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Gen-Z protests against Government in Chitwan, 8 September 2025 - हमिल सुवेदी

MOVING GOVERNANCE SERIES #6:

SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE, AMPLIFYING VOICES: RESPONSES IN PRACTICE

Civic space is under increasing pressure worldwide. Across regions, governments are introducing political, economic, social, legal, administrative and digital measures that restrict participation, limit access to funding, and weaken independent voices. Private sector actors, including multinationals, are also shaping civic space in ways that can constrain civic action, participation, and freedom of expression.

At the same time, civic actors continue to adapt, forming new alliances, using digital tools, and mobilizing through

both formal and informal channels. Youth led movements, in particular, are reshaping how participation takes place.

Through its initiatives, Helvetas supports these evolving civic space dynamics. We work with civic actors and public institutions at different levels of government to sustain genuine participation, strengthen accountability and transparency, and foster inclusive and resilient governance.



INTRODUCTION

From fragile democracies to protracted crises, the shrinking of civic space has become a salient feature of many contexts. Of the 35 countries where Helvetas operates, at least 26 are affected by these dynamics. Governments across regions increasingly rely on restrictive legislation, administrative pressure, and digital surveillance to control dissent and limit open dialogue and civic engagement, often under the guise of national security, public order, or moral values. At the same time, private sector actors, including multinational corporations, also shape civic space through their policies, or practices, for example through content moderation policies, control over digital platforms, and influence over access to information and communication channels.

In contexts marked by political centralization and personalized power, civic engagement is frequently recast as a challenge to authority rather than a legitimate contribution to public life.

These pressures are compounded by humanitarian crises and economic instability, which weaken citizens' capacity to organize and advocate for their rights, while accelerating the erosion of trust between citizens and institutions. At the same time, civic actors continue to adapt. Social movements, journalists, and human rights defenders draw on solidarity networks, digital tools, and transnational partnerships to mobilize support and document abuses, even as these same spaces are increasingly monitored and manipulated. Donors and private funders, meanwhile, face difficulties in maintaining flexible and politically attuned support, as civil society organizations are increasingly restricted in their ability to access foreign funding, whether from foundations, governments, or private sources, or domestic funding from private donors or constituencies. Concerns over political repercussions can make some donors hesitant to support more vocal or politically engaged civic actors and movements.

A notable counter dynamic is the political mobilization of younger generations. In many contexts, Generation Z – or Gen-Z for short - is challenging entrenched governance failures such as corruption, patronage networks, opacity in the management of public funds and lack of accountability. They are demanding greater transparency, public integrity, inclusion, and public participation. Harnessing this momentum, however, requires overcoming fragmentation within civil society and bridging generational and organizational divides. Building coalitions across civil society, media, private sector, and other actors remains critical to sustaining civic engagement under pressure.

This publication explores how civic actors and development partners are responding to these dynamics in practice. It examines emerging strategies to navigate and contest shrinking civic space, with particular attention to

collaboration with youth-led movements and Helvetas's country experiences in Nepal and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).

WHAT IS CIVIC SPACE?

Civic space refers to the environment, both physical and digital, in which civil society actors operate and engage in public life. This includes formal and informal groups, such as grassroots movements or youth groups (e.g. student groups), community-based organizations (e.g. local associations), national and international NGOs (e.g. development organizations), and social movements (protest or reform movements) operating in both urban and rural contexts. These actors play a counterbalancing role in strengthening democracy and good governance by mobilizing communities and engaging in advocacy and policy dialogue to influence decision-making at different levels of government. For civil society to fulfil this role effectively, it requires sufficient space to operate, organize, speak out, build networks, and engage with decision-makers.

This space can take different forms:

- **Physical space**, where people can meet, demonstrate, or organize.
- **Legal, institutional, and political space**, which determines whether organizations can register, access information, or advocate. It creates opportunities for actors to engage in democratic governance through their voices and votes
- **Financial space**, including access to domestic or international funding.
- **Digital space**, where people are engaged in online activism, social media engagement, digital campaigns, independent media, and building virtual communities
- **Social and cultural space**, where informal networks, social expressions, and spaces where identities and collective interests are articulated

Shrinking civic space describes a process whereby one or more of these dimensions are progressively restricted, limiting the ability of civic actors to function autonomously and safely. Importantly, this shrinking can be highly visible, but it can also occur gradually and in less obvious ways, making it harder to detect and respond to.

The Global Picture

Globally, civic space is under pressure, with the majority of the world's population now living in countries where civic freedoms are restricted. In most countries where Helvetas operates, civic space is classified¹ as *obstructed* or *repressed*, and in some cases as *closed*. In South Asia, for example, Nepal is currently classified as obstructed – making it, together with Bhutan, one of the countries with the most open civic space in the region. Most other countries, including India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, are considered repressed, while Myanmar is

classified as closed. In Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Hungary, and Ukraine fall into the obstructed category, while other states in the region are considered narrowed or even open. While such classifications can be debated and do not capture all nuances, they provide an important reference point for understanding broader trends.

How Civic Space Shrinks

Shrinking civic space is the result of a combination of legal, administrative, financial political, and social measures that gradually reduce the room for manoeuvre available to civil society.

One of the most common strategies used by governments is the introduction of **discriminatory legislation**. This includes laws that label civil society organizations as “foreign agents”, restrict their activities, or place them under heightened state control. Such legislation has been introduced in several countries, often inspired by the Russian “foreign agent” law adopted in 2012, and has since spread more globally.

Closely linked to this is the use of **excessive bureaucracy** as a tool of control. New legal frameworks often come with onerous reporting requirements related to finances, activities, or organizational structures. These obligations consume time and resources, keeping critical actors occupied with compliance while subjecting them to constant scrutiny. Governments also frequently change requirements, creating uncertainty, and increasing the risk of unintentional non-compliance.

Another key dimension is the restriction of access to funding. In many countries, civil society organizations face growing barriers to receiving foreign funding, whether from bilateral donors, foundations, or international NGOs. At the same time, domestic funding opportunities for civil society activities are often limited or non-existent and decrease as a result of hostile government rhetoric against CSOs. As a result, many organizations struggle to sustain their work financially.

Shrinking civic space is also reinforced through **intimidation and harassment**. This can include digital surveillance, online harassment, smear campaigns, the spread of disinformation, and direct threats against activists, organizations, or even their families, as well as tactics such as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)², increasingly used by private companies against CSOs. Such practices create an atmosphere of fear and mistrust that discourages civic engagement and self-censorship, but also discourages people to donate to CSOs. Recent cases in countries such as Serbia show how pressure on activists can extend beyond individuals themselves to their wider social and professional networks, as well as into their private and family lives through surveillance and intimidation.³

In addition, civic actors are increasingly **excluded from policy dialogue and decision-making spaces**. This may take the form of restricted access to information, exclusion from public consultations, or the capture of participatory forums by government-organized NGOs that crowd out independent voices. Finally, shrinking civic space often goes hand in hand with the weakening of independent media, through defunding, intimidation, or legal pressure, further limiting public debate and accountability.

The shrinking of civic space has significant consequences:

- **It restricts participation and weakens accountability.**

Shrinking civic space limits access to decision making spaces, weakens policy dialogue, and reduces access to information. As a result, governance processes become less inclusive, and accountability mechanisms weaken, reducing checks on political power and undermining democratic processes.

- **It fragments and depoliticizes civil society.**

Legal constraints, funding restrictions, and risks of intimidation discourage engagement and encourage self censorship. Many actors reduce advocacy activities, shift to less sensitive areas, or disengage altogether.

- **It increases inequality within civic space.**

Certain actors retain or expand their influence, while independent and grassroots civil society actors face increasing barriers, particularly in accessing funding. This results in a distorted civic landscape in which critical voices are increasingly marginalized.

- **It reshapes development practice and reinforces the relevance of localization.**

Localization emphasizes shifting resources, roles, and decision making towards local actors—particularly civil society organizations and grassroots movements—enabling them to act as autonomous resilient development actors in their own right. In Helvetas’ approach to locally led development, this implies fostering partnerships that promote local ownership, shared responsibilities, and the leadership of local actors.

As legal, political, and financial restrictions constrain the ability of international actors to operate directly, development cooperation shifts towards more indirect and enabling approaches. In this context, localization takes on renewed importance.

Responses and Emerging Forms of Resistance

Despite these restrictive trends, shrinking civic space has not gone unchallenged. Across regions, civil society actors have developed a range of strategies to resist

repression, protect hard-won spaces, and, in some cases, reopen or even expand opportunities for civic action. Some of these responses include **networking and solidarity-building**, often beyond traditional boundaries. Civil society organizations increasingly reach out to new allies, including informal movements, private sector actors, academia, and international partners. Cross-sectoral and transnational networks help to build resilience, visibility, and collective power.

At the same time, shrinking civic space can also accelerate how civic action itself is organised and expressed. Mobilization is increasingly shaped by more fluid, decentralized forms of engagement that operate across both digital and physical spaces. While street protests remain a longstanding form of expression, they are increasingly intertwined with digital mobilization and coordinated through online networks and platforms, with younger generations in many contexts taking on a leading role in combining online coordination with physical protest.

Digital platforms not only enable rapid coordination, visibility, and participation at scale, but can also evolve into central arenas of civic life, where demands are articulated, debated, and collectively organized, as we will see in the Nepal case.

In parallel, **independent and non-traditional investigative research**, carried out not only by established media outlets but also by smaller groups, researchers, and activist collectives. These efforts generate evidence that can support advocacy and counter official narratives.

The Role of International Development Actors

International NGOs and development organizations, including Helvetas, can strengthen localization by channeling financial support to local civil society actors and grassroots movements; acting as knowledge brokers who connect and translate between governments, civil society, media, academia, and the private sector; and supporting dedicated programs aimed at strengthening civic actors as resilient development actors in their own right.

Helvetas has engaged in this work in multiple ways, notably through financial support to civil society actors, capacity development and mentoring, participatory engagement processes with citizens, and the facilitation of partnerships and networks across sectors in countries including Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar, as well as through regional networks in the Western Balkans and beyond.

At the same time, there remains much to learn from concrete country experiences. The following case studies examine how these dynamics play out in practice, in Nepal and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

NEPAL: YOUTH MOBILIZATION AND

CIVIC SPACE UNDER PRESSURE

The youth-led protests in Nepal in October 2025 illustrate how restrictions on civic space can trigger new forms of political participation and mobilization to contest the shrinking of civic space.

Driven largely by Gen Z, the movement emerged in response to growing constraints on expression and long standing frustrations with corruption, exclusion, and political patronage.

In September 2025, the Government of Nepal imposed a ban on 26 social media platforms. While framed as a regulatory and security measure, the ban was widely perceived by young people as an attempt to silence dissent and limit public debate.

The ban intersected with deeper structural grievances. High youth unemployment, entrenched elite politics, limited accountability, and declining trust in political parties had already fuelled disengagement from formal institutions. Digital spaces have become one of the few accessible arenas for expression, mobilization, and scrutiny of power. When access to these platforms was curtailed, mobilization shifted rather than disappeared.

Youth activists rapidly reorganized through alternative digital platforms such as Discord and encrypted messaging applications. Online organizing soon translated into nationwide street protests, targeting symbols of political authority, the social spaces linked to them, reflecting frustration with nepotism and entrenched privilege, and drawing attention to the disconnect between political leadership and younger generations.

Digital platforms were used not only to mobilize but also to deliberate, debate, and collectively articulate political demands. Large online assemblies and symbolic voting exercises reflected calls for transparency, merit-based leadership, and more participatory forms of governance. Social media thus evolved beyond a communication channel into an alternative civic arena.

The movement had tangible political effects, contributing to the collapse of the governing coalition at federal level and increasing pressure on provincial and local governments. In many municipalities, demands for youth inclusion, transparency, and responsiveness became more visible.

At the same time, the movement faces risks. Its decentralized nature has led to fragmentation, with multiple groups acting under the “Gen Z” label. As experienced in other contexts, youth movements can potentially be instrumentalized co-opted by different actors to serve

political, economic or even international interests, which would lead to the misuse of the movement's identity.

Helvetas Nepal operates in this evolving context through its **governance and civic space portfolio**, supporting efforts to strengthen inclusive and accountable public institutions while expanding opportunities for public engagement.

The program has increasingly focused on bridging formal institutions with emerging forms of civic action. Particular attention has been given to strengthening digital channels for participation, supporting youth engagement, and ensuring that governance interventions remain responsive to changing citizen engagement.

A central entry point is the Provincial Support Program (PSP), which works at the intersection of governance reform, civic space, and digitalization in the context of Nepal's federal transition. The program supports provincial institutions in improving transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement, most notably through digital tools that make government performance and decision-making more accessible, while also strengthening public financial management capacities. The mechanisms strengthened by the program aim at creating an enabling environment for citizens to engage with provincial authorities in a more structured and sustained way. In parallel, the program places strong emphasis on youth engagement, by expanding access to information, enabling interaction between young citizens and provincial authorities, and strengthening systems to be

more responsive to emerging youth demands, bridging the gap between formal institutions and new forms of civic action. The program also supports public financial management reforms, including improving planning and budgeting processes, strengthening financial accountability frameworks, strengthening the parliament's role in holding the executive accountable, and creating tools for better citizen-parliament engagement.

Beyond dedicated governance projects, other sectoral initiatives, such as SheLeads, SaMi, ReMi, ENSSURE, and TTDP, contribute to civic space by embedding inclusive practices into government systems. These efforts demonstrate how governance and civic engagement can be integrated across sectors, from migration and skills development to tourism and women's empowerment.

The Nepal case highlights the importance of adapting development practice to evolving forms of civic action that operate at the intersection of online and physical spaces with focusing on youth engagement. The case underscores the need to engage with emerging, non-traditional civic actors while simultaneously strengthening formal institutions. In a context where civic space is both constrained and contested, digital tools, youth engagement, and institutional reforms offer critical entry points for sustaining participation, accountability, and trust.



Youth Panel Formation in Nepal, as part of the ProYEL project.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA:

REBUILDING CIVIC SPACE FROM SILENCE

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), decades after the end of the war, civic engagement remains deeply constrained by structural complexity, ethno-political divisions, weak rule of law, and declining trust in institutions. Restrictions often operate through disengagement and gradual withdrawal from public life.

Since the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been governed under an unusually complex institutional arrangement. The country is composed of two entities—the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska—alongside the Brčko District, each with its own governance and regulatory frameworks. Further layers of cantonal and municipal authority, particularly within the Federation of BiH entity, have produced a highly decentralized state system, with challenges in coordination.

This institutional complexity is reinforced by persistent ethno-nationalist politics, which continue to dominate public discourse and political competition. Ethnic narratives are frequently used to block reform, undermine cross community cooperation, and discredit independent civic actors. Combined with weak enforcement of the rule of law, these conditions create a difficult operating environment for civil society organizations, particularly those engaged in accountability, governance, or rights-based work.

In recent years, the pressure on civil society has increased. A significant moment came in early 2025, when the National Assembly of Republika Srpska adopted a so called “foreign agents” law, requiring civil society organizations receiving foreign funding to register in a special public registry. Although the law was later annulled by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, its introduction had an immediate chilling effect. Civil society actors reported heightened feelings of intimidation, stigmatization, and uncertainty, reinforcing existing patterns of self-censorship.

These pressures were compounded by a reduction in donor engagement, following, among other factors, the withdrawal or scaling back of major international funding streams. The result has been a fragmented and under-resourced civic landscape, in which many organizations struggle to sustain long term engagement, build constituencies, or coordinate advocacy efforts. For many citizens, participation in public debate is perceived as ineffective or risky, leading to withdrawal rather than resistance.

The PRAGG Project: Re-engaging Citizens and Civil Society

Against this backdrop, Helvetas, together with a consortium of international and local partners, launched the *ProActive Citizens (PRAGG)* project in 2021, with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. The project is implemented by Helvetas and NIRAS, in partnership with two BiH organizations: the Centres for Civic Initiatives (CCI) and the Institute for Youth Development (KULT).



Civil Society Consultations were held in Sarajevo as part of the PRAGG project, bringing together representatives of civil society organizations from across BiH with the aim of openly exchanging experiences about the environment in which they operate.



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At the PRAGG Assembly, civil society organizations and authorities met to strengthen cooperation and build institutional ties.

An initial Political Economy and Power Analysis (PEPA) highlighted not only legal and political constraints, but also low levels of civic confidence, weak organizational capacity, and limited public awareness of participation opportunities.. While policy level advocacy remains central, PRAGG emphasizes rebuilding civic agency from the ground up, recognizing that empowered communities create the momentum needed for advocacy to resonate and take hold

The project focuses on raising awareness, strengthening civil society capacity, and fostering cooperation among civic actors and citizens. Its approach combines multiple grant instruments—ranging from local action grants to strategic partnership and flexible proactive funds—with a strong capacity building component. Civil society organizations and civil society actors receive tailored mentoring, practical tools, and continuous support from local partner organizations, responding directly to their needs and challenges.

Parallel to this, PRAGG invests in citizen engagement through workshops, public events, and participatory initiatives aimed at increasing awareness, confidence, and willingness to engage with authorities at multiple levels. The emphasis is on building trust, encouraging collective action, and demonstrating that engagement, even at a local level, can produce results.

Change in Bosnia and Herzegovina is neither rapid nor linear, and PRAGG's experience confirms that rebuilding civic space in such contexts requires time. Nonetheless, early signs are encouraging. Civil society actors that initially perceived themselves as powerless have begun to initiate advocacy actions independently, engage authori-

ties beyond project supported activities, and form alliances with other actors.

In June 2025, the Council of Ministers adopted a new national strategy for civil society development and an enabling environment. While implementation remains uncertain, the strategy explicitly addresses participation, cooperation with public institutions, and conditions for civic action—creating potential entry points for engagement.

Within this evolving landscape, PRAGG positions Helvetas as a knowledge broker and connector, supporting partnerships across civil society, media, private sector, academia, and institutions. By strengthening the capacities, networks, and agency of local civil society actors and enabling them to engage with authorities and citizens, the project contributes to locally led development processes. The project's longer term ambition is to contribute to localization and sustainable civic engagement beyond its own lifecycle.

The Bosnia and Herzegovina case illustrates that shrinking civic space does not always provoke visible resistance. In contexts marked by fragmentation, fear, and fatigue, rebuilding civic space may begin by restoring confidence, agency, and belief in the value of participation, which is essential for ensuring long term engagement and enabling meaningful scale-up beyond the project's lifetime.

CONCLUSION: WORKING FOR CIVIC SPACE

Civic space is under growing pressure worldwide. Across political systems and regions, restrictions on association, expression, and participation are reshaping how citizens engage with power and how development actors can work. Yet, as this paper shows, shrinking civic space does not lead to uniform outcomes. Different response patterns coexist: while it can provoke visible mobilization, it can also manifest as withdrawal and fragmentation.

In Nepal, restrictions triggered rapid, youth led mobilization that reopened debates on accountability and representation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, civic space has contracted more quietly, shaped by institutional complexity, political stagnation, and fear, requiring long term efforts to rebuild confidence, agency, and collective action from the local level up. Both cases demonstrate that civic space is something that is continuously contested and reclaimed.

Several common lessons emerge. First, engaging with civic space in restrictive environments **requires moving beyond a narrow focus towards informal movements, youth groups, digital collectives, community initiatives, and diaspora networks.**

Second, **collaboration matters where civic actors are isolated.** Alliances that connect civil society organizations with media, academia, private actors, and institutions can help reduce vulnerability, amplify voices, and open meaningful spaces for dialogue. In such contexts, the role of international actors is often about convening, connecting, and enabling others to act and brokering knowledge and facilitating exchange.

Third, **even under shrinking conditions, existing policies, institutional mandates, and international frameworks continue to offer entry points.** Laws on participation, decentralization frameworks, sectoral policies, and human rights mechanisms may be inconsistently applied, but they remain important leverage points for incremental change when combined with political economy analysis and conflict sensitive approaches.

Finally, **Gen-Z mobilization introduces a critical dynamic.** Youth led movements challenge traditional modes of engagement, questioning not only who participates but how participation is organized. Their energy, digital fluency, and moral claims create opportunities to expand civic space, but also pose challenges related to fragmentation, surveillance, and co-optation. Supporting this momentum requires development actors to adapt; resist instrumentalization and accept a degree of uncertainty.

Taken together, these experiences suggest that engaging in reclaiming, protecting, and expanding civic space is about sustaining agency under pressure. It is about protecting remaining space, reopening channels of participation where possible, and enabling civic actors to adapt without losing legitimacy or autonomy. For development actors, this means working politically and investing in relationships and trust.

¹ The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), one of the most widely used references for assessing civic space globally, distinguishes between five categories of civic space: open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed, and closed. This is maintained by [CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation](#), a global civil society alliance that has monitored civic space trends across countries for many years.

² Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are abusive legal actions intended to intimidate, silence, or penalize individuals and organizations for exercising their right to freedom of expression and participation in public debate on matters of public interest. (Council of Europe)

³ Amnesty International, A Digital Prison: Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia (London: Amnesty International, 2024).

