



Re-igniting youth participation at CIVICUS

In recent years there has been an explosion of attention and focus on young people. As “43% of the world population is under 30 and only 1.8 billion people are between 10 and 24 years old”¹ young people are a global force that is striving to make their communities a better place. But as civil society faces constrictions and barriers, there is need to support youth organisations and movements to ensure they continue their good work.

At CIVICUS, we are working to make sure that young people’s voices are heard, given a platform in our global civil society alliance and ultimately influence our work. Since 2007, CIVICUS has formally recognised the leading role that young people play within local, national and international civil society with the organization of CIVICUS Youth Assembly, which has become an established part of our work. With Youth Assemblies held in 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014 and most recently in Bogota in April 2016, CIVICUS have ensured a dedicated space for young people to be an integral part of the way we approach civil society discussions.

The role of youth in a healthy global civil society

These are difficult times for civil society.

In 2015, the [State of Civil Society Report by CIVICUS](#) found that six out seven of the world’s population – over 5 billion people – live in countries where the freedom of association, freedom of assembly and the freedom of expression are constrained or denied. In 2014, serious restrictions on civil society rights were documented in at least 96 countries. The 2015 report concludes:

...these developments suggest a renewed period of contestation about the acceptable bounds of civil society, the latest manifestation of the battle to protect citizens against state power.

In a recent report, [From Rhetoric to Action](#), which explored enabling environment for civic participation, building on the [CIVICUS Enabling Environment Index](#), considered the situation for

¹ United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA. *The State of World Population 2014 : The power of 1.8 million*, available from https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP14-Report_FINAL-web.pdf

child and youth development through a global survey and youth-led research pieces in 17 countries.

It highlighted the precarious situation for youth civic action. Though the challenges may be known, they are worth repeating: poor governance and lack of effective rule of law; restrictive laws and a corrupt judiciary; continual restrictions on funding and resources; little protection for informal youth movements – especially in vulnerable situations; youth organisations that lack the skills to fundraise and professionalise; a lack of trust between established youth organisations and informal youth movements.

Despite this, the report highlights how young people frequently and innovatively overcome these barriers:

“young people are using online communication to form ad hoc networks to provide basic public services, respond to humanitarian crises and form community-based protection systems; they are establishing socially-oriented enterprises; they are advocating for policy dialogue on contested issues; they are holding leading roles in organisations and movements; they are taking to the streets, sometimes risking their lives, to push for justice and human rights.”²

Youth refuse to allow these restrictions to stop their participation. However, the human cost and dangers they face should be too much for any of us to ask, expect or be comfortable with.

Youth participation within CIVICUS

As CIVICUS we recognise that to strengthen civil society we must strengthen the voices of young people; within our work, within the work of our members, and within their own organisations and movements.

In 2013, the CIVICUS Youth Advisory Group was established to raise the voice of youth within CIVICUS' work. This was the first initiative that brought the voices of young people into CIVICUS in a structured way – in an advisory capacity. We also had two Youth Advisory Group members elected by our membership to the CIVICUS Board of Directors, embracing intergenerational dialogue in decision-making bodies. At a crucial time for global development and civil society – through the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals – we provided a platform for young people to be heard on the governance structure of a global civil society alliance.

But quite honestly, we haven't got our youth engagement quite right just yet....

Despite having two strong young voices on our Board of Directors, we weren't able to capitalise on the wealth of knowledge of the Youth Advisory Group, and did not have a dedicated youth funding stream to support our youth engagement work. We are determined to continually reflect

² Youth Policy Labs. 2015. “From Rhetoric to Action: Towards an Enabling Environment in the Sustainable Development Goals”. The Case for Space Initiative. Berlin: Youth Policy Press.

and improve our work, to lead by example. We want more youth to be able to attend the Youth Assembly and International Civil Society Week; we want closer integration between youth and the rest of our members; we want a dedicated budget to fund innovative youth civil society projects, and we want to integrate youth voices into all of our work.

Why do we want to analyse and improve youth engagement? Because with over 3500 member organisations, we believe that we can achieve real change within our membership.

Ultimately, our interest is not in being a youth talking group. We owe it to the young people all across the world who risk their lives for a better world to be more than a weekly Skype call.

A new youth team

The Youth Advisory Group has now been relaunched as the Youth Action Team – and you can [meet the team here!](#) The change of name signifies the change of approach: from advisory to action, discussion to impact, rhetoric to change. Their introductory videos demonstrate the range of interests the members want to focus on – new funding mechanisms, removing legal restrictions, developing skills and training and providing platforms for a stronger voice for youth within civil society.

The YAT is not (yet) an elected group. But while we were not voted for **as** representatives, we are representative **of** civil society. We are committed to changing the situation for young people involved in civil society – from long-standing youth organisations, to youth activist groups, to the individuals taking a stand.

Immediately the YAT has a direction.

In December 2016, as a show of support for the work the YAT is undertaking within CIVICUS, the YAT will meet with the CIVICUS Board and staff team, a powerful statement of intent in continually learning, listening and reconsidering the best structure to ensure that their participation is meaningful, effective and focused on achieving change.

In the year ahead, “youth” will be a specific part of CIVICUS’ work and strategy. This is a big step forward. Through a new Youth Working Group, combining CIVICUS staff, members and the YAT, the group will be responsible for guiding work on young people.

Though we’re not starting from scratch, we want to understand the priorities for youth within civil society and young people better.

Civil society is in a turbulent position – one that is dangerous, threatened but still coming out fighting. For the rights of everyone, we must defend it.

Contact us at youth@civicus.org, join our [Facebook Group](#) or follow via #CIVICUSyouth to get involved!