all of the risks identified above. In all the countries studied, LGBTIQ+, girls, women and young people, play a leading role in the

defence of human rights, and their active citizenship challenges the social norms regarding sexuality, gender and age. Sexual violence, historically, is used as a tool of control and discipline in order to undermine autonomy and freedom. This is evidenced in the Plan International study through the revelations that young feminist women in Latin America shared how men sent them “videos of girls being raped and denigrated by men” on their social networks as a warning to the kind of risks they would be exposed to for raising their voices in defence of young women’s rights. This experience also underscores how persecution, harassment and abuse is manifested online.

Access to civic space for youth is often limited due to the influence of actors in both the private and public spheres of their lives. From the perspective of the youth activist, family, other youths/peers and community leaders, were identified as the most influential in their decisions (and capability) to organise. Governments, political actors, law enforcements agencies, anti-right movements and religious institutions have all been identified as actors who pose the greatest threat to youth activism through persecution and restrictive laws.

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While access to online civic space is emerging, digital access laws and regulations are lagging behind.

GAPS TO ADDRESS IN ORDER TO CREATE A MORE ENABLING CIVIC SPACE

The Plan International study identifies several needs and gaps that should be addressed in order to create a more enabling civic environment for youth activism:

- **Child and youth activists feel unsafe – especially groups representing and advocating for the rights of minorities**

Most children and youth activists indicated that sometimes they feel unsafe and insecure during their activism, particularly with representing and advocating for the rights of the vulnerable, minority

and at-risk children and youth in their local communities. To fully support young people, in all their diversity, and for them to claim their space as civil society actors, global

civil society should be more inclusive and adaptive to the diverse needs of young people. Participants of the study highlighted that, despite measures and mechanisms for safeguarding being in place at country level, they perceived that these do not sufficiently identify and respond to the risks that they, especially girls and young women, face in relation to their civic engagement.

- **Children and youth are not recognized or supported as civil society actors**

Youth voices are not sufficiently heard due to social norms which primarily support adult and male leadership and take the view that youth are “less than” adults. This affects their capacity to participate equally in civil society and hinders their ability to influence other sectors such as the government, the private sector and media. As one respondent said,

“Most of the time, youth are regarded as the last group of people to be prioritised to attend meetings especially because there is a feeling that they can’t contribute much.”

Additionally, among those surveyed for the Plan International study, 95% identified a lack of resources as another important factor inhibiting their access to civic spaces. The youth consulted mentioned that the current predominant conditions and requirements of international cooperation hamper their access to funding and resources. For example, frequently youth organisations do not have the required legal status or administrative structures in place to receive such funding.

- **Many young activists distrust authorities and external actors**

Despite some countries having available reporting and referral route protocols in place, the children and youth activists noted that they do not have confidence in their respective law enforcement agencies or in receiving support from others such as more traditional civil society actors. As a result, they are unlikely to engage with external actors, apart from Plan International, or other partners, sponsoring or parent organisation, when they encounter an incident or when they are referred to report a risk. Existing initiatives are not sufficient to appropriately support young activists, nor are advocacy efforts towards authorities.

- **Need support to effectively use existing safeguarding mechanisms – offline and online**

Most CSO partners and youth activists report some level of awareness of the safeguarding measures that are available to them when encountering a risk or incident in their activism – though a majority state that they do not have the technical capacities to effectively use them. When it comes to risks and safeguarding measures in their online activism, this seems to be less well known and understood. Moreover, while access to online civic space is emerging, digital access laws and regulations are lagging behind in most countries in the study, leading to uncertainties on what is, or is not, legal and/or acceptable. In addition, young activists express a need to be better equipped to identify and manage their own risks and safeguarding measures.

- **Young activists do not know where to turn when subjected to risks related to their activism**

The study shows that children and youth activists have limited knowledge about which organisations or actors to approach when they feel unsafe in relation to their activism. Even though within the Generation Change! programme there is often a strong presence of children and youth groups that connects them with a wider aspect of civil society actors, most youth responded that they lack in-depth knowledge of whom to turn to in order to learn how to protect themselves from threats, risks and/or violence. The

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study also found that due to the limited support, children and youth activists do not feel confident to report risks and incidents related to their activism even when they do know where to turn. According to some of the respondent's experiences and perceptions, they find the reporting

procedures tedious and cite delayed response times after reporting and inadequate follow up.

COVID-19 CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG ACTIVISTS

Quarantines, lockdowns and social distancing have become the norm since the global spread of COVID-19 and, while these restrictions are considered necessary for public health reasons, they have also contributed to the shrinking of civic space. The research team took this into consideration, examining the unique challenges that this posed for young people and their organisations. In addition to restrictions on the number of young people that could attend in-person meetings or gatherings, moving their advocacy to an online platform also presented youth with challenges such as lack of access to the internet and the high cost of data. Additional online risks have also been mentioned above. Yet, the pandemic also serves as a reminder that civic spaces are not only physical gathering

points but can also be online. In this context it is important to understand the different inherent and potential risks that young people face when trying to leverage this virtual

space – such as limited access to the internet technology, lack of online privacy and safety, and restrictions of access due to their age, especially for younger activists.

However, beyond the ability to gather physically or virtually, the study also noted that children and young people, especially girls and young women, experience being shut-out of spaces where discussion and decisions are taking place regarding responses to COVID-19.

RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT AND PROTECT YOUNG ACTIVISTS

Given the important role that youth activists play today, CSOs and other development actors need to understand how to support and protect children and youth activists giving them the best opportunity to safely and securely make their positive contribution. Based on the study's findings and the concerns voiced by young activists, Plan International, and other development actors, should consider the recommendations below:

Ensure internal systems can identify and respond to risks faced by child and youth activists

Clear and more accessible reporting mechanisms need to be in place to identify, monitor and follow up on the risks and incidents that child and youth activists face related to shrinking civic space. Guidelines should be co-created between e.g. the

INGO, the CSO partners and activists themselves – to make sure all offline and online risks are captured and processes are internalised and well understood. Organisations should consider establishing a youth advisory group to make sure that any systems that are put in place are designed with input from the youth activists themselves.

In addition, for organisations such as Plan International existing global guidelines should be disseminated on a regular basis to support and guide e.g. country offices and CSO partners on how to deal with existing risks. Special focus should be given to online risks and activities – especially those faced by girls and young women – as the study showed weak knowledge and capacity within this field. On the other hand, becoming more aware of risks can also help young activists to develop greater resilience and stronger collaboration with others organisations, movements and networks.

Referral route protocols in the Generation Change! Programmes: At Plan International we recognise the need to work with professionals who have a particular expertise in issues of shrinking civic space, while strengthening our own internal capacity on safeguarding and risk management to better deal with the particular risks that the children and young people we work with may face due to their activism. The study therefore recommends a particular design of referral route protocols that are adapted to civic space-related risks, in order to make these particular types of referrals more standardised and adapted to each context.

Pro-actively support youth activists to connect and convene, leveraging their positions to amplify their voice and experience

Stronger efforts are needed to create safe civic spaces – both physical or online – that are owned, led and shaped by activists. Safe spaces allow them to share their experiences and get support from other activists, actors or experts. International organisations should therefore extend support to help activists work collectively by connecting them and providing a common platform for activists at different levels. International organisations offer many entry points for local CSOs to influence both state institutions and local authorities. Through partnership with a well-known INGO, there may also be reputational benefits through association which, in turn, can offer a form of protection for local CSO partners, including children and youth, who advocate on general human rights issues. However, in some particular contexts, it is important to consider that

being associated with an INGO – perceived to represent “western values” – may have a negative effect on how they are perceived.

Provide capacity strengthening support for youth activists and their organisations – including the provision of resources – to enable them to sustain safe action and build resilient organisations

There is a need for increased support to identify specific offline and online risks that affect children and youth organisations, taking into consideration the diversity of activists and the specific risks faced by girls, young women and persons who identify as LGBTIQ+. The objective is to help children and young people to address their own safeguarding needs. Increased capacity strengthening for youth-led organisations to manage projects and funds is also required to build more resilient organisations.

Make flexible and fast funds and resources accessible to young people and their organisations

In addition to general support and capacity development on how to deal with risks, it is important to make flexible and fast funds and resources accessible to youth and their organisations when risks and incidents occur. Resource mobilisation

– both financial and non-financial – continues to be a critical factor that impacts their capacity and ultimately the extent of their activism. Despite progress being made with more alternative funding mechanisms available, resources still seem insufficient to meet the current demand.

Civic Space Flex Fund in the Generation Change! Programme: The study also served to consult youth and Plan International's CSO partners on the design of the "Civic Space Flex Fund", to meet the need for more flexible funding to be available when civic space situations change. The fund focus on strengthening technical and organisational capacities and be able to respond to unforeseen or urgent situations related to shrinking space for children and youth activists. The process of applying to the fund and reporting is simple and fast and special attention is given to activists in rural areas and minority groups already part of the Generation Change! Programme.

RETHINK THE SUPPORT – NAVIGATE THE RISKS WITH YOUNG ACTIVISTS

Safe civic spaces are necessary to allow young people to mount their social movements, speak their truth and inspire important political and economic change, opening up for new synergies with society. However, the current trend of shrinking civic spaces – is cause for concern. Without access to safe civic spaces, children and youth are finding it more difficult to positively participate in civil society which will ultimately lead to declining their civic engagement. Additionally, girls and young women experience the consequences of shrinking space differently and development actors, involved in this issue, need to understand and respond appropriately.

Studies such as Plan International's "Civic Space Implications for Children and Young People" shed light on the importance of promoting civic environments that are safe, welcoming and supportive of children and young people. It also shows the importance for development actors to co-create responses to risks together with young activists. Addressing the issues underlying the shrinking of civic spaces will help ensure that children and young people get involved, stay engaged and ultimately benefits from a more equitable and just society – for their generation and generations to come.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The study, "Civic Space Implications for Children and Young People within the Generation Change! Programme" (2021), was carried out by the Ubuntu Research Team – a youth-led collective – aimed at identifying how shrinking, or limited civic space, affects young activists online and offline, particularly girls and young women. The study also proposed appropriate measures and strategies designed to minimise risks and negative incidents while continuing to effectively support young people as civil society actors.²

To inform the study, the research team primarily consulted youth activists in Africa, Latin America and Asia, already involved in the Generation Change! programme, on their broad experiences from engaging in civil society (beyond their involvement with the Generation Change! programme). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers needed to rely on collecting data via online methods and, as a result, the number of children consulted was significantly less than planned. Instead more young people were consulted. Plan International recognise the need to analyse in depth the particular challenges faced by children in the future. For more information on the study and Plan International's work with the Generation Change! Programme - please contact program@plansverige.org.

²The study was carried out within the framework of the Sida Civsam-funded Generation Change! Programme and incorporates learnings from a survey of 191 respondents, 28 key informant interviews and 9 workshops, covering a broad spectrum of inputs and perspectives from children, young people, CSO partners and Plan International staff in 21 countries. Particular focus was put on five case countries: Bolivia, Cambodia, Malawi, Timor-Leste and Togo.