

GenZ Movements and CSOs in Kenya and Madagascar: Friends or Foes?

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Amid democratic backsliding, Generation Z (GenZ¹) protests have emerged as major regime challengers. Yet, social movements do not mobilize in isolation. They draw from and collaborate with a larger ecosystem of civil society organizations (CSOs). This policy brief looks at the cases of Kenya and Madagascar, where GenZ movements and CSOs initially played complementary roles. Yet, in Madagascar, the movement parted ways with CSOs quickly after the protests ended. In Kenya, collaboration prevailed, even though frictions appeared in GenZ groups. The brief concludes that social movements draw their legitimacy from acting autonomously from CSOs, the state and donors. Donor support should focus on pro-democratic CSOs who work complementarily and can translate demands into concrete reform proposals.

Known for their digital mobilization capacity as well as amorphous and leaderless structures, GenZ movements have been found hard to co-opt and suppress.² In both Kenya and Madagascar, GenZ protests have led to significant regime responses. In Kenya, opposition to the 2024 Finance Bill triggered a sustained protest movement that forced the bill's withdrawal and a cabinet reshuffle. In Madagascar, protest over chronic water and electricity shortages escalated within three weeks into the fall of President Andry Rajoelina in October 2025 and a military-led transition — the first time a GenZ-led mobilization has contributed to toppling a sitting African government.

Despite these responses, underlying grievances have so far not been addressed in both countries and activism continues beyond street protests. In Madagascar, the GenZ movement became fragmented soon after the protests were over, whereas in Kenya, GenZ activism was sustained during a much longer timeframe. While this can partially be explained by the differing political context, the policy brief argues that the relationship with organized civil society also played an important role in shaping activism. It shows that in order to understand GenZ movements and their political significance, they need to be placed in their broader civil society context, instead of being looked at in isolation. Social movements can be effective in mobilizing large crowds. However, unlike CSOs, they are much less effective when it comes to institutionalizing political demands in the aftermath of protests. To understand the differing trajectories of pro-democratic civic participation in

¹ Those born between 1995 and 2010 are defined to belong to Generation Z. They are the first generation who grew up with access to digital technology. Statista, "Generation Z – Daten & Fakten," 2026, accessed 24 September 2026.

² Erica Chenoweth and Matthew Cebul, "Why Gen-Z Is Rising", *Journal of Democracy* 37, no. 1 (2026): 5–14.

both countries and how donors can support these, the policy brief specifically seeks to understand how movements and more organized forms of civil society interact and influence each other. Based on interviews with activists and CSOs, it reviews the evolution of activism since the initial protests and examines how the roles of the involved actors in Kenya and Madagascar changed over time.

The policy brief finds that GenZ movements and CSOs played complementary roles during the “hot” protest phase. Yet, sustaining collaboration over time proved to be difficult in Madagascar where fear of NGO-ization, i.e. the institutionalization of the movement (NGO stands for non-governmental organization), led to a rupture in relations. In Kenya, CSOs were central to mobilization and collaboration prevailed, even though, just as in Madagascar, internal friction appeared in GenZ groups. While CSOs can play an important role in supporting protest mobilization and activism, CSOs and movements constantly negotiate the possibility of co-optation as well as a potential loss of autonomy and legitimacy when they engage. Both forms of civic participation have particular strengths that can only be harnessed if a sufficient level of autonomy from each other is guaranteed.

Defining CSOs and Social Movements

CSOs are registered, formal and institutionalized entities. They have clear objectives and a defined organizational and membership structure. In contrast, social movements are network-like: they are characterized by informal interactions between individuals and groups. Their mobilization is often short-lived and relies on a specific issue they raise. While professional CSOs rely on core and/or project funding, social movements are mainly volunteer-based and/or receive ad-hoc donations.³ CSOs can be a part of social movements, but this does not necessarily have to be the case.⁴

There is a significant overlap between both concepts: Social movements and CSOs can have the same goals and make use of the same instruments. Yet, due to their different degree of formalization, CSOs tend to employ less confrontational tactics and make more often use of institutionalized engagement, such as policy advocacy, service provision and knowledge creation. Social movements in turn tend to be more active in mobilization, campaigning and protest. Due to their non-formalized structure, they tend to be more fluid and undergo bigger changes over time, for instance dismantling or professionalizing.⁵

³ Donatella Della Porta, “Building Bridges: Social Movements and Civil Society in Times of Crisis,” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 31, no. 5 (2020): 938–48.

⁴ Friedhelm Neidhardt and Dieter Rucht, “The Analysis of Social Movements: The State of the Art and Some Perspectives for Further Research,” in *Research on Social Movements: The State of Art in Western Europe and the USA*, ed. Dieter Rucht (Campus, 1991), 421–64.

⁵ Mario Diani, “The Concept of Social Movement,” *The Sociological Review* 40, no. 1 (1992): 1–25; Jurgen Willems and Marc Jegers, “Social Movement Structures in Relation to Goals and Forms of Action: An Exploratory Model,” *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research* 3, no. 2 (2012): 67–82; Hanspeter Kriesi, “The Organizational Structure of New Social Movements in a Political Context,” in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 152–84.

Relations Between CSOs and Social Movements

The academic fields of social movement studies and civil society research, which focuses on organized civil society, rarely interact. While the former traditionally focuses on contentious politics, violence, issues of identity and social conflict, the latter centres on autonomy, civility, and institutionalized voluntarism. Historically, relations between social movements and CSOs have been frequent.⁶ CSOs have provided important recruitment networks and organizational resources, facilitating collective mobilization even when not directly involved in protest. Conversely, movements have contributed to the development of CSOs, which can provide organizational infrastructure during periods of reduced protest activity. In addition, overlapping membership has been common.

Critical literature that examines the dynamics between social movements and CSOs in the Global South, often talks about the NGO-ization of activism.⁷ NGO-ization refers to the institutionalization of movements due to donor funding for democratization, which can lead to demobilization and depoliticization or taming of messages.⁸

Newer literature counters this one-sided narrative and observes a hybridization of activism and volunteering.⁹ Della Porta's concept of "SMOization" (SMO stands for Social Movement Organization) describes how CSOs increasingly adopt social movement repertoires such as protest, coalition-building and digital mobilization, while movements adopt organizational infrastructure typically associated with CSOs, such as formal funding structures and legal registration. This suggests that the boundary between movements and CSOs is not fixed but continually renegotiated, with both sides absorbing elements of the other.¹⁰

Kenya: Complementary Action, Government Repression and Waning Activism

In Kenya, opposition to the 2024 Finance Bill provided the immediate trigger for mobilization. Protests began in mid-June and peaked on 25 June 2024, when protesters entered the parliamentary compound and set parts of it on fire. Police forces responded with tear gas and live ammunition. The government-led Kenya National Commission on Human Rights reported 39 deaths and 361 injured in relation to nationwide protests between 18 June and 1 July 2024.¹¹ The day after the storming of the parliament, President Ruto withdrew the Finance Bill. Yet, the protests rapidly expanded beyond taxation to encompass corruption, economic inequality, police violence, political exclusion and demands for more accountability. The movement is notable for its cross-ethnic character

⁶ Helmut K. Anheier and N. Scherer, "Voluntary Action and Social Movements," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, ed. Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (Oxford University Press, 2015), 494–511; Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, "Social Movements and Civil Society," in *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*, ed. Benjamin Edwards (Oxford University Press, 2011), 51–68.

⁷ Catherine Mercer, "NGOs, Civil Society and Democratization: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Progress in Development Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 5–22; Joanna Hearn, "African NGOs: The New Compradors?" *Development and Change* 38, no. 6 (2007): 1095–1110.

⁸ Sonia E. Alvarez, "Beyond NGO-ization?: Reflections from Latin America," *Development* 52, no. 2 (2009): 175–84; Maha Atia and Christine E. Herrold, "Governing through Patronage: The Rise of NGOs and the Fall of Civil Society in Palestine and Morocco," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 29, no. 5 (2018): 1044–54.

⁹ Lorenzo Bosi and Lorenzo Zamponi, *Resistere alla crisi. I percorsi dell'azione sociale diretta* (Il Mulino, 2019); Costis Hadjimichalis, *Crisis spaces: Structures, struggles and solidarity in southern Europe* (Routledge, 2018).

¹⁰ Della Porta, "Building Bridges: Social Movements and Civil Society in Times of Crisis".

¹¹ The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, "Update on the Status of Human Rights in Kenya during the Anti-Finance Bill Protests", 1 July 2026.

and its rejection of traditional party politics. While street protests became less after the summer, also in 2025 and 2026 protests were organized to commemorate the June 25 events and July 7 (saba saba)¹², which is the day that is used to commemorate the pro-democracy protest of 1990.¹³

Relations between activists and organizations can generally be characterized as complementary, even though frictions exist. Established Kenyan civil society actors provided the organizational backbone during the 2024 Finance Bill protests. Participants drew majorly from student groups, feminist networks, and the Social Justice Movement – a coalition of grassroots, community-based, and youth-led initiatives, as well as human rights and governance-focused CSOs. Established CSOs issued support statements but also supported by developing communication infrastructures to monitor and document arrests, injuries, deaths, abductions and security risks, and to coordinate rapid responses. They provided and coordinated safe spaces and advised activists, as many protesters lacked prior experience in human rights advocacy. At the same time, activists mentioned that they ensured that organizations did not take credit for the protests, which would also make them vulnerable to being perceived as acting on behalf of donor agendas. The movement's concern for acting autonomously was aggravated further when President Ruto falsely accused the Ford Foundation of sponsoring the protests.¹⁴

In the long run, CSOs' support activities focused on the documentation of human rights violations and legal campaigns and assistance. The violent and deadly reaction of the Kenyan regime led to the fact that many activities revolved around calling out and fighting police brutality and demanding for accountability, for instance through court cases. Legal assistance was offered to those who were detained (or their families in case of abductions). Organizations also supported the families of victims of police violence, for instance by organizing autopsies and pushing for reparations. Families and activists were also supported through counselling. When the Kenyan regime issued an order for the press to stop broadcasting the protests in June 2025, organizations challenged that decision in court.

The support of organized civil society contributed to sustaining the movement over time. Yet, the violent regime reaction in the form of shootings, arbitrary arrests and abductions led activists to resort more and more to online activism, even though street protests continue to date. Activists would primarily call out governance failures and police violence on social media, but also create civic education content, just as during the Finance Bill campaign. However, the online space also quickly became the target of state repression. Since the start of the protests, the regime invested in digital counternarratives and disinformation to discredit protesters and used state-sponsored “goons” to track down online activists leading to a wave of abductions.¹⁵ The death of Kenyan blogger Albert Ojwang in police custody led to a public outcry and renewed demonstrations in the summer of 2025. The content of protests that year moved away from the Finance Bill which had been withdrawn, and largely focused on accountability concerning police violence/impunity and larger demands such as the end of corruption and better economic policy to tackle the high costs of living.

Not only the content of activists' demands changed, but respondents also noticed that over time, activism was “tamed”. This happened primarily because of the hard hand of the

¹² Saba means seven in Kiswahili

¹³ Yashraj Sharma, “Kenya braces for return of Gen Z protests – how did they begin?” *Al Jazeera*, 24 June 2026.

¹⁴ Urooba Jamal, “Why is Kenya's Ruto accusing the Ford Foundation of stoking protests?” *Al Jazeera*, 18 July 2024.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, “‘This fear, everyone is feeling it’: Tech-facilitated violence against young activists in Kenya”, 2025.

regime, but also because frictions and mistrust started to appear between activists. Differences became apparent between different age cohorts, but more importantly, cases of co-optation became known. Most prominently, the entry of leading activist Kasmuel McOure into the ODM Party (and later his open support for Ruto) caused a controversy within the movement. According to interviewees, some activists were on the government's payroll to spread messages discouraging mobilization, while other activists were accused of only participating in the protests to subsequently apply for asylum abroad.

In 2026, the 25 June anniversary protests as well as the saba saba protests were much smaller than those of the previous years. This was mainly attributed to the road blockages and heavy police presence that the regime deployed, but it also reflects declining activism more generally.

As the Kenyan elections come closer, activism is now geared towards voting out the regime. Many of the leading figures of the movement are vying for political posts and educating others on how to become engaged in formal politics. In March 2026, activist Ademba Allans started a campaign called “#TukoKadi”, which roughly translates to “we have the voter's card”, to animate young people to register as voters. The campaign has developed its own music, dance and social-media culture, rather than going for a conventional NGO voter-education program. While the regime continues to use tech-facilitated violence and spreads counter narratives¹⁶, so far, the #TukoKadi campaign is reported to have been largely successful in reaching young people.¹⁷ The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission reported a surge in new voter registrations of 875,501 voters between 30 March–9 April 2026 alone. By the time the 30-day Enhanced Continuous Voter Registration drive closed, 2.6 million new voters had registered. This is one of the fastest expansions in Kenya's history, even though no data is available that shows the share of young people amongst these new voters.¹⁸

Madagascar: From Solidarity to Mistrust and Fragmentation

Protests initially focused on chronic electricity and water shortages, but quickly developed into demands concerning corruption, governance and presidential legitimacy. The street protests between 25 September and mid-October 2025 led to at least 22 deaths and more than 100 injured.¹⁹ The military intervened and President Andry Rajoelina left the country, giving way to the establishment of a military-led transitional government.²⁰ Colonel Randrianirina announced that the transition phase would last two years. A vote on the new constitutional framework is foreseen for July 2027, and the presidential election should follow until the end of 2027. Yet, observers question the timeline, due to the stalling national consultation process that should precede elections.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Stephen Gachahi, “Tuko Kadi: Gen Zs eager to author their destinies”, *Daily Nation*, 31 March 2026.

¹⁸ Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, “Press Release”, 9 April 2026, <https://www.iebc.or.ke/uploads/resources/WDHz5ctC1r.pdf>; Irüngü Houghton, “#TukoKadi just broke Kenyan history”, *Amnesty International*, 4 May 2026.

¹⁹ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Madagascar: UN Human Rights Chief shocked by violent response to electricity and water protests”, 29 September 2025.

²⁰ Dafy Faramalala Andriamparany et al., “Madagascar at a crossroads: breaking the cycle of state capture” (GI ACE Working Paper, University of Sussex, 2026).

²¹ RFI “Madagascar: le pouvoir annonce de prochaines élections en juillet 2027 sur le cadre constitutionnel”, 18 August 2026.

Relations between activists and CSOs differed during the protest phase and the transition phase. When protests started, indirect support measures prevailed. Indirect support happened through press releases, solidarity announcements and monitoring and documentation of human rights violations. Direct support measures were more diverse and were only offered by few organizations. Some provided physical equipment such as helmets and helped distributing first aid and food. Legal aid and counsel were provided by human rights organizations as well as psychological counselling, both to activists and journalists. Other organizations helped by providing meeting spaces for coordination purposes and by offering mentoring. Some organizations assisted in collecting donations from the private sector and the diaspora. With few exceptions, organizations typically did not use donor or project funding for these activities. CSOs also acted as a crucial bridge to the international community. They organized high-level meetings between youth representatives and international organizations and embassies to counter government narratives that discredited protesters as puppets and sought protection for individual activists.

Yet, organizations also admitted that they had to be careful not to be too vocal. For one, this was due to fear of intimidation and retaliation from the government. Another reason was to avoid being linked to a specific candidate or party and being accused of being partisan. So instead of advocating for the government to step down, they called for an adherence to rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and called out police violence. Organizations also relied on umbrella organizations to issue critical statements.

Some staff were in dual roles, being both activists and employees of CSOs, blurring the lines between institutionalized organizations and the movement. This helped to mobilize more institutionalized support for the movement in terms of CSO collectives, parties and international partners. Yet, certain activists criticized organizations for wanting to steal their visibility or co-opt their messaging, when CSOs started to issue joint communiques.

Despite certain frictions, for the most part, the mutual support during the protest phase was based on solidarity and perceived as complementary. Yet, after the protests, frictions between different GenZ groups and CSOs started to materialize, which led to a press communiqué issued on behalf of one of the major groups stating that they thanked organized civil society for their support, but that they wished to proceed independently and autonomously. This was interpreted by some interlocutors as a fear of NGO-ization, as CSOs became more dominant in strategizing and imposing more formal ways of working in their meetings with youth groups.

A number of new GenZ groups appeared and activism began to become even more fragmented. Frictions between groups of different socio-economic backgrounds started to appear. There were also disagreements between groups that prefer more formalized action versus those who use confrontational tactics. At the same time, rumours of co-optation started to circulate accusing both activists as well as CSOs to receive money from the new political leadership. According to interviewees, the regime has founded its own activist groups. While these accusations are hard to prove, they have created a climate of mistrust that persists to date. CSOs and activists both report being selective regarding the groups they work with.

While the new regime invited several groups for consultations, the majority of interviewees labelled consultations as “façade”. Some GenZ members reportedly took positions in the new administration. Promises to create a youth parliament have not materialized so far and the proposed national consultation process is stalling. The regime initially utilized the GenZ movement's energy to legitimize its takeover, but it has now moved toward a more repressive model. Activists, who wish to organize renewed

demonstrations to denounce the slow progress of the transition, face intimidation and arrests.

CSOs on their end continue working on sectoral advocacy and have started their own process of national consultations, instead of merely reacting to government plans. These "pre-consultations" are to ensure CSOs would arrive at any official national discussions with concrete, data-backed recommendations. Unanimously, interviewees describe the current political transition as "le grand flou" (the great blur), and these consultations are seen as a way to provide clarity and structure to the movement's demands in a period of political confusion, while also making sure that regional and youth voices are included.

Change Trajectories Compared: Complementarity and Friction

The cases show that when CSOs and activists share the same goals, their roles can be complementary. In particular during the "hot" protest phase, CSOs provided activists with important logistical support and used their advocacy and communication capacities to disseminate messages to political stakeholders and the wider public. Organizations did not receive additional donor funding for their support measures but relied on core funding and voluntary support. The urgency of the situation created solidarity and a sense of a joint mission. In addition, social movements drew their participants from CSOs. Yet, the interviews also showed that not all CSOs were equally supportive. Organizations working on human rights, governance and legal support were the ones that were most active. Apart from that, also feminist groups and grassroots organizations played a bigger role as compared to organizations active in "development cooperation".

Once the first protest wave was over, sustained activism and collaboration between movements and CSOs proved to be much more difficult, particularly in Madagascar. One reason for this is the differing political trajectory: In Madagascar, the protests in combination with elite defection led to regime change within less than a month. While movements are effective at mobilizing, they are weaker in institutionalizing demands. In Kenya, protest mobilization continues since 2024, as the regime is still in place. At the same time, state repression continues to weaken activism in both countries.

The interviews also showed that lines between activists and organizations can be blurry. Some activists are simultaneously staff of organizations or become employed by an organization after first being activists. In turn, many employees of organizations also joined street protests. These dual roles can be beneficial for both movements and organizations. Organizations benefit from the momentum and mobilizing capacity of activists, while activists get access to more professional campaigning, practical support and benefit from the experience of organizations. Activists can also be politically more vocal than organizations who are easier targets for state repression. At the same time, these blurred lines are a constant source of friction.

According to the interviews, in both cases questions of autonomy and legitimacy were central in defining relations between activists and CSOs. Not only state repression, but also rumours and actual cases of co-optation contributed to growing mistrust within the GenZ movements. However, they also put strain on the relationship between activists and organizations. For youth movements, autonomy is at the heart of their legitimacy, while CSOs that are registered need to make sure that they stay within the boundaries of what is permitted – else they undermine their own existence. Thus, relations with the state are a constant concern for both sides in negotiating their relationship. While the literature on

social movements frequently reports how movements become institutionalized over time (NGO-ization)²², the Kenyan case illustrates well that this does not necessarily have to be the case. Even with a change towards voter education, activism was able to maintain its non-institutionalized character. On the contrary, fear of NGO-ization led to a rupture between youth activists and CSOs in Madagascar.

While the fluid and leaderless structure of movements makes them harder to co-opt, it also comes at the expense of coherence. In both countries, internal frictions started to appear within the GenZ movement, leading to a certain level of fragmentation and disagreement over time. The fluidity and changing nature of a movement lends itself less to institutionalizing demands. CSOs in turn have a more or less permanent organizational structure and follow a long-term mission, which helps in building advocacy expertise and establishing connections to policy makers. The national consultation process organized by CSOs in Madagascar reflects how CSO coalitions can effectively collaborate to create institutionalized participation channels. While they include youth voices in their process, activists were not the ones in the driver's seat.

Conclusion

Taken together, the cases suggest that pro-democratic activists and CSOs can play complementary and partially overlapping roles in putting issues on the political agenda and accompanying political reforms. Yet, they possess different strengths. GenZ movements are most effective at mobilizing crowds, making complex issues accessible for young people, and putting pressure on regimes. Established CSOs, including human-rights organizations, legal organizations and advocacy networks, retain important resources that decentralized movements may lack, such as experience in advocacy, monitoring institutions and translating demands into policy and legal reforms. Neither function can simply substitute for the other.

While the academic literature on social movements and CSOs stresses a process of hybridization in which social movements are tamed and CSOs become more activist-like,²³ the cases of Kenya and Madagascar do not necessarily display such dynamics. The GenZ movement in Madagascar refused NGO-ization and those CSOs who collaborated with activists did not report a change in their repertoire. In Kenya, collaboration prevailed, but state repression majorly contributed to declining activism.

A central lesson from both cases is therefore that both forms of civic participation have particular strengths that can only be harnessed if a sufficient level of autonomy is guaranteed. CSO support to youth movements may be most effective when it provides infrastructure and protection while allowing youth activists to retain ownership over their political demands and forms of organization. Due to the fluidity of movements and the observed internal frictions, collaboration is bound to change during different mobilization phases. Meanwhile pro-democratic CSOs remain crucially important as an organizational backbone and in offering continuous monitoring, sensitization and advocacy.

²² Alvarez, "Beyond NGO-ization?: Reflections from Latin America".

²³ Della Porta, "Building Bridges: Social Movements and Civil Society in Times of Crisis".

Policy Recommendations

Donors should invest in established pro-democratic CSOs active in human rights protection, governance and legal support during quiet periods between protest waves, rather than channel funding directly to GenZ movements. Because protests emerge ad hoc, direct donor support is difficult to deliver in the moment; investing in CSOs beforehand pays off once political windows of opportunity arise. Moreover, as social movements draw their legitimacy from acting autonomously, providing them with donor funding could have detrimental effects.

Where governments respond to mobilization through arbitrary detention, violence or criminalization, international partners should strengthen rapid-response legal assistance, emergency protection, documentation and diplomatic monitoring. Madagascar's post-coup repression illustrates that protection also needs to continue after a protest movement achieves political change.

International partners should especially support the post-protest phase. This means helping civic actors translate demands into concrete reforms involving public finance, anti-corruption institutions, public services, police accountability and political participation. Both cases show that regime change or concessions do not automatically produce democratic reform, but that sustained civic engagement is needed.

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