A learning journey on how youth experience civic space and how INGOs can support them







#### THIS IS A PUBLICATION BY:





The Learning Journey was funded by:
Oxfam's Empower Youth for Work program



#### CREDITS

**Authors:** 

Fiammetta Wegner, Kirsten Williams and Liv Kaya Aabye, Recrear

**Editor:** 

Gioel Gioacchino, Recrear

Project coordinator:

Ronald van Moorten, Oxfam

Copyediting:

Virginia Vigliar

Graphic design and illustrations:

Cesar Duarte, Recrear

## Playbook Content

INTRO WORDS	. 04
STORIES OF YOUTH CIVIC SPACE	.06
» PAKISTAN	. 07
» PALESTINE	
» UGANDA	
SHARE YOUR OWN STORIES OF CIVIC SPACE	
EXERCISE FOR INGO STAFF AND YOUTH	
ANNEX	
» OUR METHODOLOGY	. 36
» THE WRITING OF THIS PLAYBOOK	 . 39

### Intro Words

'What happens if we meet?' explores how young people experience civic space<sup>1</sup> and the role INGOs can play as their partners<sup>2</sup>. The following pages are an invitation to reflect on the realities of youth civic space.

Young people provide inspiration and momentum to civil society by challenging broken systems while searching for their own way to exist in and drive a more just world. Yet, the ability of youth civil society to shape their realities is increasingly challenged. In many countries youth groups and movements face limitations to their rights to organize, act and speak out. This has led youth activists, movements and organizations to find alternative routes of engagement and creative ways to express themselves and shape their communities.

This Playbook brings together the findings generated throughout a four-month Learning Journey between Oxfam staff, 15 youth organizers from Palestine, Uganda and Pakistan and the Recrear team.

Together we explored the question:

How do young activists experience civic space and how can INGOs better support them in shrinking civic spaces?

In response to this question, participants shared many personal stories. Their lived experiences give an insight into the different ways youth-led groups challenge and reinvent their participation in civic space.

- Participants of this Learning Journey agreed on the following definition of civic space: "the space for civil society actors to make their voices heard, hold power holders to account, organize and advocate for their rights and interests. It's outside of the space of government, private sector and personal / household sphere where citizens can express freedom to assemble, associate and speak out."
- 2 Civil society is made of many types of organizations that interact, influence and nurture youth civic space. For the purpose of this Playbook, we focus on the relationship between INGOs and youth groups.

This playbook is centered around three stories, one from each of the contexts we explored. They are fictionalized, combining lived experiences, reflections and learnings generated directly from the youth participants. After each story we offer questions and exercises. The questions are meant to spark deeper reflection among the INGO community. The exercises are aimed at strengthening the way INGOs support and partner with youth organizers in the context of shrinking civic space and can also be used by youth organizers themselves to guide their interactions with INGOs.

The stories are followed by a section in which we present the learning question each country team generated for their context, a country background and three top learnings<sup>3</sup>. We conclude with an exercise to invite the reader to use the stories in this playbook as a way of opening new conversations through storytelling.

What emerges in between the dialogues in this Learning Journey is that youth organizers are resisting, expressing themselves, and surviving. Meeting youth organizations where they are is in itself an act of resistance. Youth activists need allies and support, yet they want to be equal partners, and not get co-opted by more established INGOs.

There is too big of a gap between youth aspirations and the availability of institutional support: international partners like Oxfam have an opportunity to reflect on their role in either changing or contributing to unjust scenarios.

If you are an INGO staff member, we hope the content of this Playbook will inspire you to have powerful and much-needed conversations, and that engaging in such dialogues will lead you to take initiative to strengthen your relationship with youth groups and movements.

If you are a youth organizer, we hope this Playbook can be a tool to bring international partners to the table and seek meaningful ways of collaborating.

Most importantly, may the stories below be mere conversation starters: we encourage you to experiment with different ways of threading these reflections in your own communities, organizations and networks.



# Stories of Youth Civic Space

learnt that my knowledge is not my own, my stories are not my own, they need to be shared so that I might enlighten people to what the real issue is."

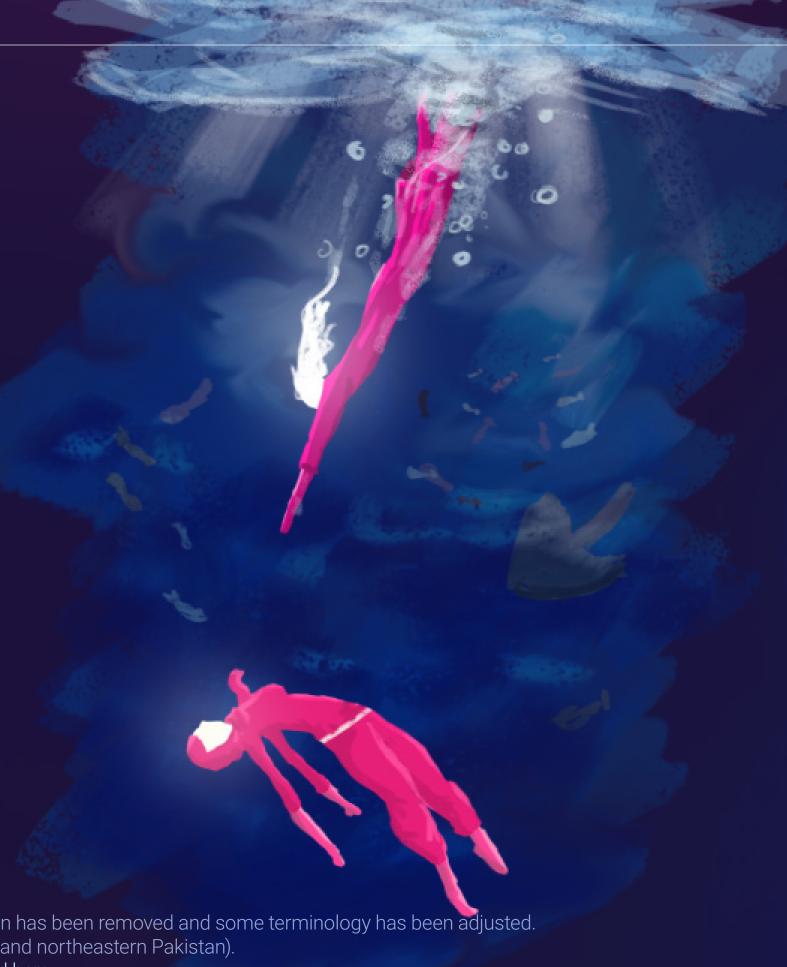
- Youth participant



Alma grew up in a small rural town close to the city of Lahore, Pakistan. She loves to dance Bhangra<sup>5</sup> and since very young showed a great sensibility for movement and music. About one year ago, Alma moved to Lahore hoping that in the city she could be more comfortable with her transgender identity.

Alma is still learning about city life. She was lucky to find a transgender community that accepted her, helped her to find a safe place to live, and provided political education so she could learn about her rights. Her community was part of the transgender movement on the frontline of fighting to pass the Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act in 2018<sup>6</sup>. The law allowed people to choose their gender and to have their identity recognized on official documents. This was a huge milestone! Before that act, transgender people couldn't vote and had very little rights. Alma feels lucky to be surrounded by such powerful and inspiring people.

Her peers often talk about that historical moment. They are proud to say the law they helped drafting is now one of the most progressive in the world. Despite the law, they still experience harassment on a daily basis. The bill improves their political status but not their day-to-day reality and societal acceptance. They are discriminated against in their families, at school, in public places, and on public transport. It's almost impossible for transgender people to find a job and most have to choose between sex work or begging on the streets to sustain themselves. They never feel completely safe and many of Alma's friends have died or disappeared.



- Due to the sensitive context, in this chapter of the Playbook some information has been removed and some terminology has been adjusted.
- 5 Bhangra is a popular folk dance and music from Punjab (northwestern India and northeastern Pakistan).
- To know more about Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act read read here. 6

8

When she thinks about that, Alma's body gets stiff and she is so scared she can't even get out of bed. In those moments dancing is the only thing that keeps her going. When she dances her body becomes alive and her mind quiets down.

She also keeps going because she promised herself that she won't give up. She sealed that promise with herself five years earlier, upon hearing the news that activist Sabeen Mahmud had been killed by a gunman on her way home after having hosted a debate in her café 'The Second Floor'. The café was a beautiful space Sabeen had founded with the idea of providing a community space for open dialogue. Alma had met her on her first ever poetry night, also organized at the café, while she was visiting Karachi. She was so impressed and inspired by Sabeen that she decided there and then that she wanted to be like her. Since that day, she has been fighting for a society in which she and her community can feel safe and thrive.

In the city, she's been learning how to be an activist. She acted as a youth leader in different programs and recently started a local NGO providing sanitizers to vulnerable people during the Covid19 pandemic. The long-term vision of Alma's NGO is to change public perception of transgender people.

All the projects she pours her heart in add to her daily risk of being harassed and killed. On top of that, the funds for her organization are at risk of being pulled out any moment. Without funding she would need to close down. Alma feels hopeless when she thinks about how long it took her to register her organization.

Today, Alma is sitting on her bed, looking out of the window. She holds hands with her friend and colleague Mehlab, and cries. Another prominent journalist and women's rights activist was shot dead in the Turbat province; Shaheena Shaheen<sup>8</sup> was her favorite show host. She was also an incredible artist, Alma looked up to her. Shaheena's paintings portrayed the resilience and struggle of women. Her art speaks about women's misery but also their power. Alma is devastated by the idea that everyone she looks up to as a young woman, artist and activist dies. She holds on to Shaheena's work knowing it will bring much needed hope to transgender women like her.



- This is a real occurrence mentioned by participants in the Learning Journey. Learn more about Sabeen Mahmud <u>here</u>.
  - This is a real occurrence mentioned by participants in the Learning Journey. Learn more about Shaheena Shaheen Baloch here.

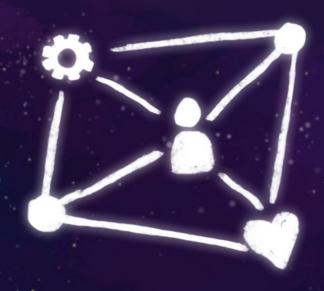
## Reaching to Vulnerable Groups



International funds and support are a vital source for sustaining the work of some of the most vulnerable and/or progressive movements. Without support they are more exposed to risk.



We invite you to reflect on what groups are left behind in your context. Think about the specific challenges they face, such as barriers posed by societal norms as in the case of Alma's story.



You can engage with the following questions:

- How can your organization support these vulnerable groups?
- How can you leverage your role to help build national and/or international support networks around them?

# Exercise for INGO staff and youth: Aligning Safeguarding Practices



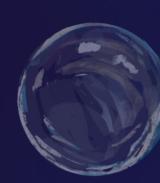
In contexts of restricting civil liberties, INGOs need to safeguard the security of their staff members. This can include measures that restrict their ability to operate in certain areas and circumstances. Youth organizers also come up with their own strategies to protect themselves and their peers. How can INGOs and youth organizers collaborate towards the creation of a safer environment?

- Invite a group of youth organizers and engage together in a mapping exercise.
- Use a Venn Diagram and map out:
  - **A.** The practices INGOs adopt to support and work with youth in your context: in the circle on the left side;
  - **B.** The strategies and tactics youth or-ganizers use to protect themselves: in the circle on the right side;
  - **C.** The common strategies that can strengthen the security needs for both youth and staff members: in the middle.

- Once you have filled the Venn Diagram, review together the internal safeguarding policies of your organization and discuss:
- » Which strategies do youth organizers perceive as most helpful?
- » What are additional strategies you can identify?
- » What are strategies that can be made more effective by partnering with youth organizations?











### Country Question

What is causing civic space to shrink in Pakistan? In what ways is youth civil society responding and how can these efforts be strengthened?





14

Rana recently graduated from law school and she doesn't yet know how to process this milestone. Until recently, she felt her university was the only environment where she could 'safely' learn from and mobilize with other young people to respond to the political realities in Palestine. There, she was surrounded by photography exhibitions, workshops and discussions that gave her hope.

Now that she is out of university, the constant reminders of the harsh reality of the occupation are weighting on her even more. Her freedom to move from a city to another is strained by checkpoints, the social media accounts of youth activists are often censored, and she faces threats when she joins others to peacefully resist occupation policies. Over the last two years, three of her former classmates who were politically engaged were imprisoned. To organize politically, she'd have to put her safety at risk. She studied law because she wants to change these oppressive laws and the political context that keeps young people feeling stuck.

When she connects to her desire to protect the future of young people in Palestine, she feels so much responsibility, urge, desire, grief, anger. She wants to be the best example possible for her younger brother Yazan, now in his third year of business administration studies. He ends up being the one inspiring her. During the pandemic, the informal youth club he is a part of cannot meet in person and is struggling more than usual to obtain donations. Even so, he and his team members are meeting in their homes and putting in their own pocket money to do their campaign work remotely. They are also attending webinars to learn from the experience of the many social start-ups that are popping up in Palestine.



Meanwhile, Rana is looking for a job in the social sector: she wants to be useful, while providing for her own livelihood and putting to use all the skills she worked so hard for. Yet, her options are limited. She's spent a couple of years trying to find work with an international NGO. She knows she's qualified for entry level work, but she never gets the job. Talking with her old university friends, she learns that they too find themselves in this situation. She grows frustrated because INGOs seem to too often hire expats for jobs that could be filled by Palestinians.

She sees INGOs as preserving the status quo so she has mixed feelings about working for one. She's disillusioned by how most of these big international organizations fall short in addressing the root issue of the occupation. The problem is that they avoid getting political and they stay at arm's length from progressive movements that address ending the occupation. Yet she also knows they have the potential to do powerful work. She believes that, if they were to bring in more youth activists like her, they could push for more radical transformation.

The inner voices telling her she's better off making a livelihood outside of Palestine are omnipresent. She knows so many young people that left. They believed leaving was the only opportunity they had. When she speaks to other young people on the same path as hers, she feels supported. There is care, courage and determination in their conversations. They hold space for their pain and regain hope from the peaceful resistance efforts they bring forward.

Rana wonders if her generation can help shake up the stagnancy that seems to be ingrained in civic space. She's tired of foreign-led projects that don't touch the realities lived in communities. She is determined to find a space to be together with other young people, what her university used to be, so that she can get energized, and find the courage to keep dreaming that, together, they can rebuild the communities they care about so deeply.





## A moment for reflection: Hiring and Compensation Practices



Rana's experience joins a growing wave of voices that challenge the way international organizations embed themselves within local realities. Young people describe a lack of transparency in hiring practices that favor international staff, even when qualified local staff exists.



We invite you to reflect on the following questions:

- What kind of requirements are in place in your organizations which might prevent young people from being hired?
- How do you engage young people in your work? What are the mechanisms in place to compensate for their participation?

## Exercise for INGO staff: Learning Dialogue with a Colleague.

- 4. Host a conversation with a young colleague within your INGO or part of a youth-led group who regularly engages in your work.
- 5. You might introduce the conversation as an opportunity for the two of you to get to know each other and have a dialogue which can be a mutual learning opportunity.
- 6. Here are some ideas for how to structure the dialogue:
  - » Opening (10 minutes): Introduce yourself and set intentions for the conversation: Why are you interested in connecting with each other?

- Questions to fall in love (10 minutes): Each of you can pick a question out of this list<sup>9</sup>.
   This will help you build more trust and encourage a more open conversation.
- » Main questions: You might structure the conversations around a few questions such as:
  - What is your job? What does your typical day look like?
  - What issues are you passionate about?
  - What are the challenges young people face in your community?
  - What are the challenges you face when interacting with donors/partners?
  - What are the rules of the sector that you would like to break?
  - What do you find helpful and what do you find unjust in the way our organizations operate?

- » Make sure you are both having the chance to ask and answer questions;
- » Close the conversation by taking a moment to write down any burning question which might have emerged in the course of your dialogue. Share at least one question with each other.
- 7. After the conversation, you can take a moment to check-in with yourself:
  - » How did you feel during the conversation? What reflections or ideas did it spark? What new questions do you have?
  - » Stay curious about the kinds of questions that might emerge and how you can continue to explore them.

#### Country question:

What limitations do Palestinian youth face in their organizing and how can these youth contribute to civic space effectively and safely while living under occupation? How can these efforts be strengthened?

## Country Context

Young Palestinians find themselves enclosed within a highly politicized context. The occupation as well as the protracted internal divisions within Palestine limit their freedoms of speech/movement/assembly and constrains their livelihoods. Moreover, the fact that these political realities play out differently over Gaza and the West Bank make it difficult and unsafe for youth to organize across the territories.

Even though many young people support the peaceful resistance of the occupation, they also fear being labelled and targeted as 'rebels'. Young

people are intimidated by how Israeli and Palestinian authorities have repressed and threatened local grassroots movements through policies and regulations. Youth are severely affected by the targeted violent practices under Israeli occupation, and the daily harassments of arbitrary checks and aggressions at checkpoints <sup>10</sup>.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian economy is grappling with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, with a youth unemployment rate recently reaching 38% among youth aged 18-29<sup>11</sup>.



## To p learnings

#### Youth see INGOs as not doing enough to address the Israeli occupation:

INGOs efforts are seen to create short-term solutions as opposed to addressing root issues. As one youth organizer put it "INGOs agendas rely on the two-state solution but this is unrealistic and so their actions don't really lead to anything. It feels like we are wasting resources".

The perception is that international frameworks are divorced from local realities. An Oxfam staff person explains how in Palestine, the development sector became crowded and consequently fragmented in the early 2000s. This led to instrumentalizing, as opposed to harnessing, youth to achieve structural change. Moreover, INGOs organizational cultures and policies can limit local youth organizing. One youth shares:

The language and regulations of INGOs is also reflected in the guidelines of local organizations; youth are not at liberty to express their own language and feelings in civil society"

Interview of Youth Organizer in Learning Journey.

The Palestinian case reminds us to observe and question: to whom and what are international partners accountable? In practice, are INGOs equally accountable to the communities they serve as they are to their donors' agendas? Do INGOs have equal influence over donors' agendas as they do over local civil society?

Job security is a necessary requirement for youth participation in their communities, and in Palestine, youth struggle to secure jobs even when they are overqualified:

The participants described the cultural perception that youth are unqualified, immature, emotional and radical - they constantly face negative stereotyping. The scarce employment opportunities in Palestine, compounded by the occupation, is a significant contributing factor to the immigration of youth abroad as highlighted in Rana's story.





In fact, accessing information online had become more expensive ever since the government introduced a tax on social media. Isaac could afford getting online once a week, at most. Many other young people he knew were completely cut out. Some of his friends were trying to avoid the social media tax and access blocked websites by using VPNs<sup>12</sup>. This worked for a while until patchy internet became more frequent. He was left wondering: how could he know what was going on around him and decide whom to vote for, if accessing reliable information was so hard?

As the election grew closer, Isaac met less and less often with his theater group. Authorities seemed more emboldened than usual, using covid-related measures to specifically target community leaders and groups. The fear of being labelled a terrorist group had grown severely. In their last gathering, Deborah told Isaac that the legal organization she had connected him to was 'temporarily' suspended for suspicion of terrorism.

While they struggled to meet up, Deborah still shared links to social media sites with the latest news on the ongoing elections. He was grateful for her support, as the news on the radio seemed one-sided, and many issues he cared about were not covered at all. Then, on the eve of the elections, the whole country went into an internet blackout. It lasted for an entire week.

If Isaac felt isolated when he first moved to Kampala six months ago, he feels scared and hopeless now. Weeks have gone by since the elections and nobody knows exactly what's happening. Isaac wants to know what's going on, whether the elections have been frauded and if his friends are safe. But getting online is a luxury: only those able to access several VPNs manage to connect from time to time. Isaac feels isolated.

Today he finally managed to meet up with Deborah. She tells him that even the NGOs that were able to speak about the situation in Uganda have now been silenced. The only news she has is that of a young journalist who got kidnaped and tortured and a local opposition politician who has disappeared. "Young people are making their battle cry. We have no spaces left.", Deborah cries. Just like them, everyone around has more questions than answers.



A virtual private network (VPN) masks the internet protocol (IP) of a device by creating a data tunnel between your local network and an exit node in another location; making online actions virtually untraceable.

## A moment for reflection: Nurturing Youth Connections



Encounters like the one of Isaac and Deborah show how much young people can inspire and support each other. Staying connected is a lifeline for young people who would otherwise find themselves isolated. The need for stable and affordable internet connection has become more urgent in the context of the pandemic.



We invite you to reflect on the following questions:

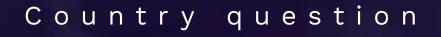
- How can your INGOs support young people to access internet connection?
- What spaces can your organization provide to spark connections between young people from different backgrounds and contexts, both online and offline?

# Providing Safe Spaces for Young People to Share Their Stories

In cases of extreme crack down on civil society, such as the case of Isaac and Deborah's story, young people might be left with no spaces to make their voices heard. INGOs can leverage their connections to provide opportunities for young people to voice their stories through international platforms.

- Partner with local youth organizers to run short interviews with 2-3 young people about the situation they are living and what are their concerns/questions/ideas. Let young people decide what they want to ask.
- You can either write short stories or film short videos. In both cases, make sure to ask for consent in advance, explain how the stories will be used and have the young people sign off before their stories are shared. If safety is a concern take measures such as anonymising names and blurring videos/voices to protect the identity of the young people.
- If there are communication channels like Telegram available to you, form groups on these platforms to host conversations on these stories.
- Share the stories on your social media and online platforms to bring more visibility.
- Make sure the conversations and reactions generated make their way back to the young people you interviewed. You could invite them to your offices and have a conversation.

With the term 'safe spaces' we mean physical or online spaces where (young) people feel free and are invited to express themselves and speak about their experiences and opinions, without feeling threatened or judged. They are created through care and active listening. The theater group in the story is an example. It allows Isaac and Deborah to build a trusting relationship in which they can share their stories and generate new understandings. INGOs can promote the creation of safe spaces by recognizing and supporting those identified by young people. Investing time into building trusting and authentic relationships with youth is also important. These can be strengthened by listening open-mindedly to what young people have to say and asking what makes them feel unsafe.



What strategies can young people employ to overcome lack of access to information and coordinate better in order to have a stronger impact on civic spaces?

How can these efforts be strengthened?



## Country Context

Access to media in Uganda is restricted and people criticizing the government experience censorship and threats<sup>14</sup>. This makes social media an important source of information and platform to organize for youth. However, the government imposed a social media tax, making data expensive and unaffordable for many youths. In rural areas, internet infrastructure and access are even more limited, creating a 'digital divide'. The situation has worsened with the Covid crisis, as most communications and services moved online.

Uganda has one of the youngest populations in the world and youth struggle to ensure sufficient and stable income. <sup>15, 16</sup> One youth participant shared:

Most of the jobs are held by the older people and this is even reflected in the government: none of the country's ministers are under the age of 40. The retirement age is not clear in Uganda, and people hold onto positions until death or bring close relatives to cover their places".

This Learning Journey took place during the pre-elections period. Young people mobilized against the 76-years old president Museveni, in power for 35 years. Young citizens are underrepresented in formal places of power, those advocating for change are considered as opposition and become targets of

repression, assault, torture and assassination.<sup>17</sup> During the election period, there was a countrywide internet shut down to ensure that people were not able to communicate and access information regarding the election process. The youth, who often relies on social media, were completely disconnected from each other.



- To read more about censorship and repressive actions in Uganda see: Uganda: UN experts gravely concerned by election clampdown
- 15 For demographics see United Nations Population Fund: UNFPA United Nations Population Fund.
- 16 For more information on youth unemployment in Uganda and the difficulty to share exact numbers, read Why Everyone is Wrong About Youth Unemployment in Uganda.
- 17 For more information on restricting civic space in Uganda during the elections read CIVICUS: Uganda: Egregious measures threaten free and fair elections

## To p Learnings

#### The importance of creating safe spaces:

Ugandan youth lack access to the information necessary to mobilize, be aware of their rights and hold duty bearers accountable. Youth participants stressed the importance of creating safe spaces to hear each other. These opportunities to meet can enable them to reflect on their personal experiences, make sense of them, and organize to challenge social structures and norms. They also stressed the power of being able to have safe spaces to meet with duty bearers so as to build trust and strengthen dialogue.

#### Human rights education and simplifying legal texts empower youth:

'Though young people know a lot, they know little about legal things', a youth participant reflected. Legal knowledge is necessary for young people to know that they are acting within the law and are therefore protected by it. The lack of human rights awareness and legal knowledge make it difficult for youth to enjoy their civic rights. Youth organizers and NGOs are making important contributions by simplifying complicated legal documents and using accessible events like sports to educate about human rights.

#### Providing data packages improves but not solves connectivity-barriers:

'If an online event goes on for 2-3 hours, you can't expect someone on a minimum wage to be able to participate' a youth participant explained. Luckily, the costs of participating in this process were covered by Oxfam: this allowed us to organize interactive sessions. Nonetheless, internet access was a major challenge in our communication throughout the process; and particularly towards the end because of the internet shut down during elections. Some participants managed to circumvent governmental restrictions by using a VPN, which allowed them to at least stay in contact via chat on WhatsApp. As such, providing data-packages makes online engagements more inclusive, but it does not solve all connectivity-barriers.



## Share your own Stories of Civic Space

We end our Learning Journey by inviting you to use the stories in this playbook to open new conversations. The participants in this process discovered what civic space meant to them by coming together and creating meaning amongst themselves and with other people in their community. We encourage you to reflect about your own experiences alongside those of young people.

Engage youth organizers and INGOs members in your community by asking them to contribute their own stories of youth civic space.

This is an opportunity to generate more learning around the concept of civic space and welcome perspectives that might be complementary or entirely contrasting to those presented here.

## Exercise for INGO staff and youth: Sparking a Conversation Through Stories

#### 1. Collect

- » You can invite people in your network to share their stories on engaging with civic space. This could be a personal anecdote, a fictional story or a real story.
- » Add some open-ended questions to help guide participants in their writing. For example: who is the main character of your story? Where is the story taking place? What happens to the character in your story? How does your character feel about what's happening?
- » You can collect the stories via email, social media, WhatsApp or by asking people to send them to you via post.

- 2. Gather with others in your community, or set up a call, to read and discuss the experience and dilemmas in those stories.
- 3. Generate some debrief questions to open the conversations that you are craving. For instance:
  - » How do you feel about the main character's actions in the story?
  - » Does the story bring forward a dilemma?
  - » What does the dilemma in the story invite us to think about?
- 4. As a closing exercise, you can ask each person to describe civic space as if they were speaking to a friend..

We hope these conversations will spark a desire to deepen the way we meet and create civic space.





#### **OUR METHODOLOGY**

This publication distils a 6-month learning trajectory commissioned by Oxfam and carried out by Recrear International. The core elements informing this Playbook include:

- A literature review
- Scoping webinars with global youth organizers and Oxfam staff
- A Learning Journey with youth organizers and Oxfam staff from Pakistan, Palestine, and Uganda

#### **HOW WE DESIGNED OUR LEARNING JOURNEY**

#### We first set out to understand what knowledge was already available:

The Recrear team conducted a scoping study to explore existing grey and academic literature around youth civic space in order to identify key themes to look at more closely during the Learning Journey. As part of the scoping study, we also hosted two webinars to gather insights into the experience of Oxfam staff members of the global Youth as Active Citizens (YAC)

community<sup>18</sup>, Empower Youth for Work program<sup>19</sup> and some youth organizers who had previously engage with Oxfam.

#### Then we went deeper, engaging with lived experiences:

Together with the Oxfam team, we identified Pakistan, Palestine and Uganda as three countries where we could involve Oxfam staff members and young organizers in a co-learning process to generate knowledge from their lived experiences. These countries were selected on the basis of providing a context where civic space was perceived to be shrinking and where Oxfam staff members were available and interested in participating. In addition, neither of the three countries had been extensively studied on the subject of youth civic space and INGO relationships.

- The Youth as Active Citizens (YAC) Community has been set up in 2015 with the aim to enable participants to develop their knowledge and practices in the field of youth active citizenship. The YAC Community aims to further develop Oxfam's ways of working in partnership with young people so they can be better enabled to participate and lead on decision-making that affects them and their communities.
- 19 Empower Youth for Work is a five year project by Oxfam which focuses on giving young people in rural areas of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Ethiopia opportunities to develop professional skills and meaningful social networks.

## The participants in our Learning Journey included:

5 young organizers, and 1 Oxfam staff member from Pakistan

6 young organizers, and 2 Oxfam staff members from Palestine

Young organizers, and 1
Oxfam staff member from Uganda

Recrear members

#### Pakistan

Shamim Rubina Maab Saima, Shahzad

#### Palestine

Hala Mari Bader S. Alzaharna Razan Nahed Al Saqqa Raghad Hilal Neda, Majd Al-Khoury Dania Majed Ghosheh

#### Uganda

Chelangat Gloria Kasingye Sandra Delpizz Ojakal Raphael Mark Mugambi Martin Charity Chelangat The Recrear team designed a methodology for this journey, infusing creative and reflective practices so that the process would feel nourishing for everyone. We held group sessions in which young organizers and Oxfam staff members came together to learn across each context as well as country-specific sessions to share more intimately as a team, co-design learning activities, reflect together and generate context-specific insights. Some of the activities we conducted included questions to fall in love<sup>20</sup>, creative writing and storytelling, a shared team journal and mapping.

#### Example of a learning activity designed by participants

In the context of a protracted Covid lockdown and online conferencing burn out, the Pakistan group decided to engage their networks in a storytelling activity. They each wrote a utopian story about how civic spaces would look and feel if they were more open, accessible and free in their country. Their stories were shared with two people in their networks and communities who were asked to share a story back. Then they came together as a team to reflect on what they had learnt.

#### Our learning journey



Getting to gnow each other



Generating country-level questions



Mapping country context



Engaging in learning activities to learn from team members and across teams



Participants
designing learning activities
to engage their
communities
and networks



Engaging in collective sense-making



7

Curating the playbook

#### THE WRITING OF THIS PLAYBOOK

All the information in this playbook has been condensed by the three facilitators of the Learning Journey and authors, who took part as co-learners while accompanying the process. Each of us carries different positionalities<sup>21</sup>, and we understand them as changing over time and in relation to the people and circumstances we engage with<sup>22</sup>. What brings us together is that we are part of an organization called Recrear, which aims to explore social transformation through co-creation, creativity and care. We are three women in our late twenties and early thirties with a western or mixed background and live in different contexts from those explored in this process.

All participants had a chance to review this playbook and give feedback to its content. We strived to capture the essence of their experiences. The playbook carries the same spirit of creativity and collaboration that accompanied this process.



- The term positionality describes a person's social standing or identity and considers how characteristics such as gender and sexuality influence our engagement with others and the world. To learn more see: Chacko, E. (2004). Positionality and Praxis: Fieldwork Experiences in Rural India. Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, 25(1), 51-63.
- Ateljevic et al describe positionality as based on fluid, temporal and contingent relationships. To learn more: Ateljevic (Associate Professor), Candice Harris (Senior Lecturer), Erica Wilson (Lecturer) & Francis Leo Collins (PhD Candidate) (2005) Getting 'Entangled': Reflexivity and the 'Critical Turn' in Tourism Studies, Tourism Recreation Research, 30:2, 9-21, DOI: 10.1080/02508281.2005.11081469.

A learning journey on how youth experience civic space and how INGOs can support them





