



Highlights from the report commissioned
by the Case for Space initiative

From rhetoric to action

Towards an enabling environment
for child and youth development in the
Sustainable Development Goals

**“World leaders, look up,
because the future generation
is raising their voice.”** — Malala Yousafzai



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Children in an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in Za'atari, Jordan.
War Child UK provides support to the most vulnerable children whose
families, communities and schools have been torn apart by war.

Photos: War Child UK



On 25 September 2015, world leaders adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs present an ambitious vision of what the world should look like in 2030. We must all use them to transform our globe over the next 15 years.

The UN Secretary-General's proclamation that young people are "the torch bearers" of the SDGs is a charge that young people are ready to accept. Indeed, they have demanded this role.

Young people around the world participated enthusiastically to help shape the SDGs. The SDGs can be seen to reflect that youth influence. Now commitments must be met by action. The negotiations are over, but now the greatest challenge begins.

If the SDGs — particularly those that young people advocated and fought for — are to transform the lives of children, young people, their communities and countries, we must do things differently from now on.

As Malala says, the future generation has spoken. We must not clap our hands and carry on: we must match youth ambition with action.

The SDGs signal the fact that young people, more visible, more vocal and more numerous than at any point in human history, are high on the global agenda. Youth make up 43% of the world's population, and 85% of young people live in developing countries. Against this demographic backdrop, the SDGs assert that "no one must be left behind." But many children and young people are being left behind. They are shut out of decision-making processes, unable

to access their rights, and prevented from forging productive livelihoods. The historic opportunity the SDGs present comes at a time of extraordinary disconnect between the rhetoric governments, donors and international institutions offer about child and youth development, and the reality experienced daily by millions upon millions of children and young people.

In response, the *Case for Space* is a global research and advocacy initiative that seeks to understand and strengthen the enabling environment for child and youth development. The full report of the initiative, *From Rhetoric to Action*, investigates and analyses current conditions, documents the project's youth-led, youth-developed and youth-targeted research, and presents considerations for future action. This paper shares brief highlights from the full report. It aims to provide food for thought and action for the child and youth sector, and stimulate discussion and action by decision-makers on the space and structures for child and youth development.

The Case for Space initiative was convened by Restless Development, War Child UK and Youth Business International, with research carried out by Youth Policy Labs.

"A little less conversation, a little more action"

— Prime Minister of Norway Erna Solberg

Our innovative approach

Research led by young people

Our research sought to take a new approach to understanding child and youth development. We wanted the findings to be grounded in the political, social and economic contexts that affect children and young people's lives. It was also important for the project to create space for young people to own and lead the research process. The central question we explored was:

What is the enabling environment (necessary conditions and structures) that ensures children and young people can influence decisions, have access to their rights, and have improved livelihoods?

The three connected themes of **participation**, **protection** and **livelihoods** were chosen because they are critical areas of child and youth development, and can act as an entry point for understanding issues central to the lives of young people more broadly. While these are

“Implementation is the litmus test of the new agenda.”

– UN Secretary General, Ban-Ki Moon

not the only components of child and youth development, our focus on the three themes allowed the development of clear considerations for future action.

Three research approaches were used:

- » **Exploration of local context by Global Young Researchers** (GYRs): Our youth-led participatory approach involved 18 Global

Young Researchers (aged 24 to 34) from five regions of the world, who led the design, execution and analysis of a research topic of their choice relating to participation, protection or livelihoods. This ensured that the research was informed by an understanding of numerous local contexts.

- » **A global survey (GS) of children and youth organisations and movements:** The survey sought the views of people working in organisations and movements of and for children or young people, on the environment in which they work. 827 people across 123 countries completed the GS, giving perspectives on their work, and the governance, economic, cultural and social factors that affect it.
- » **Case studies:** Case studies of Restless Development, War Child UK and Youth Business International (YBI) were commissioned to provide an insight into their day-to-day operations, programming and challenges across 11 different countries. Staff from three to five in-country teams or members from each organisation answered questionnaires exploring how various factors affect their working environment.¹

The research adapted the theoretical framework designed for the CIVICUS Enabling Environment Index, which covers the governance, socio-economic and socio-cultural environments for civil society organisations (CSOs). This guided the development of research questions by the GYRs, and informed the design of questions for the GS.

The Global Young Researchers

“Coming from very different backgrounds, with diverse research interests and advocacy experience, we all met for the first time in April 2015 at the Global Young Researchers Lab in Berlin, and immediately began to work together to develop the research project’s methodologies and create our research questions. In the process, we learned about each other’s research, thought about space for children and youth in different contexts and from different perspectives, and formed new relationships that went beyond a love of research and concern about global child and youth development. We became a team: interacting, exchanging opinions, discussing and coming to a consensus. In the process, we not only gained important professional experience, we also grew our network of others who are similarly passionate about the rights and development of children and young people.

With the publication of *From Rhetoric to Action*, we conclude the research phase of the project and find that we have a greater understanding of the breadth and depth of the global struggles of children and youth, and are more dedicated than ever to creating enabling spaces for them. We hope that opportunities such as this, for young researchers to address youth-related issues, will become more common. We need more young people to be the protagonists of their own movements, to generate, analyse and use their own data, and to be their own strongest advocates for human rights and equality.”

The Case for Space Global Young Researchers (Amy, Ani, Brabim, Brian, Fayyaz, Felipe, Gioel, Hilary, Jake, Lawrence, Martti, Naim, Nathalia, Rocío, Roli, Salim, Soha and Tavarrie)

Participation



Ani Hao



Lawrence Ndambuki Muli



Martti Martinson



Naim Keruwala



Rocío González Ramírez



Salim Salamah

Protection



Amy Cheung



Mwebaze Kanaahe Brian Bilal



Fayyaz Yaseen Bhidal



Felipe Blanco



Jake Soriano



Tavarrie Smith

Youth Livelihoods



Gioel Gioacchino



Hilary Ewang Ngide



Roli Mahajan



Soha Mohamed Osman

Special features



Nathalia Sarmiento Salamanca



Brabim Kumar

Key findings and considerations for action

Our findings shed new light on the enabling environment for child and youth development, and identify new challenges and opportunities. Not all of our findings are surprising: some important issues identified below have been discussed for some time. The repeated and intensifying appearance of these issues therefore suggests that current actions are inadequate or absent.

Factors that enable and hinder child and youth development in the areas of participation, protection and livelihoods

When participation becomes an end in itself, rather than a means of advancing change, young people distance themselves from it.

Despite an explosion of structures, spaces and places for young people's voices to be heard, young people's willingness to participate in civic activities - such as volunteering, taking part in community decision-making and taking peaceful action - is moderate. The main barriers are known: lack of knowledge and awareness of how to participate; belief among young people that their contribution

will make no difference; and disillusionment with conventional politics. This is seen in different contexts by the GYRs: formal participation structures in African regional bodies slant towards urban and elite youth, neglecting those who are rural and underprivileged. At the local level in Australia, participation structures are rejected as too hierarchical, too political or too dull.

Young people may feel a low propensity to participate, believing that their actions will make little difference, but at the same time, in



Participation

recent years young people have led or participated in protests, uprisings and revolutions in numerous locations around the world. It seems that there comes a tipping point where young people are willing to take to the streets - and even risk their lives - to seek to realise a better future. This suggests that participation is most embraced when there seems a possibility of advancing real change.

Building trust between established youth organisations and emerging youth movements and activists would create more opportunities for collaboration and support.

Established, formal youth organisations and emerging, informal youth movements are often characterised as being on opposing sides: youth organisations may be accused of being bureaucratic, co-opted by funders and subject to legal constraints, compared to which youth movements are seen as dynamic, organic and free from intrusion and manipulation. Activists interviewed by GYRs in Brazil and Mexico share a mistrust of formal youth organisations, which are seen as too close to governmental structures, and therefore corruptible. But there are also examples where formal organisations and informal groups form collaboration. For informal groups, youth organisations can provide legal protection, support and advice; act as interlocutors with funders to fulfil the structural and systemic obligations that donors require; provide access to networks and individuals that informal movements might find difficult to reach; and offer basic

infrastructure, such as office space, meeting venues and equipment. Youth organisations that work with less formal movements benefit by broadening their participation bases and strengthening their legitimacy.

When the rule of law is ineffective and civic freedoms are repressed, child and youth participation often continues through informal networks.

In constrained political environments, activism is not prevented; it is merely relocated. While restrictions on civic space are increasing,¹ according to the GS almost a quarter of youth movements engage in lawful protests, and a tenth in unlawful but peaceful protests. GYRs further demonstrate how when the state fails, is considered illegitimate, or seen as representing fundamentally different interests to those of youth, young people can form powerful networks that bypass formal participation structures. Whether dealing with taboo subjects that the government refuses to address, such as sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in Brazil, or providing basic services that a government fails to deliver, such as education, health and justice services in Syria, participation in civic space lives on, with young people in the lead.

For youth participation to be meaningful, it needs to address the issue of power.

Young people are trailblazers of action and change. GYRs showcase young people in countries such as Brazil, Egypt, Mexico and Syria who lead organisations and movements that seek to improve the lives of other young people, their communities and their countries. Two-fifths of organisations that responded to the GS are headed by a young person. Through social networks and community mobilisation, young people are developing leadership and outreach skills and confidence. Particularly by using new technologies, young people are developing new models of power, in which power comes from knowledge, peer coordination and the ability to inspire others to participate.

In response, structures for youth participation need to move beyond the current preoc-



cupation with formal and tokenistic representation; they need to work with young people to enable them to develop power and challenge existing power relationships.

Considerations for action

- » Definitions and understandings of youth participation should go beyond formal youth organisations and traditional civic activities, such as voting, volunteering and being consulted, to embrace genuine spaces for political action, power-sharing and the realisation of meaningful changes in the lives of young people.
- » Opportunities should be pursued to create stronger relationships between child and youth organisations and youth movements. Trust should be built between groups that have different structures and ways of working. Attention should focus on areas of mutual collaboration and support.
- » Donors, international agencies and youth organisations should increase their understanding of the role, structure and position of informal movements and youth networks, and provide support that plays to their strengths, rather than seek to change them. Support should include flexible finance mechanisms, legal support and protection, and the provision of basic resources.
- » Current representation structures remain a useful bridge between governments and young people, but are at risk of interference and the perception of co-option. Governments should be encouraged to promote independent youth participation structures that are not aligned to political parties and free from manipulation and coercion.
- » More radical opportunities that go beyond traditional participation structures to focus on the development of power should be explored, such as co-ownership of development agendas, crowd-sourcing of legislation and accountability involving open data.

Children and young people are vulnerable to abuse and violence, where the perpetrators are trusted adults, armed groups, the state and other young people.

Children and young people represent nearly half of all victims of crime: 43% of all murders are of children or young people, and 223 million girls and boys suffer sexual violence each year.¹ Young people also commit violence against each other: GS respondents identify young people as the leading perpetrators of violence against other young people.

GYRs tell the stories behind the numbers: children are physically abused at the hands of their employers in Pakistan; young people who were forcibly recruited as child soldiers face enduring social stigma in Colombia; juveniles experience police brutality and maltreatment during detention in The Bahamas.

Challenging cultural and gender stereotypes and changing attitudes and behaviours are powerful tools for minimising violence and increasing the resilience of children and young people.

Changing attitudes can change lives. GYRs explore how percep-

Protection

tions can be challenged and stereotypes overturned: to change how young people handle potentially violent situations in Mexico; to help minorities mitigate threats to their mental health in the USA; to build a culture of road safety in Uganda.

Education plays a pivotal role in raising awareness and promoting values that increase the resilience of children and young people. The War Child UK case study showcases the contribution of child right's clubs in the Central African Republic, and work with Syrian refugees in Jordan to promote the value of education and build awareness of the dangers of child labour and early marriage.

Youth-led networks can play a key role in community-led child protection systems. They can also hold states to account when they fail to uphold rights of children and youth to protection.

Youth-led networks are playing a key role in protection systems for children. Youth-led networks can step in to provide basic services for the community when the state withdraws, as in Syria, or when the state is a perpetrator of violence against young people, as in Mexico. In Mexico, formal and informal youth groups work together to document cases of abuses against activists and provide legal support. In the USA, youth networks, in the form of youth leadership and community programmes, serve as support structures to help young people address mental health issues when formal

support structures fail. International civil society can also help to support community-led protection systems: in the Democratic Republic of Congo, War Child UK works with community leaders to strengthen protection networks, in addition to working with government and law enforcement agencies.

Considerations for action

- » Governments and law enforcement agencies should enforce just and equitable legislation and policies that provide legal protection, redress for violations and space for violators to be held to account, particularly for survivors of abuse, harassment and corruption.
- » Education is a powerful tool for challenging negative cultural and gender stereotypes, and changing attitudes and behaviours that pose risks to the wellbeing of children and young people. Teachers, parents and families should be engaged in educational initiatives, to promote supportive environments for child rights in school, the community and at home.
- » Community-based child protection systems should be scaled up to help fill gaps in state-supported initiatives.
- » Community-based child protection approaches should ensure the participation and empowerment of children and young people, to enable them to inform child protection initiatives, and hold governments to account.

Livelihoods

Young entrepreneurs are starting businesses, not only to generate employment, but also to express cultural and civic values.

The top three most significant issues that children and young people face, as identified in the GS, are socio-economic in nature. Support for skills development and entrepreneurship can help young people take charge of their livelihoods.

But while young people want to create jobs that support them financially, they also seek to transform their communities by actively participating in development, including through social enterprises. GYRs showcase young entrepreneurs in Egypt, Italy and Poland who are taking charge of their livelihoods while fostering development through social enterprises. In the words of one GYR:

“The space of business transforms itself into a space of participation.”

Informal and personal learning can complement formal education in providing the competencies and confidence young people need to improve their livelihoods.

While GYRs tell of the success stories of young social entrepreneurs, they also highlight the challenges. Many potential young entrepreneurs simply lack the skills, knowledge or support mechanisms needed to establish enterprises. Formal education often fails to provide these. Instead, non-formal education opportunities, such as mentorship and training, can give young entrepreneurs the added expertise required to succeed. Case studies

describe how members of YBI’s network tailor mentorship in Canada and India, to ensure it meets the special needs of marginalised groups. Such targeted initiatives need to be supported and extended.

One-third of GS respondents report that their organisation or movement also relies on the private sector for skill exchange and mentorship, suggesting that child and youth organisations are learning to work with the businesses for more than simply financial support, but there is further potential to develop this resource.

The three most significant issues that face children and youth today, as identified by Global Survey respondents //

- » Lack of economic opportunities, including employment (56.8%)
- » Poverty (45.1%)
- » Inequality and lack of social mobility (27.2%)

Livelihoods support for young people can be provided better when a wider range of stakeholders, including the larger community, are involved.

A whole-of-society effort is needed to improve livelihoods for children and young people, encompassing businesses, communities, civil society and governments and their agencies, including the police and judiciary. GYRs demonstrate how in Cameroon, youth organisations and movements could play an essential role in monitoring and evaluating livelihoods programmes to ensure that they meet the needs of young people, but they need



A young Ugandan entrepreneur in the pottery business supported by Enterprise Uganda.

Photo: Enterprise Uganda // Youth Business International

support to develop the capacity to do so. In Colombia, there is a need for a joined up response to combat stigma so that former child soldiers can secure employment. In India, action to protect women in the workplace is needed to ensure that they can stay in jobs.

Considerations for action

- » Long-term employability, entrepreneurship and practical skills learning should be promoted, and more opportunities created for non-formal education.
- » Collaboration should be encouraged between the private sector and CSOs to develop activities that enhance skills, knowledge and learning, such as mentoring for young people, paid internships and training in the workplace.
- » Support initiatives for youth-led social enterprises should extend beyond cities into rural areas, where poverty levels can be higher and social problems more acute.
- » A wide range of stakeholders, particularly youth-led and youth-focused CSOs, should be enabled to participate in the design, development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of livelihoods programming. Operational frameworks should be instituted to guide engagement, and the participation skills and capacities of young people and CSOs should be developed.
- » Tolerant, open and safe working environments for young people should be promoted, with a focus on vulnerable populations, such as former child soldiers.



Nathalia (Global Young Researcher, Colombia) examines the rehabilitation of former child soldiers in Colombia through livelihoods programmes. This picture is of Luna, a former child soldier, from a photo exhibition Nathalia helped organise called "Girls of Water and Rice". It is part of the Voices of Post-Conflict Project in Edinburgh, Scotland, where Nathalia is studying.



Other aspects of the environment that enable or hinder child and youth development

Poverty

Poverty is the most pressing issue facing children and young people today. It impacts on all other areas of their development.

Eradicating poverty is the greatest global challenge. It is recognised as indispensable for the achievement of the SDGs.

In the GS, poverty is identified as the most important issue facing young people by respondents who work with very young children (aged up to five years), and one of the top three issues by all respondents.

The GYRs further illustrate how poverty affects children and young people in multiple ways. Formal participation structures in African institutions are skewed towards wealthier youth who can afford to participate. Poorer children can be deprived of their basic rights in the justice system in The Bahamas, which does not provide free legal aid, leaving those who cannot afford a lawyer to defend themselves. Poverty increases the barriers to improving livelihoods, as it can drive young people to work in jobs that involve greater risks than they would otherwise choose: poorer young women in India often work in the informal sector, where sexual harassment is at its worst.

Consideration for action

- » Children and youth data should be disaggregated in all SDGs data, to ensure that the unique impacts of poverty on children and young people are not lost within the overall statistics. As part of this, there is a need for age-specific data, with the ability to disaggregate for both children and youth with sufficient refinement.

Governance

Poor governance and a lack of effective rule of law constrains organisations and movements, and compromises development for children and youth.

Unfair or rarely enforced laws; a biased or corrupt judiciary; the infringement of fundamental rights; flawed or coerced elections: this is the reality of the governance environment that many child and youth organisations operate under, as the GS and GYRs document. Weak governance means that child and youth organisations spend time and resources on unnecessary bureaucracy, bribing corrupt officials, or fighting opaque legal battles, rather than on delivering vital services and working to effect positive change with and for young people.

Poor governance and the lack of an effective rule of law has implications for participation, protection and livelihoods. When laws are not enforced to guarantee freedom of expression in Mexico, activists experience police intimidation and free speech is stifled. The failure to enforce child labour laws in Pakistan means that the practice remains commonplace, and children work instead of going to school. Lack of intellectual property law enforcement stifles young entrepreneurs in Egypt, as they fear their ideas will be stolen. Children's and young people's rights are most acutely affected by the poor enforcement of laws, as violations are likely to go unpunished.

Considerations for action

- » To highlight the impact human rights violations have on children and youth, mechanisms for human rights monitoring should be strengthened, through bodies such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. To this end, there should be a special child and youth section of the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process.
- » The participation should be encouraged of child and youth CSOs in UPR processes, including by developing shadow reports with a special focus on children, young people and human rights. Child and youth organisations should be empowered to produce such reports.

Civil society push-back

Increasing restrictions on civil society threaten many associations, networks and movements.

There is a pushback against civil society globally, and child and youth organisations are not immune to it. The three key civic freedoms — freedom of association, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression — are being restricted and challenged in every region of the world. The pushback involves many instruments of constraint, control and harassment, but the introduction of laws and regulations to restrict the receipt of funding from external sources is a particularly troubling recent tactic, observed in many different countries.⁴

Consideration for action

- » CSOs and youth movements must resist, and actively campaign against, national and international restrictions, including restrictions against the receipt of funding.

Resources

Resourcing challenges are most acute for smaller and less formal organisations and movements.

Restrictions on the receipt of funding offer a further challenge to organisations and movements that already struggle to secure sufficient resourcing. Most child and youth organisations and movements are in a precarious resourcing situation: in the GS, almost half of respondents believe that on current funds and operating levels, if their organisations were unable to attract additional funds, they would not last another year.

GYRs show how the lack of funding affects the work of young people and their organisations and movements. Informal groups in Brazil, blocked from using free spaces because of the controversial nature of their SRHR work, lack the resources to pay for spaces. Organisations in Cameroon cannot effectively participate in the monitoring and evaluation schemes of livelihood programmes for lack of resources.

The case study of War Child UK also suggests that competitive funding processes tend to favour larger, service-orientated organisations over smaller, change-seeking ones.

It is time for a rethink on resourcing.

While lack of funding is cited in the GS as the most prominent challenge facing child and youth organisations and movements, internal issues are usually identified as the problem: respondents point to an absence of expertise and time to fundraise, and perceptions that youth organisations are unprofessional. This

suggests some lack of awareness of external issues affecting the sector as a whole, including the trend of increasing civic space restriction and the on-going lack of public funding. It raises the concern that many children and youth organisations and movements will be caught by surprise if civic space restrictions worsen or the funding situation deteriorates further. There is a need to take on these challenges now to build preparedness for future changes in the environment for child and youth development.

Considerations for action

- » CSOs and youth movements should campaign for development work to be adequately resourced, and for the fairer distribution of resources, to reach a wider range of organisations and movements.
- » Capacity building programmes should be initiated to support young people's abilities in organisational development, particularly in fundraising skills and financing strategies.
- » Stronger knowledge and awareness should be developed about the nature and operations of informal youth movements, so that strategies to support them can be improved.
- » A global youth donor and philanthropy summit should be established to reconsider the ways in which youth civil society is funded, the uneven allocation of funding, restrictions on the receipt of funding and the ability of small CSOs and informal groups to access resources.

From rhetoric to action: **what needs to change?**

The *Case for Space* initiative has offered a rare opportunity to measure the pulse of child and youth development practice, and to understand better the issues, obstacles and opportunities that matter most to children, young people and their organisations and movements today.

The findings of the research strengthen understanding of the major hindrances for child and youth development: disproportionate poverty; poor quality education; scarce employment opportunities; poor governance and a lack of effective rule of law; constrained political rights and freedoms; low trust in institutions; uneven civil society infrastructure; under-resourcing of many child and youth organisations and movements; and an increasingly restricted legal context for civil society.

It is discouragingly far from new to observe that poverty affects children and young people disproportionately, and that governance is closely intertwined with development outcomes. To make matters worse, many movements of young people around the globe — the very citizens who are best positioned to address these challenges — find themselves caught up in the current global pushback against civil society. The sheer scale of challenging conditions can feel overwhelming.

And yet the research also gives cause for hope. Around the world, small but important victories are being won by and for children and young people. Our research has showcased ways in which, on the cusp of a new era in global development, child and youth organisations and movements are taking

Children in an Internally Displaced Persons camp in Afghanistan voicing their issues. Photo: War Child UK



action: young people are using online communication to form ad hoc networks to provide basic public services, respond to humanitarian crises and form community-based protection systems; they are establishing socially-oriented enterprises; they are advocating for policy dialogue on contested issues; they are holding leading roles in organisations and movements; they are taking to the streets, sometimes risking their lives, to push for justice and human rights.

The research has also reaffirmed our belief that children and young people are the ones best placed to inform policies and programmes that affect them. The youth-led nature of this research offers a practical demonstration of how young people can be agents of change. Youth-led participatory research techniques should be built into all initiatives that explore the issues of children and young people.

Finally, in addition to documenting and sharing learning about the many actions through which children and young people are working to change their societies, *From Rhetoric to Action* has sought to advance ideas to challenge and change the environment for children and young people globally: to make the UPR process address child and youth rights; to foster youth-led child protection systems; to strengthen non-formal educational opportunities to support employment; to ensure that the SDGs consider and capture the realities of children and young people. We now look forward to dialogue on how to action these game-changing ideas from young people.

Endnotes

- 1 YBI is an international network of independent non-profit organisations, and as such has members, rather than staff teams in different countries.
- 2 CIMCUS, 2015, The State of Civil Society Report, <http://civicus.org/images/StateOfCivilSocietyFullReport2015.pdf>.
- 3 World Health Organization (WHO), 2000, World Report on Violence and Health, cited in E Delap, 2013, Protect my future: why child protection matters, 2013, Family for Every Child, Better Care Network, Childfund Alliance, Consortium for Street Children, Keeping Children Safe, Plan International, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, Terre des Hommes and World Vision, http://www.terredeshommes.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/20130322_protect_our_future_summary_document_april_2013.pdf.
- 4 International Center for Not-for-Profit-Law (ICNL), 2014, A Mapping of Existing Initiatives to Address Legal Constraints on Foreign Funding of Civil Society, <http://www.icnl.org/research/resources/foreignfund/A%20Mapping%20of%20Existing%20Initiatives%20to%20Address%20Legal%20Constraints%20on%20Foreign%20Funding%20of%20Civil%20Society,%20July%202014.pdf>

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