

SOLIDARITY LOOM

Weaving a Global Network of
Engaged Creatives

YOUTH, ART ACTIVISM

January 22, 2026



PLACE

PRE PORT

February 2026

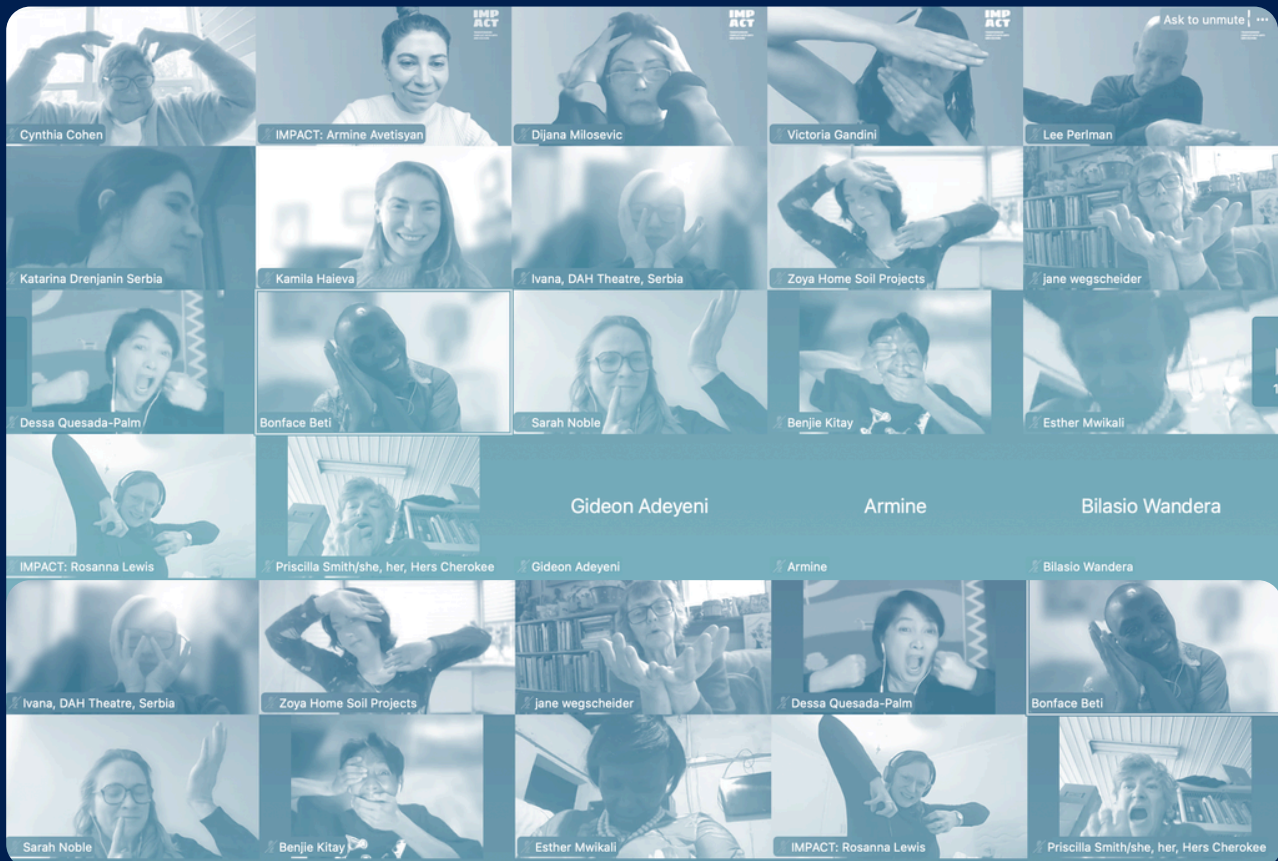
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INTRODUCTION

The Solidarity Loom series launched with the opening event, **Youth, Art, and Activism**, which brought together voices from Serbia, the Philippines, the United States, and Kenya. Speakers and participants across diverse regions to examined how rising authoritarianism is shaping the lives, agency, and safety of young people, artists, and civic actors. Contributors described shrinking civic space, the normalization of state violence, and the strategic use of fear, surveillance, and legal precarity to suppress dissent—often with disproportionate impacts on youth and marginalized communities. At the same time, discussions highlighted the limits of protest-only models and underscored the growing importance of creative, relational, and care-centered approaches to political engagement. Together, these reflections point to the urgent need for solidarity practices that protect dignity, sustain imagination, and support collective resilience under repressive conditions.



“Youth, Art and Activism”

In Numbers

PRESENTERS



REGIONS



PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS



REGISTERED



COUNTRIES



NEW TO IMPACT



PARTICIPATED



STORY FROM SERBIA

KATARINA DRENJANIN

1. SERBIA IS OPERATING UNDER AN AUTOCRATIC REGIME THAT ACTIVELY SUPPRESSES CHANGE

- The Serbian government responds to dissent—especially from artists, cultural workers, and students—with suppression, violence, and control over resources and visibility.

2. STUDENT-LED MOVEMENTS BECAME A RARE CATALYST FOR MASS CIVIC MOBILIZATION

- A large, decentralized student movement (ages ~18–late 20s) organized nationally, blocked public universities, and coordinated democratic, nonviolent actions.
- Students' leadership generated broad public trust and participation.

3. MORAL LEGITIMACY CAME FROM YOUTH AND FROM PARENTS PROTECTING THEIR CHILDREN

- The emotional power of the movement expanded participation beyond traditional activists
- Students' visibility shifted the emotional stakes: people joined not just politically, but protectively and relationally.

4. SELF-ORGANIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE WERE THE MOVEMENT'S MOST ENDURING OUTCOMES

- The most lasting achievement was not policy change but collective learning in self-organization, democratic decision-making, and resilience.



“What happened was that young people succeeded to raise voices of many different citizen and social groups... which was something organizations and parties weren’t able to succeed in the past.”

“It’s a lesson of self-organization that has stayed.”

– Katarina Drenjanin–

STORY FROM SERBIA

KATARINA DRENJANIN

5. REPRESSION PRODUCES EXHAUSTION, SILENCE, AND STRATEGIC PAUSE, NOT DISAPPEARANCE

- After intense repression, movements enter periods of rest and reduced visibility, while the regime continues consolidating power.
- This pause is framed as recovery, not defeat.

6. CULTURAL WORKERS FORM A PARALLEL SURVIVAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Independent cultural and human rights organizations help people survive materially, socially, and imaginatively under authoritarian neglect.
- The government funds itself, not public well-being.

7. ACCESS TO CULTURE AND ACTIVISM IS DEEPLY UNEQUAL

- Educated youth with time and access dominate cultural networks, while working youth are structurally excluded from participation.

8. INVISIBILITY IS A CORE TACTIC OF AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL

- Independent cultural scenes are rendered invisible through media capture, funding control, and information suppression.
- Even local youth often cannot see or access these spaces.

9. ART FUNCTIONS AS AN INVITATION TO COLLECTIVE ACTION AND RESILIENCE

- Youth-led artistic interventions invite broader publics into acts of learning, resistance, and solidarity without relying solely on protest.

10. SITE-SPECIFIC YOUTH ART CHALLENGES STATE POWER SYMBOLICALLY AND MATERIALLY

- A youth theater project staged a performance in an environmentally endangered site targeted by government development, reclaiming space through art.

“We are having some kind of cooling and silence... but probably it isn't any silence at all.”

“Art productions... are inviting the rest of the citizens to join, and rebel, and show resilience.”

-- Katarina Drenjanin--



STORY FROM THE PHILIPPINES

BENJIE KITAY

1. AUTHORITARIANISM THRIVES THROUGH SILENCE, FEAR, AND HISTORICAL ERASURE

- When people begin to see the truth, power responds by erasing the tools of reflection.
- In the Philippine context, this takes the form of rewriting or slowly erasing history, especially memories of martial law, violence, and repression.
- History is not just memory; it is a political battleground. When history is erased, people lose the ability to question the present.

2. YOUTH INHERIT A BROKEN SYSTEM THEY DID NOT CREATE BUT MUST LIVE WITH

- Young people in the Philippines are growing up inside an unfinished authoritarian history shaped by political dynasties, loyalty-based power, and normalized fear.
- This system rewards obedience and silence rather than service or accountability.
- Martial law may be officially over, but its culture—fear, loyalty to strongmen, lack of checks and balances—continues to shape governance and everyday life.

3. THE “PERFECT STORM”: AUTHORITARIANISM + POPULISM + DIGITAL MANIPULATION

- What makes the current moment especially dangerous is the convergence of: historical authoritarian playbooks, populist political culture, social media, algorithms, and disinformation
- Power no longer needs tanks; it needs trolls, influencers, and repetition.
- For many youth, the phone becomes the classroom, the newspaper, and the judge—making curiosity easy to hijack and critical thinking harder to sustain.



**“Mirrors showed the truth.
Mirrors were destroyed.”**

**“Attention becomes truth.
Popularity becomes authority.”**

**“We stop asking why and start
following who.”**

-- Benjie Kitay--

STORY FROM THE PHILIPPINES

BENJIE KITAY

4. FROM MANIPULATED MINDS TO HARDENED HEARTS

- The effects of disinformation go beyond belief; they reshape emotion and morality. Over time:
 - Questioning is replaced by agreement
 - Empathy is replaced by indifference
 - Violence becomes normalized
- Extrajudicial killings, imprisonment, and the labeling of activists as “terrorists” become accepted as necessary for “order.”
- This is how, “minds become imprisoned and hearts go cold.”

5. THEATER AS RESISTANCE: STORIES AS MIRRORS

- Community theater as an act of resistance—a way to disrupt silence, restore memory, and reawaken critical and emotional capacities.
- Stories function as mirrors:
 - They reflect truths people are taught not to see
 - They reconnect youth to history, roots, and community
 - They open space for questioning and action

“Theater can change lives. By telling real stories, it helped me see my place in the problem—and choose to be part of the solution.”

“Hope is not waiting. It is remembering. Speaking. Acting.”

-- Benjie Kitay--

6. PAGASA: A FRAMEWORK FOR HOPE, ACTION, AND COLLECTIVE CHANGE

- Paninindigan (Viewpoint & Conviction): the courage to question and doubt
- Galing at Gawa (Skill & Action): turning knowledge into action
- Sarili at Samahan (Self & Community): personal awakening that becomes collective movement
- Hope, in this framing, is not passive optimism—it is memory, speech, and action.

7. FROM SURVIVAL TO SOLUTION: PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH ART

- Benjie’s own journey—from street survival to theater—embodies the framework he describes.
- Theater gave him a stage instead of a sentence, helping him see his place within unjust systems and choose to become part of the solution.

8. FINAL CALL: RESIST SILENCE, PROTECT HISTORY, TRUST YOUR VOICE

- Remember history
- Spread truth
- Refuse silence
- Strengthen collective resistance

STORY FROM KENYA

ESTHER MWIKALI

1. YOUTH CRIMINALIZATION AS GOVERNANCE

- Youth are systematically profiled, arbitrarily arrested, extorted, and brutalized.
- Arrests are deliberately carried out on Fridays to bypass constitutional protections on detention.
- Speaking, organizing, or protesting is treated as criminal behavior rather than civic participation.

2. ELECTIONS WITHOUT TRUST OR LEGITIMACY

- Although Kenya has held regular elections since independence in 1963, almost every election cycle is marked by violence, fear, and death, with the notable exception of 2002.
- Contested results, accusations of rigging, and post-election violence have eroded public trust.
- With the absence of a unifying opposition figure who historically helped calm tensions, the country faces deep uncertainty ahead of future elections.

3. ECONOMIC PRESSURE AS A DRIVER OF REPRESSION

- Kenya's economic crisis is central to the political unrest:
 - High taxation and rising cost of living
 - Severe youth unemployment
 - Escalating national debt that perpetuates a cycle of borrowing
- Youth—who make up 75% of the population—are denied jobs, capital, and a supportive environment for entrepreneurship.
- Economic exclusion pushes many into informal or criminalized survival strategies, which then become justification for further state violence.



“Each election is marked with violence... So we ask ourselves, is it a crime to have elections?”

-- Esther Mwikali--

STORY FROM KENYA

ESTHER MWIKALI

4. POLICING, IMPUNITY, AND SELECTIVE JUSTICE

- Esther highlights the unequal application of the law:
 - Ordinary citizens face arrest and punishment
 - Political elites operate with near-total impunity
- The Gen Z–led protests against the Finance Bill (June 2024) are cited as a turning point, where youth were beaten, arrested, and killed simply for demanding economic justice.

5. STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN FOOD, HEALTH, AND DAILY SURVIVAL

- State policies extend repression into everyday life:
 - Laws restricting farmers from planting indigenous seeds undermine food sovereignty
 - Imported seeds are expensive and untrusted
 - Health insurance reforms require unaffordable lump sum payments
- These policies disproportionately harm poor and informal workers, deepening inequality and social insecurity.

“Opportunities are not given to the youth... it’s the elderly people who are still in positions.”

“They were brutalized... not for doing any crime, but because of asking for their rights.”

– Esther Mwikali–

6. YOUTH EXCLUSION FROM POWER AND LEADERSHIP

- Despite being the demographic majority, youth are systematically excluded from:
 - Appointed positions
 - Elected office
 - Political campaigns (which are dominated by money)
- This exclusion fuels political apathy, especially among young voters who feel betrayed by unfulfilled promises.

7. CREATIVE RESISTANCE: TECHNOLOGY AND ART

- Facing lethal consequences for direct speech, youth have shifted tactics.
- Social media enables decentralized, rapid mobilization without visible coordination.
- When speaking becomes dangerous, art becomes strategy:
 - Murals, graffiti, and T-shirts
 - Theater, role play, spoken word, poetry
 - Performative actions (“storming”) that reenact police violence in public spaces to generate witnessing
- Art transforms public space into a site of political education, collective memory, and resistance.

8. CALL FOR GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

- Transnational youth networks
- Intergenerational solidarity
- Shared artistic platforms (including joint theater and performance)
- Collective messaging against authoritarianism.

STORY FROM THE USA

DOM HOLMES

1. DIAGNOSIS OF THE CURRENT U.S. MOMENT: DEMOCRACY AT A BREAKING POINT

- The United States is experiencing an active erosion of democratic norms, driven by white supremacist and fascist forces operating both inside and alongside formal institutions.
- Authoritarianism is defined not abstractly but concretely:
 - Power understood as crushing opposition
 - Militarized policing and paramilitary violence directed at communities and dissenters
- The future of U.S. democracy is not predetermined; it hinges on what people do next. Inaction accelerates decline.



2. LIVED EXPERIENCE AS POLITICAL FORMATION

- Dom Holmes grounds his political analysis in working class upbringing in Baltimore, marked by:
 - Deep segregation
 - Systemic corruption (multiple mayors facing criminal charges)
 - Chronic violence and insecurity
- Violence is framed as structural and cultural, not incidental:
 - The U.S. is described as uniquely violent due to both ideology and access to military-grade weapons.
- These conditions shaped an early understanding of structural inequality, limited life chances, and the urgency of collective change.

“If you don’t continue to work on it [democracy], one generation will wake up without it.”

“We can’t address issues like this... without having connection to each other, and without having the ability to have honest conversations with each other.”

-- Dom Holmes--

STORY FROM THE USA

DOM HOLMES

3. SYSTEMIC RACISM AS A CATALYST FOR POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

- The murder of Trayvon Martin is presented as a formative moment:
 - An unarmed Black teenager killed by a private citizen
 - The justice system legitimized the killing, reinforcing systemic racism rather than correcting it
- The key insight is not only injustice itself, but how law and institutions normalize it.
- This realization pushed Holmes toward community-based work rooted in connection, not abstraction.

4. THE CORE PROBLEM: DISCONNECTION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

- Authoritarianism thrives on disconnection.
- Honest, difficult conversations are impossible without relational groundwork.
- Structural injustice cannot be addressed without social trust and shared understanding.
- Race, immigration status, and identity are used as tools of division.
- The only divide that truly matters: democratic free expression vs. concentrated wealth and power
- Ultra-wealthy actors and corporations benefit when communities are divided and distracted.

5. WARNING: ESCALATION TOWARD INTERNAL VIOLENCE

- The U.S. is drifting toward revolutionary conditions.
- Without intervention, polarization is likely to culminate in internal violence.
- The moral responsibility of this moment is to bridge the gap between disengagement and revolt.

6. COMMUNITY BUILDING AS THE ANTIDOTE TO FASCISM

- Fascism depends on:
 - Division
 - Dehumanization
 - Disbelief in shared reality
- The counter-strategy is community:
 - Shared spaces
 - Shared stories
 - Shared power
- Examples already emerging:
 - Multiracial, multigenerational protests
 - Community-led ICE alert systems
 - Revival of radical community traditions (e.g., Black Panther–inspired organizing)

“We are no longer connecting with our neighbors, which allows us to believe lies about them that isn’t true.”

-- Dom Holmes--

STORY FROM THE USA

DOM HOLMES

7. A CRUCIAL FRAMEWORK: “THE TIRED & CONFUSED” VS. “THE ANGRY & REVOLTING”

Holmes offered a diagnostic lens for political engagement in the U.S.:

A. The Tired and Confused

- People overwhelmed by survival:
 - Housing, food, safety, basic stability
- Largely excluded from civic participation because:
 - They lack time, resources, and energy
 - Civic education is weak—most people do not understand how democracy actually works
- Democracy is mistakenly treated as inherited, rather than something that must be actively rebuilt each generation.

B. The Angry and Revolting

- People who understand how the system is supposed to function
- Anger emerges after understanding, not before
- They recognize democratic systems are under attack and respond with resistance

"Art and culture can be the center point of bringing people together in community, in a non-transactional space"

– Dom Holmes–

8. THE BACKROADS PROJECT: ARTS & CULTURE AS ENTRY POINTS

Backroads Project as a strategic, non-revolutionary intervention designed to engage the “tired and confused.”

- Arts and culture-based, not issue-heavy or transactional
- Includes:
 - Community concerts and events
 - Story-based media highlighting everyday people
 - Music and visual art as narrative vehicles
- Designed to:
 - Respect people’s limited leisure time
 - Create spaces that feel welcoming rather than demanding
 - Rebuild community before asking for action

Key Insight:

- Engagement must start where people are, not where organizers wish they were.

9. AUTHORITARIANISM IS A GLOBAL PROBLEM

- U.S. authoritarian drift is linked to global authoritarian networks.
- Democratic resistance must also be transnational, collaborative, and solidaristic.
- What happens in the U.S. is not isolated—it resonates globally.

EMERGING PATTERNS ACROSS CONTEXTS

Authoritarianism Is Lived, Not Abstract

- Shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding
- Criminalization of protest and youth organizing
- Arbitrary arrests, surveillance, and legal precarity
- Normalization of fear as a governing strategy

Youth Are Targeted Disproportionately

- In Kenya, being young was described as almost criminalized.
- In Serbia, young people face systemic pressure and political marginalization.
- In the Philippines and U.S., youth activism is surveilled, suppressed, or manipulated.

Creativity as Resistance and Survival

- Cultural work, storytelling, humor, and art create alternative spaces of engagement.
- Creative practice protects dignity where public protest may invite violence.
- Imagination becomes a survival strategy under repression.

Relational and Care-Centered Strategies

- Movements need care, not just confrontation.
- Sustainable resistance requires emotional, relational, and community-based grounding.
- Systems thinking and coalition building are essential to long-term change.

The Urgent Need for Transnational Solidarity

- Authoritarian dynamics are global and interconnected.
- Isolation weakens movements.
- Cross-border solidarity networks strengthen resilience, strategy, and hope.

Hope as Practice, Not Optimism

- Choosing courage amid repression
- Continuing to organize despite risk
- Building creative, ethical alternatives to violent systems

CLOSING RITUAL

ZOYA SARDASHTI

PURPOSE + TRANSITION

- After heavy testimonies, Zoya invited participants to notice “how somatically our body is receiving this information,” offering the Morning Ritual as a way to sustain “clarity and focus and connection” amid conflict and online witnessing.
- Grounded in Zoya’s original story, the ritual was created “as a result of witnessing ongoing state-sanctioned violence in Iran,” as a coping practice for “grief that has been sustained for a very long time.”

METHOD

Participants were guided to:

- let breath “anchor your center”
- sense the “back body” and the feeling of being supported
- visualize tension (jaw/shoulders/hips/wrists) “slip away” into the surface holding them
- experiment with letting go of “thinking of your body as a unit... to be categorized”
- find an “expansive” movement/gesture/sound/word that activates horizontality
- optionally document sensations through words or sketches, creating a reusable “practice” for overwhelm.

CORE IDEAS

- Creativity as a rehearsed capacity
- Body-knowing comes before strategy
- Horizontality as ethical relation
- Alternative to risky visibility

WHAT EMERGED FROM THE AUDIENCE

- “A lot of tears... Tears. Our information to release.” / “lightness, smile, release... heavy head... breath.”
- “Reach long cords from hips out connecting with networks of others.” / “Feel... your ancestors. Your loved ones... Collapse the false idea that self and community are separate.”
- “Our African ancestral wisdom rooted in movement, ritual and ceremony is my source of strength... ‘we were already born with this...’”
- “Our bodies carry political stories both for now or imagined.” / “Awakening the body as a site for imagining new political realities is my curiosity.”
- “I was blocked by the different ways we ‘categorise’ people... sad and angry.” / “Categories are unhelpful... there is anger bound up in a fixed placement.”
- “I’m struck by the meanings of the word ‘movement’—in the body; and the movement within the political body.”
- “In times of political resistance... our bodies can become heavy... It felt important finding a strategy like this to free them.” / “Wonderful exercise, connects and provides environment for reflection.” / “Even though grief is a constant companion, it does not make me unresponsive.”



ABOUT IMPACT

IMPACT is a diverse global organization, advocating for arts and culture to transform conflict and build more creative and just societies. IMPACT is governed by a diverse and dynamic board comprised of artists, scholars and practitioners in the field of arts, culture and conflict transformation from around the globe, including Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Israel, Kenya, Japan, Serbia, and the Philippines.



JOIN THE IMPACT COMMUNITY

- Partner with Us: we are looking for like-minded individuals, networks and organizations to work collaboratively with in the space of arts, culture and conflict transformation
- Take part in our upcoming events: sign up to our newsletter to receive news about our in-depth event series on the key themes from IMPACT: Creating Hope Together
- Join the IMPACT community: sign up to our newsletter, follow us on social media: @impactartorg
- Find out more about our programs: read our report and check out the videos on our YouTube channel
- Donate to IMPACT, so that we can support our growing IMPACT community by advocating to policymakers, funders and leaders for arts, culture and conflict transformation
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