



Understanding the Youth-Led Civil Society Landscape in Bangladesh

Structures, Challenges, and Potentials

1. Background

Youth-led civil society in Bangladesh deserves greater recognition as a vital part of the overall civic landscape. Youth citizenship is essential to revitalize and expand civil society, promote diversity, and ensure that youth are recognized as a vital stakeholder in society. Although youth have historically played key roles in political and social movements, they remain closely connected to mainstream political parties, and their organizations are often weakly structured (Ghosh, 2023; Jackman, 2021).

The July 2024 Uprising marked a turning point, leading to the formation of a youth-led political party and new civil society platforms. Earlier movements, such as the quota reform of 2018, the anti-VAT movement of 2015, and the road safety protests of 2018, also highlighted youth activism. Despite these contributions, youth-led organizations continue to face exclusion, tokenism, and marginalization by government, mainstream civil

society organizations (CSOs), and political actors, leaving their potential unfulfilled in a fragile civic space.

A BIGD study, “Understanding the Youth-Led Civil Society Landscape in Bangladesh: Structures, Challenges and Potentials,” sought to re-evaluate the position and potential of youth-led civil society to contribute to Bangladesh’s future.

We adopted a broad definition of youth-led organizations as both formal and informal groups that work for or with young people and are fully or partially led by youth. The study examined how young people engage in civic space, the legal and institutional structures shaping their organizations and activities, their ways of working, and the challenges they face. It also investigated the operations, opportunities, and challenges of youth-led civil society in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the youth-led July 2024 Uprising.

Mixed-Methods Approach

- Telephone surveys with 395 youth-led organizations
- Deep qualitative study in Dhaka, Khulna, and Chattogram with a special focus on diversity and marginalization, which included:
 - in-depth interviews with 10 organizations,
 - six focus group discussions involving 60 participants, and
 - 16 key informant interviews.

2. Key Findings

2.1. From Informal Beginnings to Formal Structures

Most youth-led organizations begin informally as peer networks, neighbourhood clubs, or temporary groups formed in response to specific crises. Over time, some evolve into formal structures to sustain their activities, access resources, and gain legitimacy, often through government registration. However, some organizations continue to operate locally without pursuing formal registration. Those who do feel the need for a legal identity, which many believe confers legitimacy, typically register under the Department of Youth Development, the Department of Social Services, and, less commonly, under the office of the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms or the NGO Affairs Bureau.

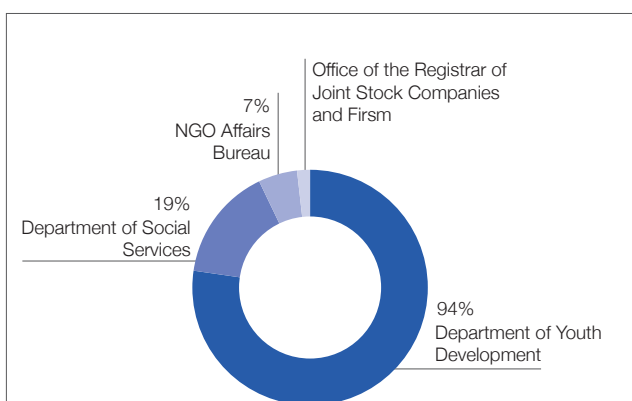


Figure 1. Under which government authority is the institution/organization registered?

2.2. Governance of Youth-Led CSOs

Youth-led CSOs studied are governed by formal structures, with most managed by executive boards or committees of young people. It is claimed

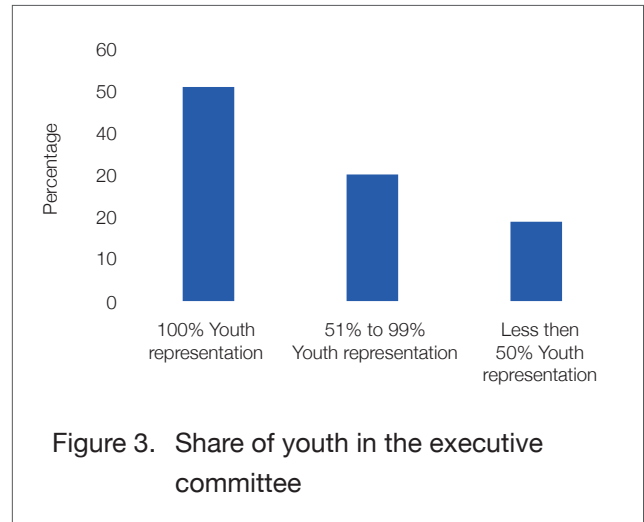
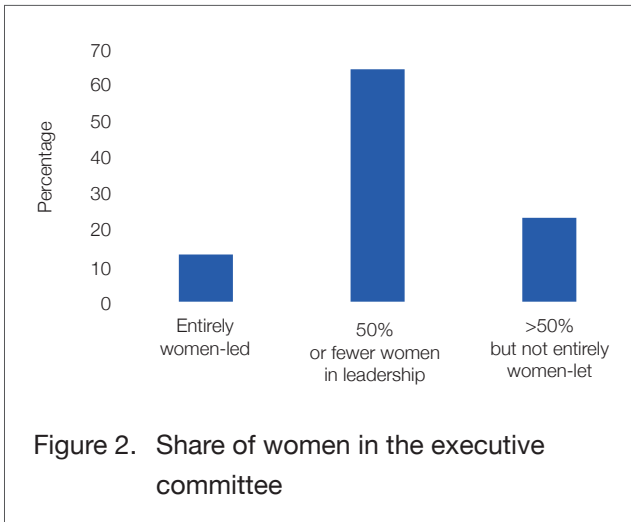
that leadership is democratic, decision-making is decentralized, and staffing relies heavily on volunteers. Local or marginalized organizations often operate from modest offices, while national-level groups typically have larger facilities for training, meetings, and coordination. Local CSOs focus on immediate community needs, whereas national organizations operate at a larger scale and often support smaller initiatives. Funding usually comes from member contributions, local donations, crowdfunding, or donors.

Although some organizations show balanced gender representation, leadership remains male-dominated. In the leadership of youth organizations, the presence of youth and women was noticed; however, women's participation was much more limited. Only 14% of organizations were entirely run by women (See Figure 2), while more than 64% had 50% or fewer women in their governing bodies. Youth have a dominant presence in committees: about 80% of organizations have at least half or more youth representation on their executive committees; among them, about 51% have an executive body run entirely by youths (See Figure 3).

2.3. Areas of Work

Youth CSOs typically engage in multiple sectors rather than concentrating on a single issue. Key focus areas include economic development and humanitarian aid, with young people actively leading disaster response, relief distribution, volunteer mobilization, and coordination with local authorities.

In addition, many organizations prioritize human and legal rights advocacy, climate change action, awareness-raising, and the protection of marginalized groups. Depending on the socio-political context,



some issues may be highlighted while others are downplayed (See Figure 4).

2.4. Ways of Working: Voluntarism, Mentorship, and Engagement

Youth CSOs operate through voluntarism, mentorship, and strategic engagement with government and political actors, tailoring approaches to regional and community contexts. Activities combine service delivery, advocacy, and capacity building. Voluntarism, relied upon by 97% of the organizations surveyed, ensures grassroots ownership and flexibility but presents challenges in terms of continuity and sustainability. Mentorship by civil society actors, although limited, primarily focuses on technical skills and project

implementation, while broader guidance on leadership, governance, sustainability, and finances remains scarce. When available, it provides crucial support to emerging youth groups, although there are risks of youth activists and organizations being dominated by older, more established actors. Engagement with government agencies allows access to training and small grants but is constrained by bureaucracy, political vetting, and favouritism. Political party engagement can expand influence but risks tokenism and threatens independence.

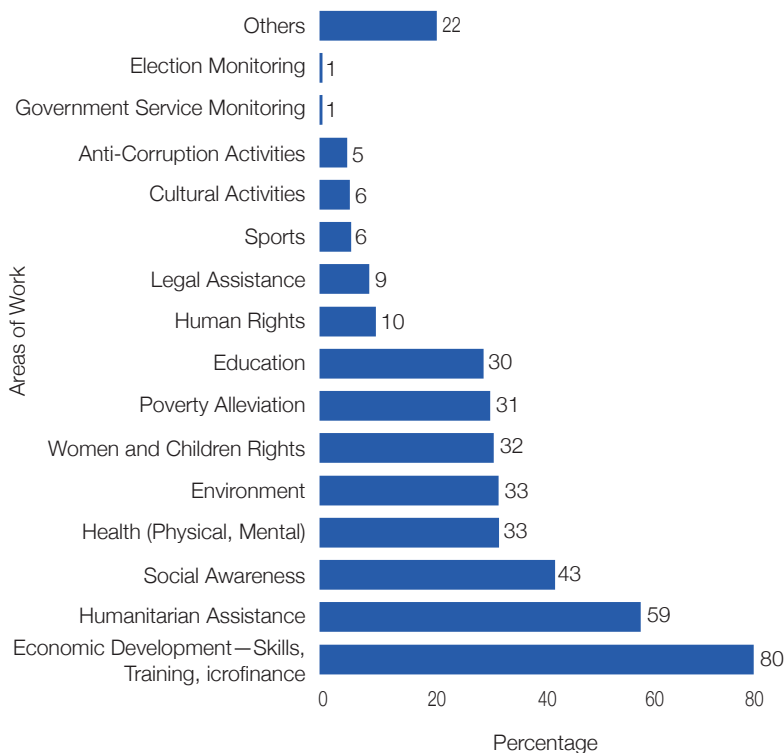


Figure 4. Main activities or areas of work

2.5. Challenges

Youth CSOs face a range of structural and operational challenges, including bureaucracy, corruption, limited civic space, and complex registration processes. Continuity is further weakened by volunteer turnover, generational tensions, and internal power struggles. Organizations addressing sensitive issues such as gender, queer, or indigenous rights encounter social prejudice, political marginalization, and surveillance. These challenges are intensified by political uncertainty and donor withdrawal. Trust is critical but often fragile. Scepticism from communities and leaders, frequently driven by political bias or misinformation, reduces support, while internal concerns

over misuse of influence can erode cohesion. Strengthening trust requires transparency, consistent engagement, and a demonstrated commitment to community needs. There is also a risk of tokenistic involvement of youth, excluding them from substantive participation and decision-making.

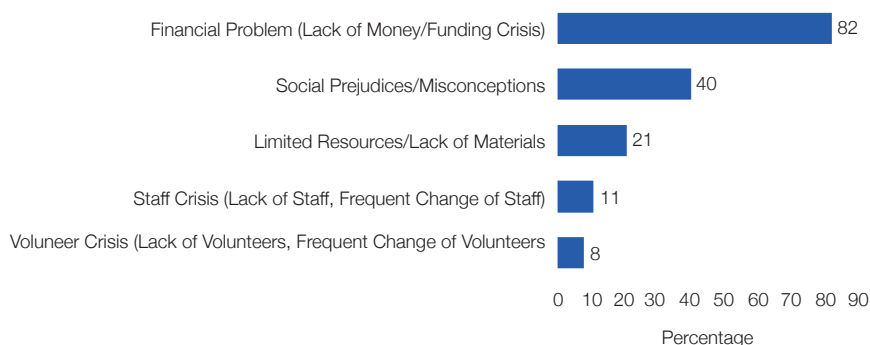


Figure 5. Challenges faced by youth organizations

Youth-Led Civil Society in Post-July 24, 2025

Opportunities and Challenges

The July 2024 Uprising created opportunities for youth to be recognized as independent political actors, included in dialogues, and consulted by government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It also strengthened advocacy for Adivasi, queer, and disability rights, fostering greater acceptance, credibility, and hope for inclusive, non-discriminatory reforms. Marginalized groups such as Adivasi and gender diverse youth were active, gaining visibility and platforms to voice concerns.

There were, however, various constraints and disappointments. Youth-led civil society organizations in Bangladesh face shrinking civic space, political marginalization, and ethnic discrimination that limit their independence and effectiveness. Even post-July 2024, they remain under surveillance, administrative control, and political hostility, especially for queer rights work. Volunteers continue to face pressure to align with political parties, while project allocations remain biased. Digital monitoring and online attacks threaten privacy and safety, forcing discreet operations. Security risks, fear of co-optation, and community mistrust further undermine their sustainability, inclusivity, and capacity to advance rights-based agendas.

Youth organizations also face political uncertainty due to the absence of an elected government, insecurity, and socio-economic instability. Donor funding, crowdfunding, and corporate sponsorship have declined, while public representatives remain in hiding. Associations with the previous Awami League government or local politicians fuel backlash, trolling, and accusations. Overall, instability, donor withdrawal, and community distrust undermine youth organizations' credibility, resources, and effectiveness.

Hopes raised by the July Uprising and interim government faded as commitments to inclusiveness weakened, quotas were abolished, and protests suppressed. CSOs working on Adivasi rights continue to face politicization, ethnic tensions, military surveillance, and state restrictions that suppress activism, misrepresent demands, and delegitimize movements.

Another group particularly affected is youth-led hijra and trans organizations, which face harassment, stigma, and religious conservatism, compounded by media misrepresentation, digital threats, and economic exclusion. Post-July 2024, civic space for their demands shrank, acceptance regressed, and transphobia intensified.

3. Recommendations

3.1. For Youth Organizations

3.1.1. Strengthen Networking and Alliance-Building at Local, Regional, and National Levels

Networking and alliances can not only expand reach but also create a stronger collective voice to influence decision-making. Partnerships, as seen in initiatives like Mastul and Bidyanondo, demonstrate how joint campaigns and pooled resources can multiply impact. Networks also create opportunities for mentorship, peer learning, and greater visibility, enabling youth

organizations to engage more effectively with government bodies, donors, and civil society.

3.1.2. Foster Solidarity Around Shared Causes

Many youth organizations today work on diverse issues and face isolation in promoting their respective causes. Through greater inter-networking and communication, they can support one another's campaigns, foster solidarity, build resilience, protect smaller organizations from isolation, and ensure that youth voices are heard in broader civic debates.

3.1.3. Explore Alternative Funding Models

To sustain their activities, youth organizations need to diversify funding streams and experiment with innovative approaches. Community contributions, small-scale social enterprises, and collaborative funding platforms such as SPARK show promise. These models not only generate resources but also increase independence, reducing reliance on donor agendas. Building relationships with local businesses, diaspora networks, and volunteer-driven contributions can further support self-sufficiency.

3.1.4. Build Credibility and Trust Through Transparency and Accountability

To build credibility and trust, youth organizations should document activities, practice participatory decision-making, maintain financial transparency, and communicate regularly with stakeholders. Demonstrating their commitment to transparency and accountability will not only help secure community support but also legitimacy in the eyes of government and partners.

3.2. For Government

3.2.1. Simplify the Registration Process

Youth-led CSOs struggle to meet the requirements set by various registration authorities. The processes are opaque, involve multiple layers of bureaucracy, and require extensive documentation. In addition, frequent turnovers of officials and informal payments are often demanded to expedite procedures. Registration processes should be simplified, made time-bound, and guided by clear requirements, limited to essential documents. One-stop services can be provided by local-level offices, and applications should be made available online. Reasons for rejection should also be provided.

3.2.2. Create District-Wise Databases of Youth Organizations to Facilitate Coordination

Youth CSOs need to strengthen coordination among themselves to align their activities and strategies. Local authorities should also engage more actively with youth organizations to ensure that young people's voices are reflected in decision-making. To support this, local government authorities should create local databases of all youth organizations operating within a particular

ward or union, irrespective of their legal status or type of registration. Authorities can also encourage self-registration of all voluntary youth groups in the locality.

3.2.3. Minimize Interference and Prioritize Grievance Redress

Youth organizations face monitoring and surveillance by security agencies, which often amount to harassment and create fear. Greater local government involvement in monitoring and verification could help minimize such interference. At the same time, a proper grievance redress mechanism should be established for youth CSOs, with simplified complaint procedures and timely, appropriate responses. Youth organizations and activists in the Chattogram Hill Tracts should be allowed to operate under the same rules and regulations as organizations in other parts of the country.

3.2.4. Promote Youth Engagement in Local Government Platforms

To create an enabling environment for youth engagement in policy, youth participation in local forums should be promoted and institutionalized. Every local government body has standing committees that could include youth representatives to raise and discuss youth-related issues. Existing social accountability platforms, such as ward shabhas (ward meetings) and open budget meetings, should also ensure youth representation.

3.2.5. Provide Capacity Development to Youth Organizations

Youth organizations, especially those in remote parts of the country, face significant skill gaps in areas critical to their functioning and sustainability. The government should take an active role by providing training and resource materials that equip youth organizations to overcome institutional challenges. Regular workshops on leadership, registration, fundraising, organizational management, writing, and monitoring should be provided to strengthen their effectiveness.

3.2.6. Recognize and Promote Volunteerism

The strength of youth organizations is volunteerism, which has historically been encouraged by both state and non-state actors through various initiatives. It is recommended that the government and educational

authorities take active steps to embed the concepts of citizenship, leadership, and volunteerism into the formal education curriculum and co-curricular activities from early ages. Simultaneously, the government should establish formal mechanisms to recognize voluntary contributions and experience in volunteering within the education and employment sectors, ensuring that such efforts are acknowledged and rewarded in academic achievements and career advancement.

3.3. For Larger NGOs/CSOs

3.3.1. Create Opportunities to Involve Youth Organizations and Volunteers Through Co-Creation

The July 2024 movement demonstrated the potential of youth-led mobilization. Larger NGOs and CSOs should create genuine spaces for co-creation with youth-led organizations by involving them from the design stage of programs to their implementation and evaluation, rather than engaging only as beneficiaries or short-term volunteers. This will strengthen ownership but also bring in new energy, networks, and ground-level perspectives.

3.3.2. Provide Capacity-Building and Mentorship to Youth Organizations

Mentoring for leadership and organizational development, training in proposal writing, digital security, and advocacy can help youth groups develop and grow. Examples from initiatives where established CSOs supported grassroots youth networks show that such investment not only strengthens smaller organizations but also expands the reach and credibility of larger NGOs in communities where youth have strong social capital.

3.3.3. Practice Reciprocity and Recognize Youth Groups as Equal Partners

Alongside inviting youth into their spaces, established NGOs must also show up for youth-led initiatives—attending their events, amplifying their campaigns, and publicly recognizing their contributions. This two-way solidarity and respectful dialogue will build trust and legitimacy, reducing the perception that youth groups are subordinate actors.

3.4. For Development Partners

3.4.1. Develop and Strengthen Trust-Based Philanthropy for Youth Organizations

Youth organizations operating on a limited scale should not be subject to the same screening and application procedures as more established organizations. Decisions to support should be based on an assessment of their intentions and should be trust-based, with development partners providing the support necessary for these organizations to meet their requirements. Special allocations may be made for youth organizations for long-term and institutional support. There should be a focus on long-term funding for youth-led CSOs instead of only support for short-term pilots.

References

<https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/publications/understanding-the-youth-led-civil-society-landscape-in-bangladesh-structures-challenges-and-potentials/>