

Briefing

Urban; Communication

Key findings and recommendations from IIED and partner research and action for city and federal officials, development partners and civil society



Issue date
September 2026

Key points

Training young people in using civic media to engage deeply and collaboratively with their urban spaces can help them actualise their personal agency and incubate collective civic action.

Collective action in the everyday social and cultural sphere prepares young people for participating in formal governance processes.

Safe, enjoyable and action-oriented spaces for young people to associate, facilitated by informed and experienced practitioners, can help young people in marginalised contexts to develop a lived sense of citizenship.

Facilitating spaces of association for youth citizenship in India

This briefing shows how young people can be helped to grow into a lived sense of citizenship through informed and empathetic facilitation. For this, their collective engagement with their own communities and urban contexts is key. Training in the use of civic media is an effective way of getting young people to explore and challenge the social dynamics behind ordinary urban problems, as well as their own worldviews and action capacities. It can help them achieve personal transformation as a first step towards changing their urban worlds for the better. The resulting spaces created for young people to associate can play a crucial role in the success of such efforts.

Young people are marginalised in civic and social life in India, as elsewhere. Yet they are often publicly exhorted to contribute more actively to social life. Policy discourse focuses on their economic potential and on formal mechanisms for youth participation, with limited attention given to local initiatives for strengthening youth agency and civic engagement. How young people can be helped to develop a deeply lived sense of citizenship is therefore an important concern.

This briefing presents key lessons for addressing this gap. It is based on findings from action research in the city of Bhuj, conducted by Hunnarshala Foundation, a local nongovernmental organisation (NGO) experienced in participatory housing and planning, and the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, as part of the project 'Neighbourhoods fit for diverse young people: civic media practices and urban claims-making in Nepal and India' (YCIV).

Bhuj is a small, conservative city with a population of around 200,000. Located in a peripheral, semi-arid region of Gujarat in western India, Bhuj is undergoing rapid industrial development with attendant social, cultural and ecological challenges.

Most young people in Bhuj face an uncertain economic future. Their education has not trained them for aspirational jobs nor empowered them to be 'heard' in the modern but patriarchal milieu of a city that is informally segregated along caste and religious lines. Outmigration for livelihoods and higher education is thus a common aspiration and, for many, a survival strategy.

The YCIV project helped a small cohort of young people develop a stronger sense of self by deepening their engagement with their context. The findings from the project can inform youth citizenship training by NGOs, extension initiatives of universities and capacity building efforts by local governments. Each finding is supported by details to help readers translate it appropriately for their context.

Civic media training can enable self-actualisation and collectivisation

Training young people in using civic media to engage deeply and collaboratively with their urban communities and contexts can help them actualise their personal agency and incubate collective civic action.

From November 2024, a diverse group of young people from Bhuj and nearby villages met every Sunday with Hunnarshala Foundation facilitators to probe, learn and reimagine their urban reality. The first phase of meetings involved workshops that combined training and hands-on learning about gender, constitutional rights and spatial mapping. Each workshop incorporated multiple forms of media — storytelling, photography and participatory video making — that revealed distinct collective and individual perspectives. But it was participatory video making, as an accessible mode of community filmmaking, that resonated particularly with participants.

Under the guidance of experienced filmmakers and others from the media, social sector and academia, the Sunday gatherings resulted in short films that raised questions about the young people's relationships with self, community, neighbourhood and the city. Twenty of these films were screened at the Asanjo Film Festival in December 2025, which the youth group organised in collaboration with Hunnarshala Foundation. They were later shown in local communities and at other venues in India and other countries.

The young filmmakers had come into the project with little knowledge of their city or confidence in speaking their mind. A year later, they had collectively organised a major event, and their films captured the complexities, contradictions and contestations of the city and their life in it.

Facilitated associational spaces help build lived citizenship

Safe, enjoyable and action-oriented associational spaces — places where individuals and groups can meet around shared interests — that are facilitated by informed and experienced practitioners can help young people in marginalised contexts to develop a genuinely lived sense of citizenship.

Through its various activities, the YCIV project produced a new space of association for young people, as a middle ground between family, formal institutions and informal community settings. Today, this space offers them an open, safe, flexible and collectively regulated environment for meeting, learning and working together with others.

The space allows self-exploration outside the constraints of family, community and formal

institutions, often by directly engaging with issues in the city. It is a fun space that also allows young people to negotiate and articulate multiple fluid aspects of selfhood. Here, young people can confront their own biases, engage one another across deep chasms of difference, develop interpersonal trust and form friendships. It is the crucible in which an emerging youth citizenship is developing.

Facilitation has been key. Hunnarshala Foundation's reputation locally helped secure parental trust, while its deep commitment to self-actualisation and collective action led to constructive outcomes.

Collective action as a rehearsal for participating in urban governance

Collective action in the everyday social and cultural sphere prepares young people for participation in formal governance processes.

Asanjo means 'ours' in the local Kutchi language. Its choice as the name of the film festival revealed a new collective consciousness and projected a distinct group identity in the civic sphere. Trained by group work to navigate conflicts between contrary impulses of self-assertion and collective integration, participants discovered commonalities across social divides of gender, caste, religion and class. They developed new modes of leadership, built trust, negotiated their identities and fortified personal agency through everyday interactions.¹

The young people also learned the art of practising citizenship through everyday acts of participation in ward committee meetings, attending awareness-building programmes about community plantations and helping with local efforts initiated by other groups.

Eighteen Asanjo Film Festival participants are now formalising a youth-led, financially autonomous self-help group as a safe space for reflection, collaboration and peer support. Using participatory media and a youth-led newsletter, they plan to document lived experiences, amplify youth voices and connect with broader urban youth networks.

Himanshu Burté, Ashutosh Gupta and Aishwarya Gupta

Himanshu Burté, research lead, Indian Institute of Technology; Ashutosh Gupta, PhD researcher, Indian Institute of Technology; Aishwarya Gupta, workshop coordinator, Hunnarshala Foundation



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development's (IIED) mission is to build a fairer, more sustainable world, using evidence, action and influence in partnership with others.

Contact

Camilla Cocina
camila.cocina@iied.org

44 Southampton Buildings
London, WC2A 1AP
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback via: www.linkedin.com/company/iied

ISBN: 978-1-83759-230-2

This research was funded by Fondation Botnar. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of this donor.

FIND OUT MORE

This briefing has been produced as part of 'Neighbourhoods fit for diverse young people: civic media practices and urban claims-making in Nepal and India' (YCIV), an action-research project led by University of Sheffield in partnership with the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR), IIED and local partners in Nepal and India, and supported by Fondation Botnar. Find out more at www.iied.org/neighbourhoods-fit-for-diverse-young-people-civic-media-practices-urban-claims-making-nepal-india

Notes

¹ Biesta, G, Lawy, R and Kelly, N (2009) Understanding young people's citizenship learning in everyday life, *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 4(1), pp.5–24. doi:10.1177/1746197908099374.

