

Recommendations by Youth Organisations

Following Shrinking Civil Space Conference, Dublin 2019

Young people and youth organisations hold important roles in democratic society, however the phenomenon of shrinking civil space is affecting young people and youth organisations at a disproportionate degree. Shrinking civil space is an issue which must not be simply worked around, but directly confronted; as overt attempts to reduce, or even just negligence in protecting, civil society space is an affront to fundamental democratic values.

The following recommendations reflect participants' understandings of areas of concern and opportunities for action to create an enabling environment for strong youth organisations to operate and advocate effectively.

Recommendations

1. We need an environment of **recognition, understanding, and solidarity**

- We need to foster stakeholder recognition of the importance and impact of voluntary work and civil society work and thus promote **seeing it as a priority**; to do so, we need to increase our **visibility** by strengthening networks and ensuring to document and communicate our value and work.
- Being recognised is a key step to achieve being prioritised as a sector, and transitioning towards **structural and reliable funding** that is not dependent on governmental interest.

2. We need **fair regulation** under which CSOs can operate effectively and **independently**

- Making it easier for CSOs to respond to **civil society needs** and ensuring that they are not held back by **bureaucratic barriers** and other issues concerning registration, operation and establishment of an NGO/CSO.

3. We need **funding which is sustainable** and does **not instrumentalise** youth organisations

- We must highlight the precarious state of youth organisations' funding and show the need for **continuous reliable multi-annual** funding and promote access to public infrastructure.
- Youth organisations **must not be instrumentalised** to provide services for the government and should be free to set agendas as those most proximate to social concerns and young people's realities.

4. We need to update **civic education**

- We should work towards better **quality** and more **comprehensive** civic education which explores the role of civil society in a functional democracy
- This is a means to demonstrate the benefits of involvement in civil society, to promote the civic engagement of young people and to ultimately **bring the EU and states closer to the citizens**.
- We need to recognise the competence & **role of youth work**, youth organisations and non-formal education in 'sparking' civic engagement of young people.

5. Space & Participation for all; we need to **confront barriers**

- The people who need civic space the most often have the most difficulty accessing it.
 - We should guarantee **active participation of civil society** with a special focus on election processes to enable diverse groups to **participate actively in decision making processes**.
 - Quality education and training for youth workers is essential, with emphasis on media literacy and fostering critical citizenship. Youth spaces and clubs should be supported to be facilitators of civic engagement at all levels.
 - More awareness and support is needed around Erasmus+ programme, the application process should be simplified and extra efforts must be made to support youth initiatives independent of the need for interlocutor organisations.
6. We need a **holistic approach**, and to cooperate **across sectors**
- Form unexpected alliances and coalitions around civil spaces within and beyond the youth sector.
 - Social media should be recognised for the opportunities it presents CSOs and the dangers it can pose if unregulated.
 - External governance of European funds for Civil Society Organisations should be considered.
 - If CSO funds cut nationally then EU level sanctions must be considered.
7. We need to take solidarity beyond words; establishing a **European ‘Solidarity Fund’**
- In countries where CSOs are shrinking or restricted through direct influence from governments, often the **most urgently needed organisations/projects are affected** (e.g. those defending human rights, protecting the rights of vulnerable and marginalised groups such as women, refugees, LGBT+, etc.).
 - Not only do these groups/victims suffer, often those organisations are also obstructed to drive towards change within the national/regional society. This important task **cannot be replaced from any place outside the country/region**.
 - It is important to support this regional/national work from outside, since it is key to a more united, solidary Europe. We therefore **propose a “Solidarity Fund”** that has the ability to jump in & (partially) replace public funds in case an EU member state surprisingly cuts the fund for an irreplaceable CSO/project.
 - Such a CSO must fulfill several strict criterias - e.g. it must be present in the field of work for at least 5 years, the cut must be sudden and unjustified, there is no proper replacement for this project/work, it must be beneficial for vulnerable/marginalised groups, etc.
8. We must frame this as a **human rights crisis**, we need to **communicate our realities**
- This phenomenon is both a human rights crisis, and a crisis for human rights.
 - Engage with **human rights instruments** as a means to invite states to engage with shrinking civil space while ensuring restrictions are flagged and documented.
 - We must **communicate our realities** to states, international organisations, throughout civil society, to human rights commissions at all levels and through human rights processes. Stakeholders at state, supranational and international level and throughout civil society, must be informed.
 - Shrinking civil space is an issue which must not be simply worked around, but **directly confronted**; as overt attempts to reduce, or even just negligence in protecting, civil society space is an affront to fundamental democratic values.

Attempts to restrict the space for civil society are often not incidental, they are deliberate actions aimed at inhibiting the participation of sectors and the normal functioning of institutions. Youth organisations are often the first to experience this, as youth organisations exist primarily within civic space. Here the role of youth organisations is evident, through our organisations and networks experiences we can play a mapping role; collecting and communicating our observations as a means to affront shrinking civil space.

Conclusions

The extent and consequences of shrinking civil space are still being underestimated. As a network of networks of youth organisations we hope our collective testimonies can be a compelling tool to help to build on the recent work done in this area.

When budget pressures build, the first cuts are often in the youth sector; justified by the notion that youth organisations will find a way to continue operating. Youth organisations at all levels should challenge this perception by offering evidence of the value of youth organisations and by highlighting the barriers we are already facing to operate independently and effectively.

Shrinking civil space is an issue which must not be simply worked around, but directly confronted; as overt attempts to reduce, or even just negligence in protecting, civil society space is an affront to fundamental democratic values. We must recognise that civil society is an indispensable part of our system of checks and balances. This phenomenon is both a human rights crisis, and a crisis for human rights and must be framed as such.