



Federal Ministry for  
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,  
Women and Youth

# ***Fourth Civic Engagement Report***

*Access opportunities for civic engagement*

*Key findings*



# Foreword

Dear Readers,

Around 29 million people volunteer in Germany. Most of them carry out their civic engagement rather independently in self-organised groups and initiatives or as formal “volunteering” in clubs and associations; some also do so in digital formats. Thus, voluntary work takes place in all areas of society and is as varied and diverse as our society itself. All of these committed people are a great wealth in this society. They do something for themselves as well as for others, strengthen cooperation and cohesion and enable participation and social integration.

Since 2012, Civic Engagement Reports have dealt with changing aspects of engagement. This Fourth Civic Engagement Report focusses for the first time on the perspective of those involved (in civic engagement) - and those who can imagine getting involved in light of current developments. The report deals with access barriers to civic engagement and identifies what specific groups of people specifically need in order to be able to get involved.

With this approach, for the first time the focus is on both sides of civic engagement: the social relevance and the individual significance for the people involved. In future, we should consider both equally important.

The report shows how social participation and personal well-being can be achieved through engagement in the same way. It is all the more important to overcome the thresholds described so that those people and groups whose opportunities for participation are already restricted are not excluded.

This finding is an urgent call to action for the political levels from the federal government to the Länder federal states to the municipalities and also for civil society.

I am delighted that you are interested in the Fourth Civic Engagement Report and hope that you will gain important insights from reading it – perhaps also for your own civic engagement.

Yours sincerely,



Lisa Paus  
Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth





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# ***1 Introduction***

The Fourth Civic Engagement Report analyses thresholds for civic engagement in Germany. It shows that social inequalities such as differences in income, school education or migration background influence civic engagement. Existing inequalities are often exacerbated within the scope of civic engagement. The report identifies “thresholds” that can act as barriers to access to civic engagement.

Civic engagement is an important form of social participation and is of great importance for social integration. By getting involved, people experience that they can make a contribution to the common good and help shape society; they experience trust, recognition and self-efficacy. They can also gain personal experience and build helpful networks.

The involvement and voluntary civic engagement of people is very important for the cohesion of society and democracy. It must be possible for people to take up and carry out voluntary civic engagement if they so wish, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation and identity, educational background, socio-economic status or origin. It is the task of the state to organise the framework conditions for civic engagement in such a way that all people have suitable access to it and can participate.

The Fourth Civic Engagement Report identifies considerable differences in participation rates in civic engagement: characteristics such as income, school-leaving qualification, employment status, migration background, age or disability make a difference. People on low incomes, with a low level of education and with experience of migration are under-represented in civic engagement, meaning that they are less likely to volunteer. Individual preferences alone cannot explain these differences in civic engagement participation.

It is of general interest to understand why certain social groups are less frequently involved in civic engagement than others. This is where the Fourth Civic Engagement Report comes in: it sheds light on the access routes and access opportunities for civic engagement and analyses the obstacles that make access difficult or impossible for less privileged groups. The report refers to these obstacles as “thresholds” because they are often invisible, but not insurmountable. The report analyses these different thresholds and explains how they work.<sup>1</sup>

According to a resolution passed by the German Bundestag on 19 March 2009 (printed matter 16/11774), the Federal Government is to present a report on civic engagement in Germany once per parliamentary term, which will be compiled by an independent Expert Commission. This report is intended to support a sustainable engagement policy and provide recommendations for action. Based on a new focus in each case, the Fourth Civic Engagement Report is intended to stimulate the discourse on the status and development of civic engagement in Germany and provide the Federal Government and other stakeholders in the field of civic engagement with recommendations for action. The Fourth Civic Engagement Report analyses “Access opportunities for civic engagement”.

The Report Commission has identified thirteen “thresholds” that act as obstacles to or impede access to civic engagement. The report provides suggestions and concrete recommendations for action on how access to civic engagement can be promoted, made more inclusive and sustainably strengthened through suitable framework conditions. The focus here is on population groups that have so far been less involved or less able to get involved.

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<sup>1</sup> These “Key findings” present selected topics and results of the Fourth Civic Engagement Report. They do not fully reflect the report and therefore the views of the Commission, but rather summarise key aspects in a generally understandable way. For reasons of clarity and readability, no references are given; these can be found in detail in the Fourth Civic Engagement Report.

The Fourth Civic Engagement Report is based on the results of three social science studies: a special analysis of the 2019 “German Survey on Volunteering” (“Deutscher Freiwilligensurvey”), additional questions in the DeZIM Online Access Panel and a qualitative study with group discussions with less privileged volunteers about thresholds in engagement. The Commission has also commissioned a legal opinion<sup>2</sup> on the issue of legal barriers to volunteering and civic engagement in Germany.

The report shows that social inequalities such as differences in income, educational qualifications and migration background also influence the opportunities for participation in civic engagement. For the Federal Government, the Fourth Civic Engagement Report is the starting point for a broad discussion on diversity, inclusion and open participation opportunities in civic engagement.

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<sup>2</sup> The report “Legal barriers to volunteering and civic engagement in Germany” is available for free download at: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ss-ar-94439-4>.



***2 Key messages  
of the  
Fourth Civic  
Engagement  
Report***

- **There are differences and inequalities in civic engagement in Germany:** people with a low level of education, low income or without German citizenship are proportionately less likely to volunteer than people with a high level of education, high income and German citizenship. These differences in civic engagement behaviour cannot be explained by individual preferences. Especially as many people who have not previously been involved are quite willing to take up voluntary work.
- **The report identifies thirteen thresholds that are responsible for the unequal distribution of access opportunities for civic engagement and participation for different social groups in Germany.** These thresholds are often not consciously erected, but are no less effective for that. Not all of these thresholds are perceived by all volunteers as a real barrier or obstacle to accessing civic engagement. Some are less visible or even invisible in their effect against taking up a form of civic engagement. Other thresholds act like barriers that are easier to recognise and remove. Others are hard to recognise and difficult to eliminate.
- **A lack of financial resources is a key barrier to civic engagement,** as civic engagement is often associated with overt and covert costs. For example, mobility costs may be incurred for the purchase of a public transport ticket or the use of a car, or socialising costs for a cup of coffee or tea at a meeting in a pub. The Commission would like to raise awareness of this among civic society organisations and the volunteering sector. For example, it proposes staggered membership models and unbureaucratic reimbursement options for travel costs, among other things, as well as fixed contact persons for cost reimbursements in order to avoid stigmatising or shaming those affected by poverty.
- **Organisations have a dual role, they are facilitators and shapers of voluntary civic engagement and at the same time a threshold:** they open up spaces for civic engagement and democratic action. At the same time, they themselves can also – usually unconsciously – create barriers to access and participation for those interested in civic engagement, for example, in their structures or cultural practices.
- **Civic society organisations are key players in breaking down barriers to civic engagement.** Organisations can themselves ensure more open access opportunities and take measures to promote diversity and combat often “hidden” discrimination. The report emphasises the need to create inclusive and discrimination-sensitive organisational cultures in civic engagement in order to promote diversity in organisations. Organisations can act as learning institutions that recognise and remove thresholds and barriers to access. They can review their structures and ensure that they do not reinforce social inequalities.
- **The report calls on civic society organisations to raise awareness of equal opportunities and take measures to reduce discrimination.** Aligning your own organisational culture more closely with this is of great importance for open access opportunities to civic engagement. As learning institutions, all organisations can help to identify and remove barriers to civic engagement. For example, the articles of association can stipulate that different social groups are represented in decision-making bodies. An environment is needed in which disadvantaged social groups can get involved without fear of discrimination. People from all social groups should be approached equally to get involved.

- **“New organisations” can make an important contribution to improving access opportunities for civic engagement.** They arise because less privileged people in “established” organisations are less likely to have their concerns and issues heard or encounter access barriers and “thresholds”. New organisations should be recognised as important places for civic society participation and supported through cooperation with established organisations. Access to funding should be available to all organisations in a comparable manner in order to support the diversity of organisations and promote renewal processes in civic society.
- **The report emphasises the importance of recognising and promoting different forms of engagement and informal civic engagement.** Informal civic engagement often has particularly low access thresholds, making it more accessible to those interested in civic engagement. Informal engagement is still less visible and receives less public recognition than engagement in clubs, associations and formal organisations. This can lead to informal civic engagement not being seen, recognised or promoted. The aim should be to make the wide variety of opportunities for social participation visible, including in informal civic engagement.
- **To improve access opportunities, it is important to promote experiential spaces for participation and civic engagement, especially in child and youth work and in community work.** These areas offer important opportunities to gain initial experience with participation, which facilitates later involvement. The expansion of open child and youth work and community work is seen as necessary in order to make it easier for less privileged groups to get involved.
- **Protection for volunteers who need support due to threats and repression is a basic prerequisite for carrying out civic engagement.** The report recommends reviewing legal requirements, reforming charity law and systematically recording criminal offences against volunteers. Political education should also be strengthened in order to convey the value of democracy and prevent anti-democratic threats. The aim is to better monitor the growing threat to democratic civic engagement, make it more visible and develop targeted countermeasures.
- **Barrier-free meeting spaces for community use and local civic engagement** in both rural and urban areas help to specifically reduce the lack of places for civic engagement as a threshold to access. In addition, existing spaces in the municipalities can be made more accessible and designed to be barrier-free.
- **Digital engagement is recognised as a valuable opportunity for civic engagement, independent of time and place.** The report recommends promoting the potential of digital civic engagement more strongly, including supporting free and open-source digital platforms, developing support services to protect against digital attacks and promoting digital skills in order to be able to move safely in the digital space. This also includes, for example, possible support with access to digital devices and the Internet.
- **It is recommended that the legal framework for civic engagement be strengthened through standardisation, promotion and protection, and that bureaucratic processes be simplified.** The aim is to disseminate knowledge about one’s own rights and the functioning of the legal system to civic society so that these rights can be asserted if necessary and legal strategies can be used wisely.
- **Not only the lack of available hours, but also the lack of flexibility in organising one’s own time can be a barrier to civic engagement** – especially for people who have to care for others and for people with restrictions or disabilities. Support services for people involved in care work should be designed in such a way that they enable those involved to plan their time more reliably. Organisations should offer more flexible participation options for volunteers.

***3 Central  
concepts and  
perspectives of  
the report***

There are different ideas and concepts of civic engagement. The scientific or governmental understanding of the term, and the everyday understanding of civic engagement and voluntary work are not always the same. Depending on the perspective, the focus is more on the unpaid work performed in the civic engagement programme or on democratic co-determination, the contribution to the common good or the time given to other people in the civic engagement programme. The following terms are of central importance in the Fourth Civic Engagement Report.

**Access and opportunities:** the term “access” refers to the path to civic engagement or to a specific task or position in civic engagement. “Access opportunities” refer to the different possibilities that people have to get involved. Interested parties must make a certain effort to take on a task or position. Equal access opportunities do not mean that every person is entitled to a certain position, regardless of suitability or the purpose of the organisation. It is legitimate for associations or initiatives to select the people who are best suited. However, it is important that all people in Germany should have the fundamental right to participate in the public sphere and in civic society.

**Thresholds:** the term “threshold” describes the often barely visible or invisible obstacles that people have to overcome in order to volunteer. These obstacles cannot simply be removed and do not only occur when starting civic engagement, but also accompany civic engagement when taking on a task or position in civic engagement. A threshold must always be overcome. The problem with these thresholds is their “invisibility”; they are often overlooked as real hurdles, even though they are difficult for certain groups to overcome. Thresholds are not insurmountable barriers. However, overcoming them can require considerable effort and courage. These “thresholds” cannot be completely removed and have an important function in some contexts (e.g. the police clearance certificate as a prerequisite for voluntary work with minors).

**Privileges:** the term “privilege” draws attention to the fact that things that are supposedly taken for granted do not apply equally to all people. Privileges are often “invisible” because they are taken for granted. By “less privileged people involved in civic engagement”, the report means people who are disadvantaged in society. They are often not automatically perceived as “helpful volunteers” or are given less attention. For less privileged people, it is not a matter of course that they are perceived as helpful and useful volunteers whose participation would be appreciated by an organisation, for example. They also enjoy less of the privilege of having their words and issues listened to as a matter of course or of having their concerns recognised by others as meaningful and “normal”. In addition, they often have fewer financial and material resources that are necessary for a civic engagement. The effectiveness of privileges depends on the environment of the respective volunteer work, in which they are taken for granted or not.

**Established organisations and new organisations:** organisations also have different human and financial resources and differ in their influence and the recognition they receive. “Established organisations” generally have a high reputation, strong networks and sufficient financial resources to implement their projects. By contrast, “new” organisations from less privileged groups, such as migrant self-organisations or organisations of people affected by poverty, have to fight harder for recognition and resources. This inequality influences the ability of new organisations to take on tasks and positions in the field of civic engagement and in civic society.

**Informal civic engagement:** the generally shared understanding of civic engagement can lead to volunteers not seeing themselves as such. The focus of promoting civic engagement, engagement policy and engagement research is often on “formal engagement” in clubs, associations and organisations. “Informal” engagement, for example, in self-organised groups and initiatives or neighbourhood help, is less often understood and recognised as voluntary civic engagement due to the lack of a formal framework. As a result, informal civic engagement often receives less attention and support. Informal civic engagement is particularly “inclusive”. Inclusion or being inclusive here means that anyone who wants to get involved can do so. People without German citizenship, without a high level of education or with a low income are proportionately more involved in informal civic engagement than people with German citizenship, a high level of school education or a high income.

**Racism** is a structure that permeates all areas of society and, therefore, also civic engagement. In racism, people are ascribed a “different” or “foreign” culture because of their origin, but often also simply because of their appearance or name. They are perceived as being in need of help or as strangers and are less likely to be approached as individuals involved in civic engagement who could make their own contribution and take on responsibility and important positions in organisations, for example. In general, people from less privileged social groups are often constructed as “deficient” when it comes to civic engagement, i.e. something deficient is attributed to them. They are perceived as a target group that requires special support and needs to be reached or persuaded. In many cases, this flawed view is discriminatory insofar as the people addressed in this way do not need to be persuaded to get involved if they are allowed to participate as a matter of course.



***4 Social  
inequality in  
civic engagement***

The special analysis of the 2019 German Survey on Volunteering for the Fourth Civic Engagement Report shows clear differences in civic engagement participation depending on school qualifications, income, employment status or German citizenship. This means that not all social groups are equally involved in civic engagement. Social inequality has an influence on participation in civic engagement. Social inequality includes not only material inequality, but also unequal educational qualifications, recognition, professional reputation, working conditions and health. All of these aspects have an impact on thresholds as barriers to civic engagement.

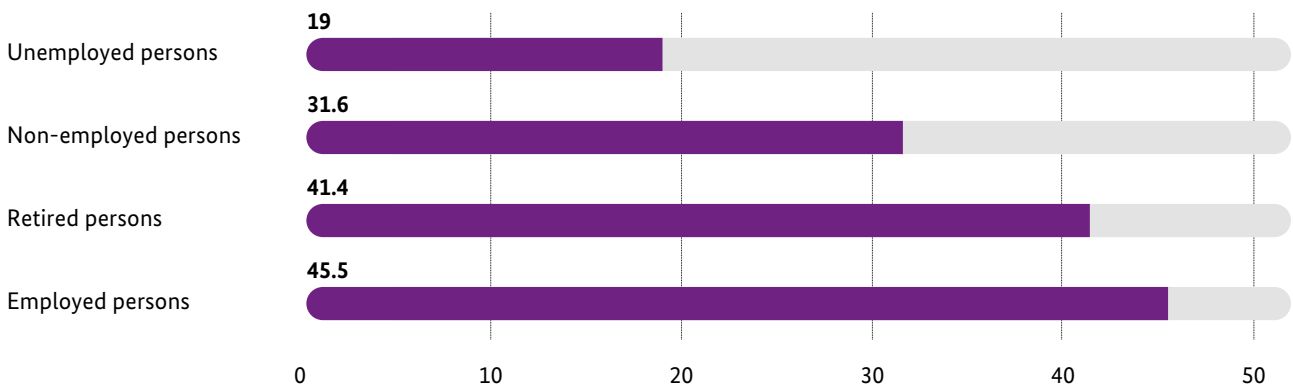
In Germany, 39.7 per cent of the population aged 14 and over are involved in voluntary work. This percentage indicates the average civic engagement rate for all volunteers in Germany. The civic engagement survey shows that the level of a person's income has an impact

on civic engagement: the higher the income, the more likely a person is to volunteer. More than 50 per cent of people with a monthly net income of over EUR 3,000 are involved in voluntary work. For net incomes between EUR 2,000 and 3,000, the civic engagement rate is 40.6 per cent. Only 30.1 per cent of people with a net income of between EUR 1,000 and 2,000 are involved in voluntary work. And with a net income of less than EUR 1,000, this is only 19.5 per cent.

There are also differences in employment status: at 45.5 per cent, people in employment are more likely than average to volunteer. Compared to the average civic engagement rate of 39.7 per cent, retired people are slightly more engaged than average at 41.4 per cent. People who are not in employment (31.6 per cent) and unemployed people (19 per cent) are less likely to be involved in civic engagement.

Figures in per cent (%)

### Civic engagement rate by employment status



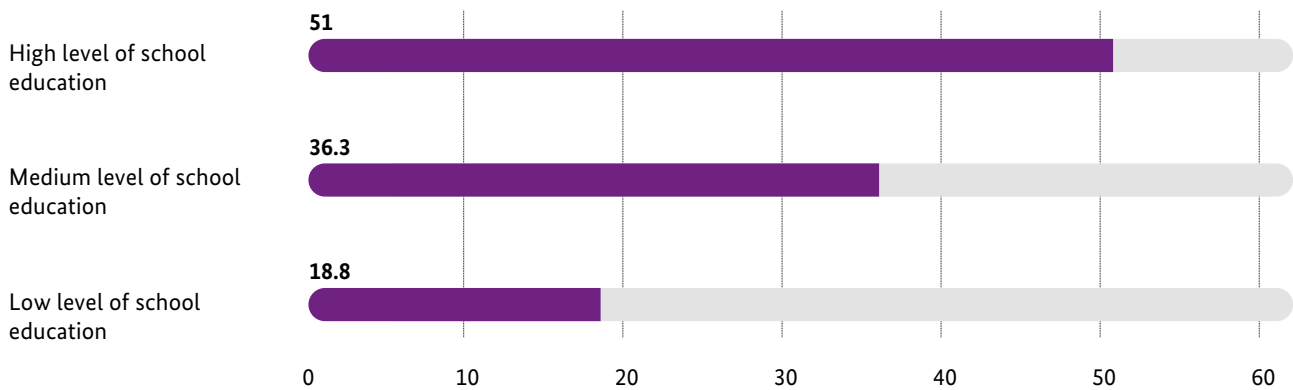
Source: German Survey on Volunteering 2019, special analysis for the Fourth Civic Engagement Report, weighted results. The percentage is based on the resident population aged 14 and over in Germany.

The correlation is just as clear when it comes to school education: 51 per cent of people with a high level of education are involved in civic engagement, as are 36.3 per cent of people with a medium level of school education and 18.8 per cent of people with a low level of school education. There are also differences in terms of nationality: at 43.4 per cent, people with German

citizenship since birth are more likely than average to be involved in civic engagement. At 33.1 per cent, people who have been naturalised in Germany are slightly less likely to be involved in civic engagement than the average of 39.7 per cent. At 17 per cent, people without German citizenship are significantly less likely to be involved in civic engagement.



Figures in per cent (%)

**Civic engagement rate by school education**

Source: German Survey on Volunteering 2019, special analysis for the Fourth Civic Engagement Report, weighted results. The percentage is based on the resident population aged 14 and over in Germany.

As a result, people with a low level of education, low income and without German citizenship are strongly under-represented in civic engagement. Reasons for this can lie both outside the civic engagement itself – such as poverty or a lack of time flexibility – as well as within the civic engagement, if certain social groups are less often approached for engagement or their skills are not seen and recognised. Individual preferences cannot explain these differences in civic engagement behaviour, especially as many of the non-volunteers would often be willing to volunteer.

There are also clear differences in the assumption of board and management functions in voluntary work according to income, educational qualifications and nationality. People with a high school diploma or university entrance qualification are six times more likely to hold board and management positions than people with a lower level of education (elementary or lower secondary school leaving certificate).

People with a low level of school education are therefore significantly less likely to hold a board or management position. When looking at nationality, the difference in board and management functions is also large (2.7 to 11.8 per cent). Access to such leadership and board functions in civic engagement is thus structured even more strongly by social inequality than participation in civic engagement as a whole.

In the group of non-volunteers, the survey on civic engagement asks about the potential for civic engagement, i.e. whether there is a willingness to get involved or not. The group of people with a low level of education (43.3 per cent) and of those with a low income (43.2 per cent) is 10 percentage points larger than the group of people with a high level of school education and a high income who are not involved. This difference is also particularly significant in terms of citizenship: among those without German citizenship, 64.5 per cent are willing to volunteer for civic engagement and 18.5 per cent are not. This proportion is significantly higher than in the group of people with German citizenship since birth, in which 30.2 per cent state a willingness to get involved and 26.3 per cent no willingness.



***5 Spaces and  
social contexts in  
civic engagement***

Civic engagement takes place in social contexts and spaces that have an impact on thresholds in civic engagement. Organisations serve as both enabling spaces and shapers of civic engagement, as well as thresholds: they open up spaces for civic engagement and democratic action, but at the same time they can also create obstacles, hurdles and boundaries. Different solutions must therefore be found in each case to overcome thresholds in organisations: for example, with regard to membership issues, the requirements for non-discriminatory and diversity-conscious organisational development or the creation of more inclusion and diversity in civic society.

“New” organisations, in which less privileged groups – such as migrants and people who describe themselves as “new Germans”, as well as people affected by poverty or people with disabilities – organise themselves, often emerge as a result of the exclusion and difficult access that these people experience in “established” organisations. Such “new” organisations are important spaces for so-called empowerment. Historically, organisations that represent the interests of marginalised groups have emerged time and again. These are therefore recurring renewal processes in the organisational landscape of civic society. The Fourth Civic Engagement Report makes it clear that “established” and “new” organisations are dependent on mutual cooperation: both in future projects and in dealing with the effects of social inequality and discrimination in civic engagement.

Political offices in municipalities, social movements, political initiatives and civic society organisations are indispensable for the proper functioning of the community within the framework of the federal constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany. In recent years, however, voluntary work has come under pressure from various quarters: local politicians as well as numerous actors in a civic society that sees itself as political, have experienced threats and violence from political opponents – particularly from right-wing extremists and groups, as well as from forms of aggressive “non-civic” engagement. However, the Report Commission has also observed that laws at state level (e.g. assembly laws or funding guidelines), as well as unresolved issues in non-profit law (e.g. with regard to participation in political decision-making), are being used to exert pressure on demonstrations and social movements.

Digital civic engagement complements traditional forms of engagement with more flexible options for action and can offer improved access, for example, for people with limited mobility. Digital civic engagement also opens up opportunities for political participation and social inclusion, especially for marginalised groups and people in rural areas. But digital civic engagement can also create new thresholds and reproduce inequalities from traditional engagement. These are often even reinforced.

The Coronavirus pandemic has emphasised the importance of digital forms of civic engagement, but has also highlighted existing inequalities. The digital divide – i.e. the digital gap between groups of people in terms of access to and use of digital technologies and the internet – also has an impact on civic engagement. Nevertheless, digitalisation offers opportunities to make civic engagement more flexible and to include people with different life realities. Measures to reduce social inequalities in the digital space are necessary in order for these to be utilised.

Legal regulations also have an impact on access opportunities for civic engagement. The law limits engagement through numerous specifications in the form of minimum or maximum age limits, as well as requirements regarding nationality or personal suitability for the fulfilment of numerous (public) offices. However, it also reduces unequal access opportunities for civic engagement, as it sets limits to discrimination by means of fundamental rights (in particular, the general principle of equality and the prohibition of discrimination) and a merit principle for the award of public office under Germany’s “Basic Law” (Grundgesetz). There are also supportive practices in municipal and social legislation – such as the recommendation that employers grant a leave of absence to committed individuals within the framework of disability bans or time off regulations – that can serve as role models for other areas of society.



***6 Thresholds  
to and in civic  
engagement***

The Fourth Civic Engagement Report has identified thirteen different thresholds that make access to civic engagement more difficult. In addition, these thresholds can also hinder the exercise of the civic engagement or access to tasks and positions in the civic engagement. These are the key thresholds identified by the Report Commission on the basis of various hearings and social science studies.

## 6.1 Financial and material resources

There are many open and hidden costs in civic engagement that can act as a “threshold” for people with limited financial resources and can exclude them from civic engagement. Civic engagement costs are incurred, for example, for journeys, materials or joint meetings. For people living in poverty, these costs can represent a considerable threshold, i.e. a real obstacle. Financial assistance such as reimbursement of costs and expenses is essential to enable people on low incomes to participate in civic engagement. Even small amounts or “hidden” costs (such as for pens or a calendar) can represent a large threshold. Limited mobility and a lack of funds for travel tickets or a car of their own also severely restrict participation in the programme. Financial benefits, such as cost reimbursements, can enable participation in the programme and lower the threshold for people on low incomes. This is not about the – widely and critically discussed – monetisation of civic engagement, but about recognising the real costs incurred by those involved.

Organisations also face financial challenges, as they have a wide range of expenses, for example, for premises, fees, events or public relations work. The financial resources of organisations vary greatly. Smaller or new organisations, in particular, often struggle with these costs and compete for limited funding. Migrant self-organisations and smaller, locally active associations face additional challenges, as they often lack the resources and staff to apply for funding, for example. Small and “new” organisations are often

unable to keep up with experienced and “established” organisations. Civic society organisations and political actors should be made aware of the thresholds that arise due to a lack of financial resources. The Commission is in favour of easier access to funding for less privileged groups in the area of civic engagement.

**Case study: I am 65 years old and live on a disability pension. I would like to take part in civic activities and get involved, but I often come up against financial hurdles. For example, I often can't afford the cost of a meal together or an outing. At the end of the month, there is often not even enough money for bus or train tickets.<sup>3</sup>**

## 6.2 Time and time autonomy

Available time is a crucial prerequisite for civic engagement. Lack of time can hinder civic engagement. According to the Federal Statistical Office's time use survey, 42.2 per cent of people stated that they had too little time for civic engagement in 2022. In 2012/13, this figure was only 15.3 per cent. People who care for children or elderly relatives often have less free time available. This also applies to people who are dependent on support, such as people with disabilities or students who need time for care, assistance systems or school-related civic engagements. There is often no time left to volunteer.

The lack of autonomy over one's own time can also be a problem if, for example, work has to be done on call or there are no fixed, reliable school opening hours and it is almost impossible to plan voluntary work. Both can lead to people having to end their civic engagement prematurely or not being able to start at all.

<sup>3</sup> The case studies are based on statements made to the Commission in group discussions and hearings. They illustrate the typical experiences and challenges that different groups face when getting involved in civic engagement. In this way, they offer insight into the reality of life for people who want to volunteer or are already doing so.

**Case study: As a blind person, I simply need more time to explore new paths. In general, I need more time for all kinds of organisational things in everyday life compared to sighted people. There is hardly any time left for me to do anything else.**

### 6.3 Discrimination and unequal treatment

The General Equal Treatment Act (AGG), also known as the “Anti-Discrimination Act”, defines “discrimination” as a disadvantage, less favourable form of treatment or harassment on the basis of a characteristic worthy of protection or the attribution of such a characteristic without objective justification. One positive finding is that people involved in voluntary work feel less discriminated against than those in gainful employment, at public offices and authorities or when looking for a job, for example. This applies to people with and without a migration background. However, people who are formally or informally involved in report more frequent experiences of discrimination than those who are not. The report cannot clarify with certainty whether this discrimination occurs in the civic engagement itself, whether people are committed to taking action against discrimination, or whether those who have more opportunities to participate make higher demands on the equality and treatment they receive as equals.

Recruitment networks are of great importance for successful access to civic engagement. People are approached by others to get involved, especially by distant acquaintances, less so by close friends and family. People with a high social status, a high level of education and a income are more often asked to get involved than less privileged people because they generally have more contacts with people who are involved. People who are considered to have a migrant background, for example, are less likely to be approached about getting involved and are generally less represented in formal involvement in established organisations.

People affected by discrimination report a lack of confidence as a barrier to engagement. They anticipate discrimination and therefore avoid access to organisations that they assume are not sensitive to discrimination. This means that social discrimination has an impact on the civic engagement. Organisations should take these experiences into account in their dealings with those interested in civic engagement and in their public image.

**Case study:  
My child has been a sports enthusiast ever since we came to Germany, and as a father I wanted to get involved in a sports club. I've already helped with simple things, but when I offered to take on more demanding tasks, the other people in the organisation didn't want to. They just couldn't imagine that I, as a refugee who perhaps doesn't speak German very well yet, would be able to do it – even though I was really motivated and ready to do it.**

## 6.4 Participation

In the Commission’s hearings, people affected by poverty, migrants and people with disabilities reported that they are often unable to have a say in their work because they are not used to the usual way of speaking. They feel excluded, especially in situations involving co-determination and change. The qualitative study with group discussions also showed how different the ways of speaking in civic engagement can be depending on the social group and background. While some groups use academic terms and complex sentences, others tend to speak in simple and straightforward terms. This diversity in itself is not problematic; it only becomes a threshold when certain ways of speaking are seen and expected as the “right” ones, while other ways of speaking are devalued.

In different milieus, people tend to speak in different ways. In civic society organisations, however, certain types and ways of speaking often prevail. This creates a certain idea of normality as to how people should speak in the organisation. Ways of speaking that do not correspond to this type are perceived as inappropriate and tend to be devalued. This leads to people with these ways of speaking feeling that their way of speaking does not fit into the prevailing organisational culture and that they “can’t say anything”.

People affected by poverty, people with disabilities and people with a migration background have emphasised that they are therefore unable to have a say in important engagement contexts. In view of the “dominant” ways of speaking, they feel excluded and do not belong. Small everyday reactions can silence people, for example, when they are treated as less serious dialogue partners by others. However, ways of speaking are contested, so that changes in the practice of speaking are possible. Those involved in civic engagement can therefore try to use other ways of speaking to make engagement more accessible, even if this is a lengthy process.

### Case study:

*In a group I wanted to get involved in, I had the feeling that you had to have a certain amount of basic knowledge to be accepted. I found that difficult, especially because I’m not that politically active yet. I felt rejected rather than invited and also had difficulties joining in because I often lacked the right terms and knowledge*

## 6.5 Politically motivated violence and non-civic engagement

There has been an increase in political disputes, violence and politically motivated pressure, including hostility and physical attacks on volunteers and civic society institutions. This violence is reflected in a brutalisation of the culture of debate, insults and threats, and also in the number of cases recorded in police crime statistics. In 2023, the number of offences against public officials and elected representatives rose to 3,798 cases for public officials and 2,710 cases for elected representatives.

Politically active civic society is also affected by attacks. This not only jeopardises the sense of security of individuals, but also restricts the ability of organisations to act. However, legal means are also frequently used to intimidate unwelcome activists. This form of intimidation can make it more difficult to finance and realise projects. The Fourth Civic Engagement Report shows that for over 80 per cent of respondents to the DeZIM panel, fear of hostility is not an obstacle to civic engagement, but for over 15 per cent of respondents, it is. People with a migration background and people who have experienced discrimination are particularly affected. In rural areas, it is also difficult to find enough candidates for political office.

The threat of physical violence and actual acts of violence clearly restrict the actions of those involved. Such threats are reported by those involved in (local) political offices, but also in the hearings of the Report Commission from educational work, political initiatives or the area of sporting civic engagement. Violence and threats can be experienced on different levels and in different forms, for example, through hostile language, social exclusion or offensive ignoring of certain concerns.

***Case study: I work as a volunteer politician and am repeatedly harassed and threatened. These attacks, whether through hate mail or in person, are so stressful that I am now thinking about giving up my civic engagement because the pressure is simply becoming too great.***

## 6.6 Spaces

Spaces for encounters, networking and community activities are crucial prerequisites for civic engagement. A lack of spaces and meeting places or those that are difficult to reach represent a threshold for engagement, and their absence limits the opportunities for encounters and joint activities. Publicly accessible and communal spaces such as school canteens, neighbourhood centres, multi-generational houses and libraries are crucial for social interaction. These rooms should be low-barrier or, in the best case, barrier-free. Poor public transport connections, a lack of financial resources (e.g. for local transport) and structural barriers can make it difficult to access engagement spaces.

“Digital” spaces are also becoming increasingly important for civic engagement. A lack of digital equipment and a lack of digital knowledge are a barrier to access. People with limited financial resources are less likely to have access to the necessary devices or fast internet connections, which makes it more difficult for them to participate in digital forms of engagement. Public spaces should therefore provide free Wi-Fi and digital devices to enable digital participation. Promoting digital inclusion and providing digital resources can help ensure broad participation in civic engagement.

*Safer Spaces* are particularly important so that vulnerable people can exchange ideas without having to fear racism or discrimination. Protection concepts and the safe design of spaces are necessary to protect those involved from hostility and attacks. It is also important that those involved in civic engagement and interested parties are well informed about the possible uses of these spaces and that access is organised as unbureaucratically as possible.

***Case study: I've often tried to find a room for our meetings and events, but always get cancellations. There are rooms in our village that would be free at the weekend, but we are not allowed to use them. This makes it difficult for us to carry out our activities.***



*Case study: I am in a wheelchair. Many initiatives have barriers, like steps, that prevent me from getting actively involved. Although I am motivated to help with activities such as serving meals, I am often unable to do so because the premises are not barrier-free.*

## 6.7 Representation

In hearings and group discussions, committed individuals reported that they were often perceived in established organisations as the only people with experience of poverty or racism. This under-representation meant that their concerns and issues were barely heard. The requirements for involvement often did not match the reality of their lives. Those involved often felt “different” and did not really belong. Lack of representation means that certain less privileged groups are less frequently represented and less visible in an organisation and in relevant positions within that organisation.

Unequal representation has an impact on three levels: *Firstly*, it is more difficult for poorly represented groups to bring their issues and concerns into the organisation and into the structures of civic engagement in general. In contrast to the concerns of the well-represented groups, their concerns are seen as “special” issues that are not relevant to the majority. *Secondly*, everyday routines and practices develop in established organisations that reflect the habits and expectations of the established actors and thus correspond less to the habits, needs and expectations of the less privileged

*Case study: In my political engagement, I have repeatedly realised how difficult it is for us migrants to gain a foothold in existing structures. In the parties in which I am active, people with a migration background are strongly under-represented and it seems as if the important positions are mainly filled by people who are already well connected and have a privileged background. It is much more difficult for us to contribute our ideas because we don't have the same access and support as others. Even if we make it into such positions, we have to work much harder to be heard at all. Our perspectives are often overlooked or not taken seriously.*

groups, for example with regard to time flexibility, financial resources or ways of speaking. *Thirdly*, due to a lack of representation, committed individuals often have the impression that they are the only ones with certain different experiences. They experience a feeling of loneliness and alienation and have the impression of being treated as “others”, which is referred to as “othering”. Their perspectives and experiences are not accepted as a matter of course, which leads to a lack of a sense of belonging and a lack of recognition among those affected.

## 6.8 Digitalisation and “digitality”

Social inequality and thresholds in analogue civic engagement are also reflected in digital civic engagement. This is referred to as the digital divide. A lack of hardware (i.e. end devices), a lack of financial resources for software and ultimately a lack of knowledge in dealing with digital services and working methods form thresholds in digital engagement that particularly affect people with low incomes or little formal education. As a result, these people tend to benefit little from the expansion of civic society and civic engagement into the digital realm – be it through online general meetings in associations, networking via digital platforms or digital training programmes. On the contrary, there is a risk that the existing social exclusion in the digital world will be reinforced.

However, digitalisation also offers opportunities that must be exploited. It can organise the civic engagement more flexibly and adapt it to different life realities. This is a particularly attractive prospect for people with limited mobility. In order to utilise this potential of digital engagement, appropriate material resources are required. At the same time, tangible efforts are needed to reduce social inequalities in the digital space.

## 6.9 Legal requirements for civic engagement

There are clear rules in various parts of the law as to which groups of people are or are not eligible for which roles and offices. In addition to obvious rules – for example, that elective offices can only be held by people who are actually elected – there are statutory grounds for exclusion for certain public activities, such as age limits, nationality, place of residence, criminal record, insolvency, care, personal suitability, profession or state of health. Civic society organisations may regulate the requirements for holding office in their statutes.

## 6.10 Bureaucracy

Measures to reduce bureaucracy and excessive regulation have been discussed in political debates for many years. Criticism of too many regulations and state regulation is widespread. In the context of civic engagement, reference is made to bureaucratic requirements that take up a lot of time, create uncertainty, cause costs and can be off-putting due to their language. In the hearings for the Fourth Civic Engagement Report, it became clear that bureaucracy often ties up resources and can overburden committed individuals. Studies show that many volunteers find administrative tasks particularly time-consuming. In addition, the regulations are highly complex. In Germany, the burden of bureaucracy is particularly felt in relation to applications in connection with the funding of organisations. Other examples include the fulfilment of obligations to provide evidence and requirements when holding demonstrations.

At the same time, it is argued that bureaucracy is an essential component of constitutional procedures – dispensing with rules, on the other hand, could favour arbitrariness. Bureaucratic requirements often also serve the purpose of protection, such as youth protection in child and youth work or data protection in association administration. International research shows that bureaucracy is not a purely German problem, but is discussed worldwide.

**Case study: It is incredibly difficult to apply for a project. You have to know so much: Education, finance, taxes ... and the language is totally complicated. I spend two weeks writing such proposals after work and have many people read them. For a small project for EUR 1,000, I had to revise the application again and again, going back and forth for every little mistake. That takes far too much time. Sometimes I wish there was just someone who knew better and took care of such applications.**

## 6.11 Funding support

Government financial aid and funding support, particularly from the federal states and local authorities, play an important role in financing civic society, even though many organisations generate their own income from membership fees and donations. Associations and initiatives have costs for rent, expense allowances or equipment, without which they often cannot maintain their programmes. A lack of financial resources is a barrier to civic engagement. However, the categorisation of insufficient funding as a threshold in the Fourth Civic Engagement Report does not mean that civic society engagement as a whole should be funded by the state.

There is a wide range of different funding opportunities for activities in the area of civic engagement. Smaller and new organisations often do not have the expertise and networks to successfully apply for funding. The Expert Commission recommends reviewing existing funding programmes to see how they can make access to civic engagement more equitable for different social groups.

## 6.12 Invisibility of informal engagement

Informal engagement in self-organised groups and initiatives is often overlooked and receives less recognition than formal engagement in clubs and associations, although it is gaining in importance. It comprises voluntary, non-profit and unpaid activities that are not linked to an institution, but often take place collectively and publicly. Such activities often remain invisible because they are not embedded in formal structures that usually offer support, recognition and access to networks.

Not every civic engagement is equally recognised and seen. This represents a threshold, because a civic engagement that is not recognised cannot have any effect. What is not seen does not exist, so to speak. Although informal civic engagement is considered to be

more inclusive and more accessible than engagement in organisations, it is associated with less visibility and consequently also less recognition – both by the people involved themselves and by other stakeholders. Informal engagement also receives less support than formal engagement. A narrow concept of a focus on the common good also contributes to the fact that civic engagement that is performed for one's own social group (e.g. in associations of migrants or people affected by poverty) is seen more as “self-help” and less as civic engagement that should be recognised. It is therefore important to promote a broader understanding of civic engagement and to make the wide variety of forms, topics and content of engagement more visible. This promotes a culture of recognising and appreciating the very different contributions made in the civic engagement.

## 6.13 The difficulty of criticising

In the public debate, civic engagement is predominantly presented in a positive light and as particularly valuable, with its contribution to democracy, integration and personal well-being emphasised. However, this positive portrayal makes it difficult to address critical aspects such as unequal access opportunities for civic engagement or even discrimination. Although inequalities in access to civic engagement have been well researched, these research findings are only hesitantly recognised in the public debate and in the voluntary sector itself. Civic society organisations often see themselves as organisations that are equally open to all people, without questioning the actual mechanisms of exclusion. However, addressing negative aspects such as thresholds in civic engagement is the first step towards a change towards civic engagement in which people from very different social groups can participate equally.

***7 Central recommendations  
for action and  
objectives***

The report clearly identifies the thresholds and social inequalities in access to civic engagement. Unequal access opportunities for civic engagement are problematic: in the view of the Report Commission, it contradicts democratic values if not all social groups can participate equally in the joint formulation and implementation of interests and in the concrete shaping of society in civic engagement organisations and in local political offices. It is of great social importance to recognise social inequality in civic engagement, to focus on eliminating the thresholds identified in the Fourth Civic Engagement Report and to make civic engagement more inclusive and therefore more democratic.

There is another reason why it is necessary to address unequal access opportunities to civic engagement: several studies show a positive correlation between engagement and income level. Social networks, the acquisition of skills, for example, in management positions, prestige and recognition are just some of the individual advantages that are acquired through civic engagement and that can contribute to an increase in social inequality.

The Fourth Civic Engagement Report identifies an urgent need for action. A democratic and inclusive society with good cohesion depends on the realisation of equal access opportunities for all social groups to civic engagement.

The report shows that in order to achieve this, a large number of thresholds must be considered and addressed at various levels in order to lower or completely eliminate them. The Report Commission proposes the following thirteen concrete recommendations for action and objectives in response to the report findings.

## **1. Recognising (as a problem) and reducing the influence of social inequality on civic engagement**

- Intensify political efforts to reduce social inequality and discrimination
- Recognise institutional discrimination (including racism, classism, ableism) as a problem, naming and combating it without fear
- Awareness-raising measures and voluntary civic engagements
- Consider access opportunities in funding guidelines and engagement strategies
- Increased use of resources to promote the civic engagement of marginalised, previously under-represented groups

## **2. Expand and ensure spaces for participation and civic engagement, especially in child and youth work, but also in community work**

- Enable participation experiences in open child and youth work as a way to get involved
- Support and financially secure other areas of youth work
- Support and promote the diversification of voluntary services
- Promote community work as a particularly suitable approach to support less privileged people in formulating and pursuing their interests
- Comprehensive expansion of services for the elderly

### **3. Create inclusive, discrimination-sensitive and diversity-oriented organisational cultures and systematically pursue openness to diversity**

- Create learning organisations
- Promote expertise on the identified thresholds
- Reflect on one's own speech and design inclusive speech
- Take experienced discrimination seriously and adopt preventative measures
- Offer a variety of membership forms
- Ensure diversity in the decision-making bodies of established organisations
- Avoidance of a "deficit perspective"
- Creation of contact points to reduce thresholds and promote diversity
- Expand opportunities for participation
- Stabilise and expand existing funding structures

### **4. Recognise and promote "new" organisations as places of civic society participation, initiate and promote cooperation between "new" and established organisations**

- Recognition and promotion of "new" organisations of less privileged groups
- Promotion of diverse forms of cooperation between established and "new" organisations
- Critical review of the funding logic

### **5. Protection for those involved in civic engagement in the face of threats and repression and solidarity with them. Promotion of political education to emphasise the value of democracy**

- Review and withdrawal of legal measures
- Reform of non-profit law
- Systematic recording and prosecution of criminal offences and expansion of counselling services
- Fast and reliable police protection in the event of threats
- Financing of protective measures
- Counselling and education
- Solidarity and support within the organised civic engagement
- Expansion of political education for all age groups as prevention against anti-democratic strategies and threats

### **6. Removal of financial barriers to engagement**

- Ensure an adequate livelihood as the basis for voluntary work
- Raise awareness among civic society organisations and political actors
- Support with access to digital end devices and the Internet
- Advance for travelling expenses

### **7. Create and guarantee time (autonomy) for potential volunteers**

- Easier access to assistance for people with disabilities
- Fewer restrictions for volunteers by the Jobcenter
- Flexibilisation of civic engagement activities
- Improved childcare

### **8. Sufficiently accessible and barrier-free meeting spaces for engagement in the local social environment – both in rural and urban areas**

- Expansion and creation of public spaces for communal use
- Ensure barrier-free accessibility and accessibility
- Digital rooms as a supplement

### **9. Recognise and promote digital civic engagement**

- Recognise and promote digital civic engagement
- Promotion of free, open-source digital platforms
- Support services for dealing with digital attacks
- Innovation of the petition system and digital political participation
- Skills development in dealing with digital technologies

## **10. Strengthen the legal framework for civic engagement through standardisation, promotion and protection**

- Standardisation and specification of engagement promotion clauses
- Better information and protection for volunteers
- Standardisation and expansion of terms and concepts of engagement
- Promote access to digital civic engagement for people affected by poverty and recipients of citizens' benefits
- Adaptation of insurance and other regulations to informal engagement
- Consideration of involvement in labour law and the education system

## **11. Optimise bureaucratic processes and funding structures to simplify and diversify engagement**

- Reduction of bureaucracy
- Establishment of service centres
- Improve the financial resources for civic society
- Consideration of inequality characteristics

## **12. Recognise and promote diverse, especially informal forms of civic engagement and initiate cooperation**

- Greater consideration of alternative engagement contexts by making funding structures more flexible
- Educating about and raising awareness of different understandings of engagement
- Promotion of forms of cooperation

## **13. Close research and knowledge gaps on access opportunities and thresholds, as well as various forms of civic engagement**

- Test assignment for better communication of findings on social inequality in civic engagement
- Consideration of diverse, also informal forms of civic engagement and debate on the understanding of the term
- Promotion of research on informal engagement
- Promotion of research on the engagement of people with disabilities
- Promotion of research into the unintended consequences of legal regulations
- Promotion of research on various aspects of the Fourth Civic Engagement Report that are still under-researched.

***Members of the  
Expert Commission  
for the Fourth Civic  
Engagement Report***



**Prof. Dr. Serhat Karakayali**

Professor of Migration and Mobility Studies at the  
Leuphana University of Lüneburg

**Tobias Kemnitzer**

Managing Director of the Federal Association of  
Volunteer Agencies (bagfa)

**Prof. Dr. Chantal Munsch**

Chairwoman of the Commission  
Professor of Educational Science specialising in Social  
Pedagogy at the University of Siegen

**Prof. Dr. Matthias Quent**

Professor of Sociology at Magdeburg-Stendal University  
of Applied Sciences

**Prof. Dr. Wibke Riekmann**

Professor of Social Work Science with a focus on  
Community Work and Community Organising at  
Hanover University of Applied Sciences and Arts

**Prof. Dr. Anne van RieBen**

Professor of Social Work Methods at Düsseldorf  
University of Applied Sciences

**Prof. Dr. Andreas Thimmel**

Professor of Social Work Science at the Cologne  
University of Applied Sciences

**Prof. Dr. Claudia Vogel**

Professor of Sociology and Methods of Quantitative  
Social Research at Neubrandenburg University of  
Applied Sciences

**Prof. Dr. Sabrina Zajak**

Head of the Consensus & Conflict Department at the  
DeZIM Institute Berlin and Adjunct Professor at the  
Faculty of Social Sciences at the Ruhr University  
Bochum

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service hotline: +49 30 20 179 130  
Monday–Thursday: 9 am–6 pm  
Fax: +49 30 18 555-4400  
Email: [info@bmfsfj.service.bund.de](mailto:info@bmfsfj.service.bund.de)

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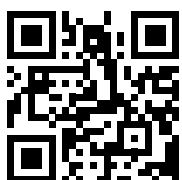
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