



## State of Civil Society Report 2019 dialogues United States

### 1. Background to the dialogue

#### Date and location

1 August 2019, Open Gov Hub in Washington, DC

#### Convening organisation/s

Plan International and Open Gov Hub

#### Focus of the session

Anti-Rights Groups, their effect on young people, and young people's responses to them.

### 2. Dialogue participants

#### Number of participants and gender distribution

24 – 17 female and 7 male

#### Specific groups represented

Mix of DC-based organisations, including: Forum One, Collaborating for Resilience (CoRe), Plan International USA, Global Integrity, Security-Nextgen, USAID, Open Government Partnership, IMAGO Global Grassroots, Rhize, Open Gov Hub, Plan International USA, Global Integrity, Accountability Lab, Institute H21, BRAC, Transparency and Accountability Initiative (TAI), Akhandataa | Solutions for Impact, Institute H21, National Endowment for Democracy + You for Democracy, International Youth Foundation

### 3. Content of the dialogue

#### Key issues or problems identified during the dialogue

1. What is an “anti-rights” group (ARG) and how do we know one when we see it?

- Context matters, and to determine what is an ARG, we must look at historical context, geographic context, etc. -- these groups are not new, but they are using new tools
- There's a difference in the messaging – ARGs use hateful messaging covered by rhetoric that appeals to cultural values and traditions akin to propaganda
- ARGs claim their own victimisation and delegitimise victimisation of their targets, attack groups of people instead of issues directly (scapegoating)
- ARGs are afraid of change and status quo changes are seen as threats to them
- ARGs co-opt the rhetoric of pro-rights groups, manipulating the right to “freedom of speech” and insidiously occupying civic space to intentionally target the rights of others, often through violence and intimidation
- It is difficult to discern what “anti-rights” really means and if it is the best term to describe these groups

## 2. Are anti-rights groups especially dangerous now compared to several years ago? Why or why not?

- There is now more open space and possible connections online, meaning there are positive and negative spaces for activism to flourish
- More than before, people in power promote and provide cover for ARGs' bad behaviour; social media is also used to create more anger and provides space for that, also increase in physical violence
- Groups that actively advocate for violence and intimidation and target the rights of others intentionally are not a new phenomenon, but there are new tools available
- Need to recognise big money providing funding for anti-rights groups; they provide funds for speakers and university activism, organising support, tech, etc.
- There is now more misunderstanding and misinformation out there, technology and power dynamics are enabling anti-rights groups to exploit this space
- There is an increased culture in anti-rights mentality
- The globalisation of issues, especially through technology, makes the unifying force of ARGs dangerously stronger on a global scale. Furthermore, acculturation in ARG mentality, coupled with the fragmentation of public policy, sets a dangerous precedent for an increasingly narrowing civic space.

## 3. Are young people particularly vulnerable when it comes to anti-rights groups? Why or why not?

- Young people engage with progressive and open platforms, and these are often not moderated and are frequented by individuals that promote anti-progressive values
- Young people are more vulnerable to physical forms of violence, seen as weaker targets by violent ARGs
- Young people are targeted and are vulnerable to recruitment by ARGs, this happens frequently at colleges; young people are highly impressionable and are still finding their identities, and joining an ARG offers an identity and social circle
- Rising income inequality has an impact on youth vulnerability to ARGs, when there are fewer opportunities and young people can't get jobs, they are more vulnerable to “scapegoating” language that ARGs use to blame minority groups for economic issues

- Young people are generally averse to traditional forms of social and government institutions, which can make them prone targets for ARGs

**4. Are there any exceptional or innovative ideas that groups or activists have used when confronted by anti-rights groups? Are these feasible for young people to use?**

- For young people to confront ARGs, we must bridge the technology gap between negative people using their power to support ARGs and grassroots elements that often do not have this support
- CSOs should meet young people where they are instead of holding conferences, need to meet young people at the grassroots and where they are at in order to enable cross-support and solidarity
- CSOs and youth groups need to create positive narratives and need to make sure that campuses are rights-oriented; this includes outreach, exposure to ongoing activities, and promoting civility
- March for our Lives was a good example of youth claiming protest spaces
- Yes, youth are targeted by ARGs for attacks and are vulnerable to recruitment, but they are also the most able to confront ARGs- there's no activism like youth activism and there are many examples of young people engaging in counter-protests
- It is important to stay vigilant, use positive narratives and be mindful of civility instead of devolving into "shouting matches" without a greater sense of social responsibility.

**Civil society actions identified during the dialogue to address these problems**

1. CSOs and youth groups need to create positive narratives and make sure that campuses are rights-oriented; this includes outreach, exposure to ongoing activities and promoting civility

2. March for our Lives was a good example of youth claiming protest spaces

3. While targeted by ARGs for attacks and vulnerable to their recruitment, young people are also the most able to confront ARGs

**Recommendations made for further civil society action to address the problems identified by the dialogue**

1. Meet young people where they are instead of holding conferences

2. Bridge the technology gap between negative people using their power to support ARGs and grassroots elements that often do not have this support

**Recommendations to other stakeholders**

Universities and other forums should give young people the space to pursue the actions noted above