

PEERS AND PARTNERS: EMPOWERING CHILDREN TO TAKE CIVIC ACTION



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CIVICUS AND SAVE THE CHILDREN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on ongoing research and analysis by Save the Children and CIVICUS, this policy brief sets out how current trends in civic space - the space for civil society - impact on the ability of children, and their allies in civil society, to organise, participate and communicate to influence political, economic and social priorities for children.ⁱ

Children have the right and the desire to be involved in decision-making, but their potential and ability to contribute to society is being obstructed in many countries. The challenges faced by civil society in general are accentuated for children who seek to engage in civic action and influence public decision-making.



Photo: Save the Children

Child-led organisations and groups face significant legal, social, economic and cultural barriers in forming and operating, and many children do not feel safe in speaking out. Children are often not considered legitimate actors in their own right and are regularly denied access to decision-making processes.

When children are given a seat at the table, it generally does not come as part of an institutional process, and children largely depend on adult-led groups for access.

In response, this brief calls for **policy-makers to support children's civic rights, recognise the benefits of enabling children to exercise their civic rights and their right to participate, and act to unlock these benefits.** Improved participation will ultimately lead to better informed and more effective policy.

For children to claim their rights, state and intergovernmental institutions must prioritise **the creation**

of spaces and opportunities for children to participate in processes that make decisions on issues that affect them. Political leaders and the private sector should recognise and support children as civic actors. Governments at the local and national levels must **repeal or amend laws and change practices that prevent groups led by children and adults, including human rights defenders, from actively exercising their rights of association, peaceful assembly and expression, and their rights to access information and participate.** Governments should put in place laws, regulations and practices that **enable participation and facilitate access to child-friendly information.**

Adult-led civil society should work to broker new connections between children and policy-makers, and help facilitate meaningful and ethical opportunities for children to participate. All need to work to offer children a wide range of opportunities - online and offline - where they can come together, learn about their rights, share experiences, take joint action and claim their rights.

How do we define civic space?

CIVICUS defines civic space as the **set of conditions that allows civil society groups and individuals to organise, participate and communicate freely and without discrimination, and in doing so, claim their rights and enable them to influence the political and social structures around them.**

This can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect all people who live within its borders and respects and facilitates the core civil society rights - the freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression, including the right to access information.

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INTRODUCTION

Civic space – the space for people to organise, participate, communicate and act as individuals and as members of civil society organisations (CSOs) - is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. Civic space, because it enables people to associate, assemble, express their views freely and access information, is essential to realising human rights and making the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) a reality.

It is now well documented that civic space is under attack in many countries around the world.ⁱⁱ However, little is said on how civic space trends are being experienced by children, and how children's rights and abilities to be active agents for change in their countries and communities are being affected.

This policy brief, building on Save the Children's track record of programming, research and engagement with children and CIVICUS' analysis of civil society responses to exclusion,ⁱⁱⁱ aims to fill that gap by **bringing children's voices to the debate, as well as those of concerned adult civil society activists.** It presents findings from a study conducted in 2016 by Save the Children and the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University, Belfast, UK, combining online consultations and face-to-face group discussions with a total of 1,606 children, aged between eight and 17, from 60 countries,^{iv} and from an online survey carried out by CIVICUS and Save the Children with 488 respondents from adult-led civil society from 98 countries.

In accordance with Articles 12, 13, 15 and 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), **children have the right to take civic action and influence** the design, implementation and monitoring of laws, policies, budgets and services.^v The UNCRC recognises the rights of all persons below the age of 18 years. The realisation of children's civic rights and the right to participate in decision-making processes should take into account and accommodate children's development, ability, and their evolving capacities. For example, approaches adopted to realise these rights for adolescents may differ from those adopted for younger children.^{vi}

A majority of children that Save the Children engages with from different regions, backgrounds, genders and age groups are clear that they see themselves as agents of change in their own right and **they want to be involved in the making of decisions that affect them and**

contribute positively to their development and the development of their societies.

Eighty-one per cent of children consulted by Save the Children and the Centre for Children's Rights through the online consultation tool report that they are interested in "decisions made by government and other people in positions of authority about issues and things happening in their community, country or the world." Almost two-thirds, 63 per cent, say they had faced an issue that made them feel they should do something, and 74 per cent of these children report that they had acted in response. In the words of one child from the Latin American and Caribbean region: ^{vii}

"I saw that nobody wanted to report the problem so I told myself that if they can't do this I have to try. It was a challenge for me, but I did it."

When they are able to participate, children can bring new insights about their situation and provide creative solutions to difficult circumstances. Involving children in civic action and public decision-making will be essential to realising the SDGs in ways that benefit children. It also helps children to understand democratic processes and develop their future capacity and willingness to participate in democracy and advance a culture of human rights.

Children are a crucial part of civil society. They should be supported to take civic action and exercise their rights of association, peaceful assembly, expression, access to information and participation in decision-making processes. In many countries, civil society helps to deliver essential services for children. Civil society can also promote and build the capacity of key actors and communities on children's rights and support children's participation. An empowered civil society can provide a voice and a platform for adults' and children's participation in public decision-making, including by holding states to account for the decisions that governments make about children. But the challenge is that too often, civil society is restricted and prevented from playing its full range of roles.

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CHALLENGES TO CIVIC SPACE

Data from the CIVICUS Monitor, an online platform that tracks civic space conditions in every country of the world, shows that just three per cent of the world's population live in countries where civic space is open. **Of the 195 countries covered by the CIVICUS Monitor, civic space is rated as closed in 20, repressed in 35, obstructed in 51, narrowed in 63 and open in only 26.** Each region of the world contains countries in the most serious categories of restriction.^{viii}

In the vast majority of cases, violations are committed by state authorities. The main reasons states restrict civil society are to prevent people from criticising authority, engaging in human rights monitoring and calling for their basic social and economic rights to be met. States restrict civic space in a number of ways, but the most common tactics are the arbitrary or unlawful detention of civil society activists, the use of excessive force against protests and attacks on journalists. Other frequently observed methods of restriction are the harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders, censorship of the media, including online media, and legislative and bureaucratic barriers that make it harder for civil society to organise and act, including to receive funding from abroad.^{ix} In some instances, particularly in conflict situations where states do not exercise full control over territory, civic space can also be threatened by non-state actors such as extremists and terrorist groups. Increasingly, attention is also focusing on the impacts of the private sector on civic space.^x



Photo: CIVICUS

Adult civil society activists indicate that, while they believe the space for adult-led groups that work on children's rights is more enabling than for civil society as a whole, adult-led civil society continues to be subject to a range of

unwarranted restrictions that limit its work. In particular adult-led groups indicate that they experience a number of arbitrary limitations on the right to participate and other extra-legal restrictions, including harassment of civil society activists and protesters. They suggest that attempts by states to restrict the legitimate work of civil society through debilitating legislation or extra-legal restrictions have a chilling effect on adult-led children's rights groups.

Although the global picture is gloomy, there are also some positive developments, including for child-led and adult-led civil society focusing on children's rights. **CIVICUS has tracked a number of improvements in civic space, including changes to laws, the release of activists and progressive court judgements.**^{xi} In some cases, Save the Children has taken action with likeminded organisations against laws being introduced to restrict civic action.^{xii} Recent research has also focused on the role that some businesses have played in defending civil society from attacks by states.^{xiii} Further, the SDGs, which include a focus on civil society, offer a new opportunity. Goals 16 and 17 commit states to protect fundamental freedoms, provide access to public information, ensure participatory decision-making and strengthen civil society partnerships. If taken seriously by states and if implemented in line with existing international human rights obligations, the **SDGs have the potential to accelerate the realisation of civil rights and freedoms for adults and children.**

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 16

Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 17

Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development



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CHILDREN AS CIVIC ACTORS

Challenges and responses

Any restrictions of civic space affect children as much as adults. In addition, children face specific challenges due to their legal or cultural status as children. In many countries children are at best seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, and at worst as the property of adults. **The civic rights of children have been ignored by many governments, caregivers and civil society, in part because to uphold rights would be to challenge a status quo that privileges adults over children.** To see children as equals and as capable agents of change can be very threatening to power hierarchies. A 16 year-old child from Latin America and the Caribbean indicates the social power dynamics at play:^{xiv}

“We would mainly like to change people’s mentalities. Change their prejudices, the myths and the sexism. Women and children have not been supposed to raise their voices and participate.”

A repeated theme identified by children is that **adults can be a key barrier to the realisation of children’s civic rights.** Adults often do not take children seriously when they engage in civic action to achieve change.^{xv} A Community Conversation Facilitator working with Save the Children in Africa sets out the social challenges, but also the potential to change attitudes:^{xvi}

“Traditionally, children could not speak out. Before, we did not even eat with our children, and they had to leave the house if visitors came. Gradually people realise that children raise critical issues concerning everyone.”



Photo: CIVICUS

In response, **public and political environments need to be created where children’s voices are valued by adults, their participation encouraged and their recommendations given due weight.** Political leaders at the highest levels need to recognise and support children as civic actors. The example offered by the President of Zambia, who during the 2016 opening of Parliament committed to engage children meaningfully in governance processes, is encouraging.^{xvii} Commitments such as those made in Zambia, where civic space is rated as obstructed, should be adhered to by states and scrutinised by civil society.^{xviii}

“Culturally children are not often viewed as having valid opinions and government structures for child participation are poor. It is rare that the government changes policy following opposition from civil society. Often engagement and consultation feels tokenistic.”

Civil society representative, Europe

In order to claim or demand a right you need to be aware of it and feel confident enough to exercise it. **Children may have the right to the freedom of expression, for example, but without self-confidence and awareness may never exercise the right.** A child from Asia talks about developing this self-confidence:^{xix}

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“Talking to adults is something new, and other children are surprised. But I think we have to inspire other children and help others gain strength and make them understand that it is possible. We have to fight for children and the welfare of children. We have to be role models. This will change society.”

Information about rights needs to be made available in languages and formats that children can understand and access, while to develop self-confidence, **children need a wide range of opportunities - online and offline - to come together, learn about their rights, share experiences and take joint action.** In Bangladesh, for example, the child-led National Children’s Task Force, with 20,000 members, is providing children with opportunities to engage in a range of activities, including monitoring service delivery to children.^{xx}



Where children’s rights are recognised in laws, this is not necessarily translated into practice. Children’s right of association is often hampered by onerous administrative procedures, and in a number of countries children’s organisations are not allowed to register their organisation, receive or manage funding, or open a bank account.

In many countries, while the right to information is constitutionally enshrined, in practice public information is often hard to access, inaccurate, out of date, or presented in a way that is difficult for children to understand. Children report that they often rely on adult-led civil society groups to help them access and understand information, including by translating information into child-friendly formats.

Children also face risks to their personal safety when exercising their civic rights. For example, only 34 per cent of children participating in the Save the Children and the Centre for Children’s Rights study felt safe expressing their views in public, compared to 81 per cent who felt they could do so in private. Only 38 per cent felt safe joining a public protest or demonstration. A number of children engaged in civic action had also received threats from those who are the focus of their actions. Children indicated that their safety concerns when participating in public demonstrations could to a certain extent be reduced through the presence of their parents or supportive adults from civil society.^{xxi}

To address this, it is crucial that adults take every precaution to minimise the risk to children of violence, exploitation or any other negative consequence of their civic action, based on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child basic requirements for the implementation of the right to be heard.^{xxii}

“Sub-national legislation does not allow children to participate in village meetings until he/she is 18, while at the national level, laws do not provide children with an opportunity to participate in affairs affecting their lives, which relegates children to passive participants.”

Civil society respondent, Africa

Responses from both children and adult-led civil society groups indicate that there is a demand for **closer connections between children’s groups and governance structures**, particularly at local levels, to enable children to participate in governance processes and provide their views and recommendations. Barriers identified here include unwarranted restrictions on civil society, lack of access to state data on children’s issues, and again the challenge of adults not taking children seriously.

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Governments also need to put in place and resource child-friendly and child-safe mechanisms and spaces where children can engage meaningfully with decision-makers. In Kenya, for example, the government has created the Children's Assembly with structures in 47 counties, offering a mechanism for children to engage in policy-making.^{xxiii}

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drastic changes are needed if all of civil society, including children, are to be free to play their roles and realise their potential.

States have the primary responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil the rights that enable civic action in accordance with international human rights obligations, including by:

- Putting in place and implementing laws that guarantee the rights to the freedom of association, peaceful assembly, expression and access to information - online and offline - for children as well as adults.
- Repealing laws and abandoning practices that restrict CSOs from fulfilling their legal purpose without state interference. States must allow CSOs to secure funding from sources outside their national borders, communicate with national and international partners who adhere to international standards, and act to protect people from human rights abuses, including from non-state actors.
- Ensuring that resources provided by donor states directly benefit CSOs, including CSOs in the global south, organisations working to protect civic space and child-led organisations and groups. Donor states can support the realisation of the rights to the freedom of association, peaceful assembly, expression and access to information, including for children, by highlighting these rights, and any legislative and bureaucratic barriers to their realisation, in bilateral discussions and partnership agreements with other states.



States also have an obligation to put in place specific measures to enable children to take civic action and engage in governance processes at all levels, including by:

- Addressing legal obstacles against children establishing organisations, including in registration and opening bank accounts.
- Providing age-appropriate, gender-sensitive and timely information on laws, policies, budgets, services and other public processes in languages and formats that children can understand.
- Establishing and resourcing child-friendly, age-appropriate, inclusive and safe permanent mechanisms and spaces where children can engage meaningfully with decision-makers and make recommendations on laws, policies, budgets and service provision, without coercion, and where government officials can provide feedback to children on how their recommendations have been taken forward.
- Systematically promoting the importance of children's participation in civil society and public decision-making, addressing negative attitudes towards children, and building the capacity of government officials, state employees and society at large to engage meaningfully with and listen to children.

Supportive space for civil society, including children, is also needed at the international level. **Global and regional intergovernmental organisations** should enable opportunities for meaningful and safe participation in their processes, including by:

- Providing timely and easily accessible information and documentation, including in age-appropriate formats and languages children can understand. For example, child-friendly versions of international commitments and human rights standards, such as the SDGs^{xxiv} and the UNCRC,^{xxv} are important to help enable children to engage meaningfully in their implementation.
- Providing formal and predictable opportunities for civil society to participate in different processes in person, through virtual means and written inputs. As part of this, child-friendly platforms - online and offline - need to be put in place to facilitate children's engagement. Meetings should be systematically webcasted, as this contributes to increased transparency and engagement.
- Ensuring that accreditation processes for civil society are transparent, straightforward to use and implemented without delay. While ensuring that the necessary security arrangements are in place, accreditation processes for children should be

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simplified and must allow a child to be accompanied by his/her adult chaperone or translator at all times.

- Proactively promoting civic space and acknowledging children as key actors within civil society, and taking urgent action when civic rights are being violated. Intergovernmental organisations could adopt specific standards on how to ensure children's safe, meaningful and inclusive participation in their work. An example of these kind of standards are the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Working Methods for the Participation of Children in the Reporting Process of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.^{xxvi}

The **private sector and business leaders** can play an important role in promoting, protecting and expanding civic space, including by:

- Championing civic space in private dialogue with political leaders and speaking publicly about violations. It is crucial that human rights are perceived as core concerns of companies rather than as challenges to their business models.
- Reinforcing community and government efforts to protect and fulfil child rights. They can do this by engaging children as key stakeholders, documenting the child rights impacts of their actions and supporting and promoting children's rights as a core value.
- Applying the Children's Rights and Business Principles^{xxvii} to help improve the contribution of business to the rights and well-being of children. The Principles can serve as an inspiration and guide for all businesses in their interactions with children.

Adults in general have a fundamental role to play. Adults must support children to assess and mitigate risks and to make informed decisions based on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child basic requirements for the implementation of the right to be heard.^{xxviii} Parents, teachers and other adults in the community should acknowledge the wealth of experience and insight that children have. They should start to see themselves as the protectors and promoters of children's rights, with key responsibilities to support children to exercise their rights. Then they must progressively step back and let children take centre stage as children's capacities evolve and they emerge as fully engaged citizens. To enable this, it is crucial to raise awareness of children's rights with adults, and to prepare and support them to meet with and listen to children and value their contributions.

As **adult-led civil society**, we should see child activists as peers and partners and jointly plan strategies for change.



This means we should provide longer-term and follow-up activities in which children can participate, and take the different schedules and needs of children into account when planning activities.

We must also speak out about restrictive civic space and make clear the impacts of restrictions on people's lives, including the lives of children. We must influence governments, businesses and communities to enable space for children to exercise their rights.

We can contribute to this by serving as a bridge and helping to build capacity and broker and facilitate opportunities to engage with children. We should help governments sensitise and prepare employees, officials and parents alike for engagement with children. And we must continue to work to make state obligations to uphold children's rights a reality. As adult-led civil society, we must open ourselves up to partnership and participation with child-led groups and organisations, and make the realisation of children's participation rights a benchmark test of our work to advance human rights as a whole.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Save the Children is one of the world's leading independent organisations for children. We save children's lives. We fight for their rights. We help them fulfil their potential. Through our work, we put the most deprived and marginalised children first to ensure that all children benefit from the progress the world is making.

We have a big, bold ambition: we want a world in which all children survive, learn and are protected.

Founded in 1919, Save the Children is made up of 29 member organisations and Save the Children International.

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CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world. Our international alliance includes more than 4,000 members and partners in 175 countries, who are working together to realise a more just, inclusive and sustainable world.

Established in 1993, CIVICUS has worked for nearly a quarter century to enhance the rights, freedoms, health and vitality of civil society as a whole, especially in the areas where participatory democracy and citizens' freedoms are threatened.

CIVICUS

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ In accordance with the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) children are defined as individuals under the age of 18.

ⁱⁱ CIVICUS (April 2017), [People power under attack: Findings from the CIVICUS monitor](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ CIVICUS (2016), [The CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report 2016, Thematic Overview: Exclusion](#)

^{iv} Centre for Children's Rights & Save the Children (2016), [Enabling the exercise of civil and political rights: The views of children](#)

^v The UNCRC provides children with the rights to the freedom of association, peaceful assembly, expression and access to information (Articles 13, 15 and 17), and the right to participate in decisions affecting them (Article 12).

^{vi} UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment No. 20 \(2016\) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence](#)

^{vii} Centre for Children's Rights & Save the Children (2016), [Enabling the exercise of civil and political rights: The views of children](#)

^{viii} Based on [CIVICUS Monitor](#) data as of May 2017

^{ix} Based on [CIVICUS Monitor](#) data as of May 2017

^x CIVICUS (2017), [CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report 2017, Thematic Overview: Civil Society and the Private Sector](#)

^{xi} Based on [CIVICUS Monitor](#) data as of May 2017

^{xii} Save the Children (2016), [Safeguarding civil society space for children](#)

^{xiii} CIVICUS (2017), [CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report 2017, Thematic Overview: Civil Society and the Private Sector](#)

^{xiv} Save the Children (2012), [Children in Politics - A collection of 11 inspiring, motivating and suggestive case studies on children's engagement in governance](#)

^{xv} Centre for Children's Rights & Save the Children (2016), [Enabling the exercise of civil and political rights: The views of children](#)

^{xvi} Save the Children (2012), [Children in Politics - A collection of 11 inspiring, motivating and suggestive case studies on children's engagement in governance](#)

^{xvii} President of Zambia, [Speech during opening of Parliament in 2016](#)

^{xviii} Based on [CIVICUS Monitor data on Zambia](#) as of May 2017

^{xix} Save the Children (2012), [Children in Politics - A collection of 11 inspiring, motivating and suggestive case studies on children's engagement in governance](#)

^{xx} [National Children's Task Force](#) website accessed on 24 August 2017

^{xxi} Centre for Children's Rights & Save the Children (2016), [Enabling the exercise of civil and political rights: The views of children](#)

^{xxii} UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment No. 12 \(2009\) on the right of the child to be heard](#)

^{xxiii} Ministry of East African Community, Labour and Social Protection (2015), [Operational Guidelines of the Kenya Children Assembly](#)

^{xxiv} Global Movement for Children of Latin America and Caribbean (2014), [The World We Want - A Young Person's Guide to the Global Goals for Sustainable Development](#)

^{xxv} UNICEF (2014), [If you are under 18 years old, you have these rights too. Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

^{xxvi} UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2014), [Working Methods for the Participation of Children in the Reporting Process of the Committee on the Rights of the Child](#)

^{xxvii} UNICEF, UN Global Compact and Save the Children, [Children's Rights and Business Principles](#)

^{xxviii} UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General Comment No. 12 \(2009\) on the right of the child to be heard](#)