

HERE TO STAY

Claiming Youth-led Civic Spaces



Digital open-source research report
Success factors for claiming youth-led civic spaces by European youth work

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Section 1: The Debate.....	5
Section 2: National contexts and case studies.....	14
Section 3: Youth workers and young people speak out	25
Section 4: Recommendations.....	31



Introduction

This is a background document which main purpose is to serve as inspiration for those involved in the Here to Stay -Youth-led Civic Spaces project. This project aims to counter the trend of shrinking Civic Spaces for young people, and look at the role of culture, sports and arts can play in this.

Although this paper reviews the wider international context, we have taken in mind the needs, concerns, realities, and experiences of the project partners from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Netherlands, and Romania.

For this research we analysed the (local) contexts in which our partners operate, and looked at the main challenges, needs and opportunities of the young people they work with, in particular when it comes to the use of Civic Space. These analyses, together with learnings from successful case studies and discussions with key stakeholders, have helped us in defining tools and approaches are relevant in working with them. Supported by a literature review of the international debate and a collection of success stories, key concepts, trends, and recommendations were gathered. These will be used as a guide to develop a training manual, which the project partners will use to guide youth workers in their communities. These outputs, however, will not only be relevant to the project partners, but for youth workers across Europe.

What follows are four related sections:

- 1. The first presents a **brief overview** of the current debate.*
- 2. The second presents the **national contexts** of the partners and case studies of effective interventions.*
- 3. The third highlights the **discussions** held by youth workers and young people.*
- 4. The fourth part lists the most important **recommendations** for youth workers and 'lessons learnt'.*

Infographics of the ratings of EU member states' CIVIC SPACE¹



Section 1: The Debate

Shrinking Civic Spaces

Civic spaces are opportunities that allow people to organise, participate and communicate with each other freely to influence the political and social structures around them. Civic space refers to the space – online and offline, legally and in practice – where people exercise their rights to freedom of association, expression, and assembly, to access information and to actively participate in society. Individuals, groups, and organizations use civic space to solve problems and improve their well-being, by speaking out on issues of public concern, gathering in online and offline fora, and by participating in public decision-making.²

Access to Civic spaces, however, is usually limited to a select number of people who may have been elected or occupy it by their privileged position in their societies. Most of these spaces are dominated by older people whose life goals and visions differ from younger generations. As such, these spaces are deprived from a vital source of knowledge and inspiration for young people. Another concern is that the policies which are set and decisions that are made are not necessarily in the interest of young people and fail to empower them.

There are movements for example that argue for increasing inclusive public spaces for old people, which, indeed, is a good idea. However, often senior citizens usually already participate in elections and are also financially a force to reckon with. What is argued for elderly people, i.e. that spaces should accommodate to and be flexible to their needs, provide them a ‘sense of belonging’, and promote ‘agency’, should also be demanded for young people.

3

Data show a limiting of civic spaces or ‘platforms’ open to young people as a global phenomenon. As reasons are given anti-democratic tendencies including hate speech, fake news, populism, conflicting diversity, funding constraints, extensive administrative and reporting procedures. These data also point out more ominous restrictions such as curtailment of access to information and freedom expression, the rights of assembly and fear of retribution and political pressure.⁴ ‘Anti-platforming’ and ‘cancel culture’, or refusing access to speakers, has become fashionable.⁵ Other reasons are economic, poor access to information and general disregarding basic human rights.

This shrinking of civic spaces is well recognized, and efforts to increase the range of civic spaces as well as their accessibility are supported by policies by entities such as the European Union and the Council of Europe, which in various



statements proclaim to recognize the threat posed by restricting civic spaces and have made proclamations in favour of participation and active citizenship by young people.

In August 2020, during an open discussion evening at an arts college in Amsterdam, black students demanded a safe place where they could freely express themselves.⁶

In the 'Revised European Charter of the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life', published by the Council of Europe, states:

- *Young people have the right and should have the opportunity to have a real say as to decisions affecting their lives and especially those made at local and regional levels. They should also be supported and given the space to be involved in all kinds of activities and actions. Of course, having a right is only meaningful if they have the opportunity, support, and knowledge to use it. Through this, young people will gain the knowledge and experience to use these rights and opportunities optimally.*
- *Enabling young people to participate in their community is not only about giving them a voice, it is also about supporting them to experience the opportunities and challenges of participation and being involved in community life. If their participation is to be real and meaningful, it not only requires their commitment, it also requires the strong and lasting commitment by everyone else.*
- *All efforts to promote youth participation should consider their diverse needs, circumstances, dreams and hopes. It should also include some fun!⁷*



In this project we take these promising words to heart and will aim to make sure that young people can indeed take up the space they have the right to!

Saving and Claiming Civic Spaces

Most of the current discussions focus on protecting the current civic spaces as they are, indeed, under attack. For young people they are their engagement in socio political causes; elections, street protests, public media [TV, radio, newspapers], websites, assemblies, and of course, memberships of boards or governing bodies, parliament, schools, sport clubs, community-based organisations, NGOs]. In all these spaces, freedom of association, assembly and expression should be guaranteed.

CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world. We adhere to its mission embrace Civicus' vision: "A worldwide community of informed, inspired, committed citizens engaged in confronting the challenges facing humanity".⁸

Civic spaces that are traditionally open to young people are the advisory boards or youth councils that are common to educational institutions, municipalities, demonstrations, protests and high-visibility events at which a select group of youngsters are invited to speak. These are good initiatives and should be continued and strengthened.



Good examples: Left: UN assembly as civic space accessible to young people. Wiikwemkoong First Nation Autumn Peltier, Canada, speaks in the UN General Assembly, New York, 2018. Right: The European Youth Parliament provides a forum for young people to develop and express their opinions on European political and social issues in an open and welcoming environment".⁹ Photo: EYP.

However, valuable as these traditional spaces are, many other civic spaces exist and are generally overlooked. Young people should have policy- and decision-making platforms relating to many other fields or spaces:

- *Sportclubs*
- *City planning*
- *Events planning*
- *TV and radio programming*
- *Staffing public service*

- Energy sources
- Public transportation
- Safety
- Action research
- Access to drugs, alcohol
- Internet/social media
- Investments
- Street art
- Access to health/medical/social services

All spheres of life are relevant and should be open to the voices of young people, as they all impact their lives and how they prepare for the future. As protecting traditional civic spaces has become increasingly difficult, opening newer ones may pose even greater challenges, but may offer surprising gateways and appeal more to the distinctive characteristics and needs of the Millennials and the Generations Z, and even Alpha.

It takes creativity and foremost bravery to work for change when the established forces not only balk at fresh initiatives but may also try to criminalise those actions. As the 2019 International Civil Society Week read: "Protecting civic space requires courage-and lots of it" ¹⁰ .



Left: Street art as civic spaces. Detroit. The text reads: "They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were SEEDS". Photo: RvO, 2018. Right: Unemployed young people in Greece, using mass protests as a civic space. Photo: Dody Tsiantar.

Using arts, culture, and sports to open up spaces!

*In the **Here to Stay** project, it is assumed that to protecting and creating new civic spaces could be done via sports, culture, and the arts. These are powerful forces for innovation and change and should appeal to most young people. The assignment here, therefore, is to keep culture, sports and arts in mind when looking at the tentative list presented above. This should not be done alone, but in collaboration with all stakeholders, foremost young people and youth workers, and also individuals who are professionally involved in the fields listed. People who engage in arts and sports tend to be more socially and physically active, spend more time outdoors, volunteer more in their communities. Research also shows that engagement in the arts helps build human, social, and community capital. However, it is also noted that young adults tend to spend less time on these.¹¹*

Arts

Artists and arts organizations promote citizen participation and bring people together to understand and address complex issues. It does so traditionally by involving audiences through the creative process.¹² Arts should spread out to more domains so that all young people get the chance to explore, that the very concepts of 'arts' and 'culture' have to be redefined and that more accessible activities outside the school and in the community should be organised and that these be open to all young people, regardless of gender, sexuality, ability, family background, language, religion, status.¹³

*In publication **Activism, Activism and Beyond** (2017), Partos, the Dutch umbrella organisation of international cooperation NGOs, makes a strong case for the use of the performing arts to claim civic space, albeit music, dance, or theatre performances. It points out that, in addition to visual arts, there are many other forms of art that young people use to express their feelings and as tools for activism. Music, for example, has a long history of being used for political and social activism. Music has been recognized as having the ability to foster desirable social and political attitudes and effectively convey ideologies. Apart from the creative protest songs that often form an integral part of marches and demonstrations, more professional performances by popular artists and orchestras have been instrumental in many instances of civic action.¹⁴*

Another powerful tool is theatre which by using drama, humour and suspense can deal with many controversial issues affecting young people. In general, public response to theatre is positive and engaging, and messages do come across very well!

There are indeed many artistic ways to tackle controversial issues affecting young people, for example, during the hey days of the Anti-Austerity Movement [Movimiento 15-M] in Spain, the dance group Flo6x6 declared the spaces

usually occupied by banks, cash points and government buildings and used these for flamenco dances and carrying a strong message, all this with the appreciation of the onlookers. Flo6x8 dancers were simply making better use of the space already available to them.¹⁵

The lesson here is that many other groups and organisations, can translate this initiative for use in their own context: they too can find public places available for effective, disruptive and yet peaceful flash mob performances, even if these are currently subject to (unwritten) rules and regulations about their use.

All these groups claiming civic space call on their audience to:

- **be creative, use art** – often, creativity is an absolute necessity for civil society organizations to overcome the practical or legal obstacles they face. Additionally, creativity can be a source of energy and joy and a way to foster inclusion and togetherness.
- **use tech, be innovative** – push in the direction of more equality and inclusion, we need more innovative solutions.¹

Sports

Educators promote sports among young people as they develop skills and habits that will make them more active, engaged, and responsible citizens. Research suggests that sports carries a range of positive civic effects such as voting, volunteering, and following the news.¹⁶ There is a difference between competitive sports versus non-competitive sports. The latter tends to be more inclusive and accommodating.¹⁷

In the Netherlands, small football courts, promoted and named after football star Johan Crujff located in ‘underprivileged’ neighbourhoods, carry signs that list ‘14 Rules of Johan Crujff’. Among these rules are: team player, initiative, responsibility, integration, social engagement, personality, respect, playing together. In all respects, major ingredients of civic behaviour. These courts are nothing less than accessible civic spaces.¹⁸

Some could see to it that the requirements for engaging in sports –space, materials, training, attendance of interesting sport events– become widely available, especially to those children and young people who lack the resources to do so; young people could play a strong role in seeing that this happens.



Left: Street theatre on the detrimental effect of early marriages, promoted by ICDI partner Bedari in Pakistan. Photo: Bedari. Right: Roma children playing football in North Macedonia. Photo: Paul Jeffrey.

Social Media

There are many and varied digital platforms that are on offer and are constantly created that cannot be ignored. To address this properly requires a whole separate study. In this research we are focusing on physical civic spaces for young people. Suffices to say that social media platforms give voice to many young people who otherwise would not have been noticed, but also may increase the vulnerability of those who already in a weak position and may create new forms of exclusion.

Off-mainstream young people

Consideration should be given to children and young people who feel less at home with traditional platforms. These are young people who are less able to express themselves verbally, speak a different language, are not used to go through documents, do not like to share their feelings or ideas with others or do not feel comfortable in groups or with other people. All of them should be recognised and engaged as social agents.¹⁹ Their emotions, feelings and presence are essential and indispensable. And so civic spaces that welcome them should be identified or created.

Young people who exist off-mainstream are usually less visible or not visible at all to those who are part of majority or conventional segments of society. They are not present in civic spaces because they are less noticeable, their needs and wishes are easily overlooked:

- *Young people who do not have a fixed home or live largely off or on the streets.*
- *Young people from multi-problem families*
- *Gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender youth.*
- *Ethnic minorities.*
- *Young people with a history of foster care.*

- Youth who have been through the juvenile- or adult criminal justice systems.

The occurrence of multiple interlinked sources of disadvantage, is obviously common among these invisible young people. One belongs to a minority, has been in foster care, missed out on education, is gay, has an impairment, is unemployed.²⁰

A special category is formed by the so-called NEETs [Not in Employment, nor in Education or Training]. These are young people with low qualifications, who missed out in education, starting at pre-school level, and now lack the soft and hard skills not only to find jobs but even to look for jobs. Work, in addition to providing an income, also functions usually as a social platform, where views and emotions can be exchanged. Lacking this, physical, mental, and relational problems develop or get aggravated. This sets in a cycle of disengagement from all main civic platforms in society.

'Known' young people, for example who are in regular contact with social workers, could assist in tracing others and so on: invisible young people are well connected to other invisible young people. In all this, the most important is to gain their trust, protect their safety, treat them with respect, and importantly do not approach them with empty promises or unfeasible scenarios. Perhaps, the expression 'getting them on board' should be reversed and should sound: all efforts should be made to 'getting on their board'.



Left: Out of the public eye. Homeless young people living in abandoned sewers in Bucharest, Romania. Photo: Daily Mail UK. Right: 'Invisible' young man begging, Prague. Photo: Unknown.

Participation

Accessing Civic Space is very much about participation. In here this definition of 'participation' is used: the actions young people take to seek to influence prevailing policies, be these instituted and controlled by governments [e.g. municipality], private formal [e.g. schools], private nonformal [e.g. football clubs] or informal [e.g. community-based playgrounds]. It is also understood that participation leaves room for challenging and changing the existing rules, norms and practices.

True participation allows young people to create and carry out their own projects with significant social and educational benefits. This helps them to influence local and national policies and practices on issues that matter to them. Its important young people can have their say, this is also followed up by them being involved in meaningful actions and contributing to creating civic spaces.

Act locally, think globally

With civic spaces shrinking, the importance of the Here to Stay project it's more relevant than ever. It is 'glocal' in nature (both Global and Local). The realisation that all people are part of a deep and wide interconnected world. Young people know and feel that what they do does not only have a direct impact on the people in their immediate environment but also much farther afield, on young people whose existence they are not even aware off. Things happening in places one may have never even heard of influence the lives of these actors and those they work with and for. The Environment and Climate Change is perhaps the most obvious 'glocal' dimension and that will appeal most strongly to young people.

Current events also affect civic spaces. The COVID-19 crisis has made clear that all people are interconnected and many other events happening thousands of miles away can have a direct impact on their lives. The impact of this pandemic on accessibility to civic spaces is disastrous and the first reports coming out show already that again the powerless, the weak, the vulnerable stand most to lose. Gains made are at risk to be diminished or wiped out altogether.

Section 2: National contexts and case studies²¹

In this section, we review the positions and overlapping themes of project partners:

The contexts and cases presented, from the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Netherlands and Romania are all different; they were described by the partner NGOs of the Here to Stay project, who all work in diverse contexts, draw on dissimilar experiences, seek to serve distinct audiences and are guided by their own goals and strategies. As such the analyses do not focus on the whole context of the different countries, but rather on the environments in which the partners work and feature the main possibilities and challenges they face when it comes to claiming Civic Space for young people.

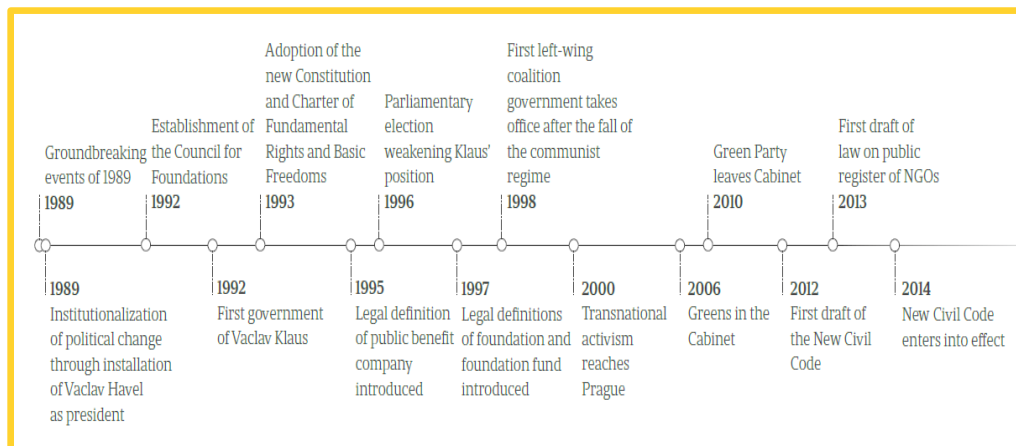
Below are some main findings of the contexts described by the project partners:

The Czech Republic (INEX):

Project partner (INEX-SDA) is a non-governmental organisation based in Prague.

INEX works for a society where people respect each other and where people are responsible for the surrounding world. INEX creates opportunities for active participation in the society and to gain knowledge and experiences; to develop personal, civic and professional life.²²

The civic space in the Czech Republic has a young background, due to the relatively history of the country as a free democratic state. A development of the civil society since 1989 can be see through the timeline below:



Czech civil society can be described as a mixture of several types of civil society models or modes (Císař et al.2011). One of them is the existence of old, membership-based organizations and types of civic activities. These are rather inward-oriented and explicitly non-political, have large numbers of members and good connections to the elite echelons of society. These are typically sports and leisure organizations, culture and youth organizations or specific interest organizations (e.g. hunting, fishing or bee-keeping associations).

The government has in the past decades treated CSOs as a supplement to its own policies but kept certain areas strictly under its control (education, justice, health care, etc.) and has established its own agents, tools (e.g. via grants) and standards in other areas (social policy, leisure, sports).

However, there are a multitude of different forms of civic spaces identified in the Czech Republic, albeit from Youth Centers, sports and leisure clubs to representations of school and political boards, religious and cultural organisations. Public spaces – skate parks, parks in general (as a space for people to gather), e-cafes (playing online games), creative centres, social (board games,) and debate clubs as social media also offer space. When it comes to young people, most of these wide range of Civic Spaces are used by young people up to the age of around 26, who are often university students.



Public spaces are not used by young people who come from smaller cities or face social exclusion; or are dealing with a low social economic status. They might feel different/not useful for the society/not capable enough to join the activity/space. Outside of cities there is a lack of informational channels and barriers are in place as well. Phenomena like hate speech, fake news, populism, bad

picture of NGOs in general can also be seen as a barrier to access civic space.

Due to the diversity and challenges facing its target group INEX sees the need to create of alternative civic spaces and provide several different platforms and opportunities for non-formal education. To achieve more access to Civic Space, project partner INEX organizes the following activities to generate civic spaces for young people:



League of fair football

In this league fair play is more important than scored goals. Through this project the participating young people who are usually experiencing violence on a regular basis (at home or in the street), learn key values such as tolerance, respect, non-violent communication, dialogue, and community role modelling.

International volunteer workcamps

The workcamps are focused on nature preservation, reparations, community work and helping people in need. It gives the participants a unique opportunity to become a member of a local community, to improve their language skills, to meet new people and to raise their skills and engagement towards society with other young people from diverse social, educational and geographical backgrounds.

Virtual workcamp

Virtual Workcamp is a joint initiative and reaction of INEX and its international partner to the current pandemic situation (COVID-19). In times of lockdown international workcamps were “moved” to the online environment. This enabled young people to be active from their home, get speak to volunteers from other countries, share same interests as well as exchange ideas and opinions.

Hungary (OSA)

*Project partner **Oltalom Sports Association** is a non-governmental organisation operating in Budapest.*

OSA makes the lives of (socially) disadvantaged adults and children more complete with the help of football. Their regular trainings offer opportunities for people with severe socio-economic challenges, while connecting them to social, employment and educational services. In 2006, Oltalom was accepted as partner in the Homeless World Cup.²³

According to CIVICUS, since 2010, under the government of the right- wing conservative Fidesz party, Hungary has experienced a serious backsliding in democracy and the rule of law, raising European and international concern. The Hungarian government has systematically dismantled the institutions of checks and balances. This is coupled with a lack of transparency in public spending, the building of a clientele of government-friendly oligarchs and a weakening of social policies, leaving the vulnerable completely helpless.²⁴



In this atmosphere, civil society organisations are among the few remaining independent voices that are not under the direct control of the ruling elite. They too, however, are being heavily targeted.

It is within this context that Oltalom Sport Association (OSA) organizes programs for people who mostly live in low socioeconomic status and having difficulties in many areas of their life. They are disadvantaged socially or economically, come a fragmented family, or live in a child protection institution. OSA's target group often deals with issues such as dropping out of education, childhood trauma and substance abuse. Mostly boys, men, and lesser extent girls attend the programs.

In OSAs view, there are still a variety of Civic Spaces accessible in Hungary. However, they see the most common and most participant civic places across the country are occupied by school, religious, and sports-based communities. In addition, there is a growing online community.



Besides the political situation mentioned above, there are a wide range of reasons why these civic spaces are not used or shared in Hungary; Public communities are not visited by affluent people, who have different areas of interest, as well as their different social habits, different everyday problems and life situations and purposes.

For people with low economic status, there are many barriers that keep them from participating in public spaces. They lack correct understanding or information about these spaces, do not know about their existence or do not know what benefits a particular public space could provide them.

Connecting the goals and needs of people to relevant spaces is the way to go. People need to understand the benefit of using these spaces and see be use that this is feasible too. This can be achieved with specific programs, based achievable goals, and accepting environment and keeping an open mind.



Oltalom believes that sports can break down barriers by making players and participants recognize that there are many points in a sport that, despite ethnic, economic and social differences, are important qualities relevant to all participants as players but also as citizens; this includes virtues like acceptance, respect, self-expression, equal opportunities, patience, empathy.

Thus, with the help of sport, Oltalom builds bridges between their target groups and services and networks such as social services, job-seekers' assistance, language teaching and housing authorities. Their football programme offers opportunities for people living in deep poverty, for the homeless, for refugee youth and for those living in correctional facilities. By organising events participated by diverse crowds such as local councilmen, community clubs, policemen and those from disadvantaged communities they form an incentive to create cooperative communities and instil skills and qualities useful to the everyday lives of those participating.

OSA believes in cultivating a close, everyday relationship with young people with individual counselling and psychological counselling. A Youth worker needs to act as a mentor. For this, the youth workers need to get training in raising awareness, assertive communication, and be able to use different psychological methods to create connection with stakeholders. The keyword for OSA is: everyone needs to have an open mind. It is necessary to strengthen basic understanding and knowledge of human values and social skills, which have not been strengthened in young people due to the low socioeconomic status, or in the fragmented family. In addition, the creation a community, place based on mutual acceptance, the possibility of showing individual values, the unfolding of individuality, and the acceptance of otherness between different social and cultural groups is necessary.

The Netherlands (ISA)

*Project partner **ISA** is a non-governmental organisation is based in the Netherlands, with a world-wide focus. ISA believes that by activating the potential of the largest ever young generation, underserved communities will change. It does so by connecting to them where it sparks, on the playing field; where creativity, cooperation, talent, drive, character, and self-confidence are unlocked.²⁵*

In the Netherlands, there are many facilities and infrastructure for young people of all walks of life. Many neighbourhoods and communities have active youth centres in which youth can engage in different activities. Often, these youth centres are part of a bigger community centre and target youth aged 10-20. These centres are more often based in less fortunate areas of a city or town, to provide opportunities other than sports associations for the local youth.



In line with its interests, ISA views places such as schoolyards, (skate)parks, public squares, youth centres and shopping malls as relevant civic spaces to engage and empower youth. Aside from these physical civic spaces,

youth can voice themselves through various institutions such as universities youth councils, school boards and youth committees and youth political parties. Other locations are art and sports clubs and schools. More and more, places like forest and other natural spaces are being recognized as places to go to.

However, the use of and access to these civic space is by this age group is very dependent on many factors; of relevance is what kind of demographic young people belong to, their social economic background, ethnic background, and education.

Youth Centres are often seen as little islands of their own, and maybe even take youth out of Civic or public spaces. Some sports are still very homogeneous. Hockey for example is not very inviting to certain groups. At most clubs you notice that there are mainly white people, from higher social classes.



ISA thinks that sports associations in the Netherlands should be more inclusive, be a civic space where youth from different backgrounds (ethnic, education, religion etc.) meet and be physically active together. As mentioned, this is not always the case.

One of the elements of sports which excludes others is the element of competition, especially from the age of 15-19 young people (mainly girls!) state this is one of the reasons they quit with sports. Another aspect of sports which excludes certain people is that it costs time and money. Youth boards other forms of youth representation can also be less inclusive as some organisations tend to use favouritism to get certain people involved, and often Youth are less informed about the opportunities to represent themselves; So, access to information is key.

That is why ISA thinks parks and squares provide youth the more opportunities to claim their space; these are place which they can (often) go to at all times, where people from ages and background go to hang out. The attractive aspect of these spaces is that they can use them freely, and that in principle should be available to all youth and are thus potentially inclusive. While using these spaces, ISA sees role for sports, arts and culture in removing barriers, accessing existing ones, creating new ones, engaging 'excluded' young people. ISA believes that the use of sports promotes and aides the development of certain values that can support the inclusion and engagement of young people that might not always be a part of civic spaces, but also opportunities that sports give youth, both directly on the pitch as through the development off the pitch.

One interesting 'side note' of 'disclaimer' came from a Dutch girl who was interviewed by ISA, one main issue was recognised within the use of public squares; Sometimes, youth would prefer a place that is somewhat secluded from the community in order to create a bit more privacy for the youth. Nowadays, many community members complain about having noise disturbance, it being a place where too many youths hang around and cause trouble, which is not very youth friendly. Youth either don't feel welcome or spaces are too intrusive to their privacy.

Romania (FITT)

Timis County youth foundation (FITT) is a Non-governmental Organisation operating in Timisoara. Besides running multiple youth centres, FITT expertise focuses on influencing public policies on both local and national level, that directly or indirectly influence the lives of young people. Earning support through national and international networking, FITT has tackled subjects such as developing quality standards for youth centres, assessing occupational standards for youth workers and revising the current youth law in Romania.²⁶

The degrees of civic participation among Romania's youth varies from engagement in policy-shaping mechanisms, to volunteering and freedom of association. Political participation is relatively high, with 65% of youngsters reporting to have exercised their right to vote and volunteering being a fairly popular activity.

Contrastingly, only 8% of youngsters are part of an association or organisation, invoking reasons such as lack of time (38%) or interest (21%). What is even more worrisome, however, is the 62% that declare not knowing of any organisations and associations activating in their area.

Civic participation in rural areas is mainly focused on state institutions, such as schools, which have managed to maintain a central place in these communities ²⁷. This makes school students' councils, which are mandatory in all schools widely accessible civic spaces regardless of the level of development of the respective community. ²⁸

Larger communities, especially urban ones, present a more diverse range of opportunities for young people, from independent sports clubs to state-recognized children's clubs, which specialize in extracurricular activities. ²⁹ On top of that, youth representation takes place in students' associations ³⁰ and consultations with youth organised by youth affairs (CCPTs), where the main youth-related issues can be debated. ³¹

The main issue is the closed-circle nature of most existing civic spaces, with newcomers usually becoming interested because they know someone on the inside. Personal connections are driving when it comes to young people's decision to get involved civically; this favouring the already privileged while endangering the diversity of said civic spaces. Large urban communities, which tend to accommodate people from less disadvantaged backgrounds and with higher levels of education than smaller rural areas, enjoy a surplus of opportunities, that decreases with the size of the constituency. This is also a

deep-seated distrust in political efficacy, with 39% of young people not thinking they can influence the important decisions being made for their community.

According to FITT, the first step in facilitating young people's access to civic spaces is removing circumstantial barriers, possibly through grassroots interventions that create opportunities in the intimate heart of the young people's neighbourhoods rather than the big, impersonal city centres.

Bringing a broad range of available pursuits straight to the youngsters' doorsteps is a promising approach to nurture civic behaviour. Through sports, arts, and culture, which are common denominators in the lives of young people, we can achieve active participation and have young people influence local public policies. (an area that is overlooked by most youth, only 13% admitting to politics being an interest of theirs).

This requires training the members of the NGOs to take on the task of making the voice of the youth heard convince young people to take a stand and become change-makers and facilitate structured dialogue sessions with community stakeholders. (This is not easy task with 58,7% of NGO members unable to name any policies addressed to young people.³²)

It is within this context that project partner FITT runs the Youth Centres UP initiative, a European Solidarity Corps-funded series of projects aiming to turn old industrial buildings into youth centres, with the help of international and national volunteers and the engagement and solidarity of the local community. The first stage of the project, which ran during the summer of 2019, enriched Timisoara by 5 newly-refurbished safe spaces, designed by young people for young people, that now host youth-oriented cultural, educational, artistic, and recreational events. The short-term goal is for Timisoara to have a city-wide network of youth centres, consisting of The Youth House, alongside 20 neighbourhood centres, strategically placed to link various communities.³³



Left: 'John Lennon Wall', Kampa Island, Prague, Czech Republic: a virtual communication channel between young people. Photo: Dreamstime. Right: Young people demonstrating against climate change, Budapest, Hungary. Photo: Unknown.

Common challenges and features taken from the case studies:

Although these studies reflect individual features, the countries also share a range of common features and challenges.

Perhaps the most important is that governments should treat the NGOs responsible for these case studies as partners, advisers, guides, and as well-meaning and highly needed critics, without whom their policies and practices would suffer in quality, outreach, and effect. These NGOs should be supported but not made to feel dependent or beholden to their governments.

A second valuable message that comes through is that young people could be reached via a range of means: sports, arts, provision of places to 'hang out', access to the internet. This observation goes two ways: NGOs should be prepared to offer a varied 'package' of services so that they can engage the widest range of young people, while also these youngsters should be encouraged to explore new avenues of engagement and meaning.

This also becomes apparent when viewing the Social Progress Index 2020 provides a ranking of the World's nations as to their relative position on 'social progress', which is a composite of ratings of sets of subscales grouped under the headings 'basic human needs', and 'fundamentals of wellbeing'. It is striking that all four countries significantly underperform on the category 'inclusiveness'. This may well be interpreted that open, accessible spaces are less available than each individual country could offer and that this observation applies to all four countries.

Country	Ranking	Global Progress Index Score	Inclusiveness score
Czech Republic	25	95.45	60.51
Hungary	40	92.10	52.15
Netherlands	10	96.48	72.93
Romania	45	78.35	44.73

Scores run from 0, poor-, to 100 high-performance. Ideally, the inclusiveness scores should be at the same level as the Global Progress Index Score.³⁴



Another significant guide is provided by The World Happiness Index. This is a composite of four environmental categories: is there [1] somebody one can count on; is there [2] a sense of freedom to make life decisions and is there [3] 'generosity'; and [4] 'trust'?. The ranking for the four countries are: Czech Republic 19, Hungary 53, the Netherlands 6 and Romania 47.³⁵ One could argue that 'free public spaces' would establish the right conditions for these four conditions to develop and grow and that lack thereof would have a severe impact on young people's feelings of contentment and happiness.



Section 3: Youth workers and young people speak out³⁶

Staff of the four participating NGOs held focus group meetings with youth workers and young people. The groups were generally small, less than eight people, mixed, male, and female and took not much more than a few hours. Yet, they provided us with fresh insights and understanding of what we are dealing with when talking about civic space. These groups appeared to have fresh ideas, guidelines, and local knowledge.

Young People Speak Out

The focus groups with young people showed us that foremost that, when taken seriously and listened to, lots of good ideas are being produced. Young people see clearly what is needed, they have realistic views and wishes – for example wanting a public bus service for the rural area they live in., Young people have an eye for their peers and those who are in vulnerable positions, they are more sensitive to the changes in their environments and what measures need to be taken, and they are specialists of their own environment. They want to bring life to unused spaces and are very capable in using the internet to create civic spaces. They also do not like to be ‘left alone’ but like to be part of a group, community and society, and don’t want to be left out, isolated or ‘locked up’ in their own often ethnically or socio-economically defined bubbles.

Young people who are not following an education or are without work are both most insulated and isolated. Libraries, access to sports, music lessons, even social media offer some opportunities, in this, however, they need some help from outsiders, both from youth workers and ‘regular’ people from the wider community. The latter may need to be told and guided, and herein youth workers could and should an active role.

Young people who participate in a programme offered by an NGO are in the main open to connecting with their peers ‘outside’ and to invite them in. Clearly, they learn a lot from the youth workers, but the process goes two ways: they are also sources of relevant information for the NGO workers and leadership. Here are some thoughts and quotations from the different focus groups:

The Czech Republic:

Civic space? A space where [we] can meet and feel good ... where I can relax and explore my personality, express my qualities, but also express my opinions ...and participate within society...for personal development and where I can form my opinions and values .

It is not always easy [for us] to find those initiatives or places, as often it's reaching out only to the same type of people and bubble.

The ideal civic space: ... where people from different backgrounds can meet and play and chat...where random people ... get to know each other. But also a place where [we] can learn.

Hungary:

We like football and another sports, in which [we] can reduce [our] tension and frustrated. [Our] lives can be so difficult and stressful because of different situations, which fill [us] up with lots of stress.

In addition to the love of football, the most important thing for [us] is [to] find friends and create social relationships.

We would welcome opportunities in which [we] learn to express ourselves better, to make it easier for [us] to find work, to shape [our] social relationships.

The Netherlands:

I believe it is good for everyone to live in such a multicultural neighbourhood at least once in their lives. This because it gives insights and possibly a totally new perspective on society.

So, for me as Dutch very white girl it is rather hard to participate in the events organized [by the community] as they are private. I do visit the local supermarket though.

Nowadays, many community members complain about having noise disturbance, it being a place where [we] hang around and cause trouble, which is not very youth friendly.

Corona has limited it of course and I do firmly believe that we are a group in society that is not shy to give their opinion.



Romania:

Although [we] have turned parks, pubs, or pedestrian areas nearby city attractions into gathering spots, there is a lack of spaces specifically designed for [us]. [We] are thought to go there “because [we] have nowhere else to go to”, not because the environment could offer opportunities for personal growth and development.

People who are “young at heart” give young people the push they need to become more vocal. On the other hand, authorities and, more generally, the political environment does not offer nearly enough support to the youth, due to what is perceived as their clinging to power.

In some cities...the municipality-run events seem to be inexistent ...as they don’t reach [us], universities take over this responsibility but encounter a wall of ignorance from [us] who just want to “have fun” ... Events would be more welcomed if they appealed to [our] needs.



Left: Young people in The Hague, Netherlands. Photo: IamExpat. Right: Young people in Bucharest, Romania. Photo: NewsRoom. Both pictures were taken in the May-September 2020 period.



Youth Workers Speak Out³⁷

The youth workers who took part in the focus groups know what is good for young people and can express their wishes in clear statements that can readily be translated in both effective and feasible local practice and policy. It seems that this knowledge has its foundation in their special personality and commitment - they are genuinely interested in 'helping' young people- and also know how to listen and respect these young persons. In their turn, local governments do wise to listen and respect them. Local communities and societies will be the better through it. Here follow some of their observations:

The Czech Republic:

They are looking for a place of confidence, trust and non-judging; and a safe environment where they can be treated equally and as competent persons.

Organised activities are not always wanted by the youth. And there are not so many opportunities for "non-organised" activities/places or sometimes they are reducing those opportunities. For example, a bench would be removed if groups of youth would gather around and be a bit noisy or messy.

The ideal civic space is a safe and clean club with a football table, sofas and WIFI. Ideally it would also have a kitchenette, showers and some place for sleeping. That place would be also open to the wider public and host other activities to attract and promote those kind of places and perhaps change a bit the public perception on youth work for the better.

To have a role model is also important. In the context of the skate park, there is a professional scooter rider who is attending competition and visits that skate park. That is for the youth a great sign of recognition.

Hungary:

Young people usually use community spaces where they have the opportunity to move a lot, they have a lot of physical space at their disposal, and that place is tidy and like to them, where the company is good. Where they can live for themselves, they feel free to express themselves.

It is important for young people that the civic space should not be in a closed space. Instead of this they prefer an opened, spacious place. They feel most comfortable in places that are easily accessible by public transport, centrally located to their place of residence. They feel most comfortable in places that are easily accessible by public transport, centrally located to their place of residence.

Sport has the strongest calling power for young people. The main reason for this is the possibility of movement in which they can conduct tension. In civic spaces in all three areas, arts, sport and culture, it is important that participants experience free self-expression, belonging and acceptance. Giving and receiving acceptance is very important to them. In civic spaces, young people are specifically looking for activities in which they experience these feelings.

The Netherlands:

We work in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Leiden Noord; a neighbourhood with some challenges regarding unemployment, low education levels, youth crime and youth unemployment. The main services are a football club, sports centre, a neighbourhood building (brede school), which includes educational, sports, health and leisure services and activities.

The Youth we work with are often called 'hangjongeren (youth that hang around-loiterers) who, due to issues at home and absent parents, walk around the neighbourhood and hang around at favourite places (hangplekken- places to loiter).

A big issue is low involvement of parents in the daily lives of their children. "Parents think that they can send their kids to school or a football club and leave them be". But especially in the Netherlands, it is expected that parents come along, volunteer and witness the development of their children in the 'outside' world at close hand.

The online world, this is the space they occupy, they are there all day. They use a variety of spaces online and live in another world. Online, you have to communicate very quickly, differently, catch them in a second (you can also lose them in a second). Catch and keep their attention and you can discuss 'wider' things concerning their well-being and 'space'.

Romania:

In cities where there is a strong civic movement, NGOs have managed opening youth centres – facilities include an activities' hall, a recording and media studio, a kitchen.

A category which raises issues in smaller cities is the youth that are no longer enrolled in formal education. While cities can be considered sufficiently friendly and action-packed for teenagers, they feel the need to leave the city once they have completed secondary education.

It is believed that in order for young people to show willingness to get involved, their needs have to have been met (e.g. emotional needs)- it takes on average a year for a youth worker to awake engagement in a young person and help them identify a need. Introspection is not encouraged within formal education and the non-formal environment should step up and create services to aid this process.

Arts, culture and sports are a crucial in developing participation, as they are already an integral part of many communities, all the while being appealing to young people if the activities are designed properly.



Section 4: Recommendations

Some thoughts for Youth workers

“If you come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together”

Lilla Watson, Murri visual artist

Throughout the preceding text, the current debate has on civic space has been highlighted. We have learned from the particular context the project partners work in and have learned even more from the suggestions and proposals made by the participants in the focus groups; Inspired by their wisdom and experience we would like to share some -seemingly simple- pointers that are important when working for and with children and young people.

Tell them who you are:

When implementing a programme aimed at children and youth, tell them who you are. Say something personal about yourself and your organisation. But more importantly, tell them why you are here, in their world. Tell them what you are planning to implement and how you hope this will improve their lives.

Listen:

Ask them for their opinion: No matter what the subject is, you can always ask children and youth for their opinion (in age appropriate ways). If your programme is about school, ask them about their opinion. If it is about sexual and reproductive health rights, they surely want to talk about it. Not only does this convey that you take them seriously, it also reminds yourself why you do the work that you do and keeps you focused on the right topics. Especially listen to those who face hardships or live in ‘toxic’ environments. This is not a passive process, but a very demanding, active, and dynamic activity, that requires a lot of energy, understanding and patience.

Ensure that they have a role to play:

As we have seen over and over, children are builders, opinion makers, researchers, educators and change makers. And are key in real success of any project or initiative. They want to be part of something meaningful and enjoy responsibility and ownership.



Be reliable and flexible:

Children and young people are still growing up, in preparation for being (hopefully) responsible adults. Besides growing up they have a lot to do school, relationships, chores, sports, and all the other social, emotional and physical challenges that life throws at them. This takes time and energy. So, when engaging children and youth, take this into account, and appreciate any time or energy they can give to you or to the project. At the same time, be reliable yourself, don't make promises you can't keep and follow up on any agreements made. You are a role model but cannot force anything upon youth.

It's about them, their world and how they experience it:

We adult professionals often claim to know so much about child development, child rights and, as the models above show, about youth participation. We think, maybe subconsciously, that we know what they need and how to support them. The knowledge is there, strategies and plans are ready to be implemented. But one of the problems of being a so called adult is, that we tend to forget how it is to be a child or young person, how they experience their lives, how everything that is thrown at them affects them and what a challenge it must be to navigate in this world. Yes, this is hard to remember, but we must try.

Breaking the bubbles:

You play an essential to break the 'bubbles' [social, occupational, ethnic, political] which young people occupy, to build bridges; not only between young people, but also between them and adults, services and public spaces. Be careful however, not to create isolated bubbles when doing youthwork.

Take good care of yourself:

As a youth worker, take good care of yourself, take regular breaks, eat, and rest well, enjoy, and protect your private life, have fun. Do not despair, even when the weather gets rough, and do not give up.

Know that you are needed:

Your wish to 'help' other is meaningful and necessary. Be proud of it. Know, that it is 'your kind of people' that your community and society, and even the world, need most.

Final Recommendations

The cases presented here are all different, the NGOs work in diverse contexts, draw on dissimilar experiences, seek to serve distinct audiences and are guided by their own goals and strategies. Yet, backed up by the literature research, they also share a range of common features and from these some interesting lessons could be learnt. Although small in number, these case studies offer a wealth in experience, ideas and pointers for action. Some of them, possibly less obvious but perhaps still significant, are listed here.

- ***It takes special people***

The participating NGOs are staffed by highly motivated people. They are guided in their work by strong feelings of justice, fairness, equity, anti-oppression, and inclusion. This value system helps them to reach out to new audiences and build bridges with excluded groups, which they do not perceive as 'others', but as equals, albeit, living in more dire circumstances. They are 'respectful listeners' and give priority to the needs and wishes of these groups. As such, they are carriers of significant knowledge and experience.

- ***The importance of validation***

NGOs such as the participants in this project often work in the margin of societies. Their work is hard, successes are not always immediately obtained or visible, 'elevator pitches' do not work, there is a constant struggle to obtain financial support, sometimes dismissed as not important. Yet their work is of utter importance and should be recognized and validated as such. Projects like these have that effect. It is made clear that efforts are essential for well-functioning democratic societies.

- ***Initiative by an 'external agent'***

In all events, it is the NGO that took the initiative to intervene. They decided what specific group needed support and indicated the way to follow and helped to facilitate the process. The understandable conclusion is that, without this 'outside intervention' the situation of the target group would not have changed. The strategies used are two fold, and a combination of these: [1] to remove the barriers that keep the specific group from accessing civic spaces and [2] to 'empower' them so that they can reach out of their own accord. Both approaches carry the risks of making the receiving people dependent on them or that extraneous values are being imposed on them.

- **Sports, arts, and culture are powerful tools:**

Used creatively and innovatively sports and arts appeal to young people, wherever they are and whatever situations they face. The choice of possibilities in sports and arts is more extensive than usually assumed and should be not informed by mainstream values but rather by the preferences and means available of the 'target audiences.'

- **'It takes a village':**

Successful interventions are the result of strong support if not the involvement by a wide group of stakeholders, especially at community level. Sometimes these stakeholders must be made aware that they have indeed, or should have, a strong interest in creating and opening up civic spaces for everybody. Such stakeholders should, therefore, not only comprise youth workers, politicians, but also shopkeepers, schools, training institutions, taxi drivers, media people, other NGOs, religious leaders, researchers... Building partnerships, advocacy and awareness raising are indispensable elements of a successful intervention. This is very much to ask, and often NGOs do not have the capacity [personnel, time, resources, networks] to accomplish it.



- **Mainstreaming remains difficult:**

All case studies show that with external intervention and modest financial inputs, socially excluded people can widen their scope, are more active, occupy new civic spaces, but continue to stay outside the mainstreams of society. They remain socially excluded. This issue needs to be given more attention.

- **Learning from young people themselves:**

This point refers to that of the role of external agents. The question here is to what extent is credit given to successful interventions by people of the target groups themselves? Thus, what is known of such positive efforts that have been achieved without the help of outsiders?



- ***The risks, opportunities, and unknowns of the online world:***

Many youth workers welcome social media as a useful civic space for young people 'living in the margin', plead for enabling them to get the means and the wherewithal to 'be on line', but at the same time, is worried about the impact of 'fake news' and is looking for ways to protect young people against it. ³⁸

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