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Youth Civic Engagement and Urban Commons in Almaty and San José: A Comparative Study

Alberto Frigerio [1,2,*], Christine Karkashian [3] and César Guzman Montero [4]

[1] School of Digital Technologies, Innotech University, Almaty 050000, Kazakhstan
[2] School of Politics and Law, Almaty Management University, Almaty 050000, Kazakhstan
[3] School of Psychology, Universidad Latina de Costa Rica, San José 11501, Costa Rica
[4] School of Architecture, Universidad Latina de Costa Rica, San José 11501, Costa Rica
* Correspondence: alberto.frigerio84@gmail.com

Abstract

This exploratory, comparative sociological study examines youth civic engagement and attitudes toward urban commons in two non-Western cities: Almaty, Kazakhstan, and San José, Costa Rica. The overarching research question is: What are the profiles, motivations, actors, mechanisms, and barriers shaping youth civic engagement in Almaty and San José, and how do they compare across these distinct contexts? A cross-sectional, mixed-methods design was employed, combining 16 semi-structured expert interviews (8 per city) with an online survey administered to 114 civically engaged young adults (Almaty $n = 58$; San José $n = 56$; age 18–35). Qualitative data were analysed through content analysis with thematic coding; quantitative data were analysed descriptively. Findings reveal both shared motivations—community contribution, skill development, and sense of belonging—and context-specific differences in actors, mechanisms, and barriers, thus offering comparative insights from two under-researched settings and contributing to the wider sociology of youth civic participation and civil society beyond the Western contexts in which this literature has traditionally developed.

Keywords: youth civic engagement; civic participation; urban commons; comparative sociology; social inclusion; Almaty; San José

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Academic Editor: Cristóbal Fernández-Muñoz

Received: 3 August 2026
Revised: 21 September 2026
Accepted: 28 September 2026
Published: 3 October 2026

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1. Introduction

Cities occupy only 3% of global land. Yet they accommodate 55% of the world's population, consume roughly 75% of all energy generated, and produce 70% of greenhouse gas emissions [1,2]. As the urbanization process is going to grow in the next few years—according to UN projections around 68% of the world's population will live in urban areas by 2050 [3]—fostering sustainable cities is becoming a top priority of the 21st century [4]. Yet urbanization is not merely a demographic or environmental process: it is fundamentally a social one, reshaping how citizens—and young citizens in particular—participate in, and identify with, collective life, which makes it as central a concern for sociology as it is for urban planning.

Among the many dimensions of urban sustainability, the promotion of active citizen participation is recognized as critical to foster community planning, reduce governance costs, and enhance public trust [5]. According to Riemer, Lynes, and Hickman [6] (p. 533), this condition 'is critical to engage a broad base of citizens to participate in a shared visioning process, discussing important questions such as what to develop, what to sustain and for how long'.

A key concept in participatory urban governance is that of urban commons, which is defined here as publicly accessible urban resources (including green spaces, cultural facilities, and community infrastructure) that are collectively managed by a diverse range of local stakeholders through formal and/or informal mechanisms, with the aim of creating polycentric, horizontal governance [7]. Building on Lefebvre's [8] notion of the "right to the city," this framework positions residents as active co-creators rather than passive recipients of urban space.

Within this framework, youth constitute a strategically important but often understudied stakeholder group. Youth civic engagement—understood here as voluntary participation in activities aimed at improving community life, whether through organizations, public spaces, or collective initiatives—has been linked to positive outcomes for individuals (skill development, social networks, self-efficacy) and communities alike [9,10]. As a result, youth engagement is viewed as an important aspect to build a thriving urban framework and achieve a community's sustainable goals [11,12].

And yet, in many urban settings, youth engagement in civic development is limited by factors such as scarce resources, negative societal attitudes, weak adult-youth cooperation, and peers' reluctance to participate [13–15]. Likewise, diverse studies underline how marginalized youth face structural barriers, critical civic opportunities remain limited, and institutional initiatives can unintentionally reinforce inequalities through the so-called 'civic support paradox' [16–18].

These insights point to the persistent tensions between formal frameworks of participation and equitable youth empowerment, underscoring the need for further comparative research in diverse urban contexts. In addition, much existing research has focused on North American and European urban contexts, while marginal attention has been dedicated to non-Western urban realities, a concept used here as a descriptive label for urban settings that are under-represented in the literature. This gap is significant, as the political, cultural, and institutional conditions shaping youth participation differ substantially across global regions. A second related gap concerns the conceptual link between youth citizenship and urban commons: as discussed in Section 2, these two bodies of literature have only rarely been brought together empirically.

This study addresses these gaps by comparing youth civic engagement in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and San José, Costa Rica—two dynamic, non-Western urban hubs that differ markedly in their political systems, civic cultures, and institutional frameworks. Almaty is a post-Soviet city where civic engagement is often constrained by state oversight and NGO fragmentation [19,20], with only 17.8% of young people volunteering occasionally [21]. San José, in contrast, operates within Costa Rica's long-standing democratic tradition, where youth participation has been steadily rising [22], with a more institutionally embedded civic infrastructure. Both cities are the most populous in their countries, with active NGO ecosystems and established research networks that facilitated data access. Crucially, this comparison is designed not as a simple best/worst contrast, but to illuminate how structural and cultural conditions shape different configurations of youth engagement—an approach with broader relevance for non-Western urban scholarship.

The overarching research question guiding this study is: What are the profiles, motivations, actors, mechanisms, and barriers shaping youth civic engagement in Almaty and San José, and how do they compare across these two contrasting urban contexts? This question is explored through the following sub-questions:

1. Who are the youths participating in activities of civic engagement in Almaty and San José?
2. What motivates them to get engaged in civic initiatives?

3. Who are the actors involved in the promotion of youth civic engagement in Almaty and San José?
4. Which mechanisms have been implemented in these cities to enable and sustain youth civic engagement? What are the main results achieved by them up to now?
5. What are the main barriers still constraining the active participation of young citizens in both cities? What strategies can be employed to effectively overcome these barriers?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two interconnected bodies of literature: youth civic engagement and urban commons governance.

Youth civic engagement has been conceptualized along a spectrum from formal political participation to informal community activism [9]. Kirshner, Strobel and Fernández [17] emphasize "critical civic engagement"—forms of participation that enable youth to address systemic inequalities—while Chacon et al. [23] identify both intrinsic motivations (moral responsibility, community contribution) and extrinsic ones (career development, social recognition) as drivers of voluntarism. The theory of planned behaviour [24] highlights how perceived social norms, including family and institutional expectations, shape participatory intentions. Barriers to youth engagement are well documented in the literature and include limited time, structural exclusion from decision-making, lack of information, and institutional mistrust [13,14,16].

The urban commons framework positions urban spaces and resources—parks, community centres, cultural infrastructure—as potential sites of collective governance rather than purely public or private goods [7,25]. This approach offers a normative lens for evaluating the extent to which youth are actively involved in managing their urban environments, rather than merely using them. The concept of sense of community (the degree to which residents feel belonging, mutual care, and shared identity within a place) has been linked to sustained civic participation and is therefore included as a key variable in this study.

The urban commons literature is also closely tied to debates on citizenship. Lefebvre's right to the city [8] has been read as a claim to take part in producing and governing urban space that does not depend on formal legal status [26,27], and communing–the everyday practices through which residents care for and co-manage shared resources [25]—has been interpreted as a way of enacting citizenship [26,27]. Vrasti and Dayal [26] use the term "cityzenship" for membership in an urban common that extends to all residents and is exercised through the capacity to make and unmake urban space, and Islar and Irgil [27] show how right-to-the-city initiatives in Barcelona defined citizenship as a collective practice rather than a state-sanctioned status. What these contributions offer for the present study is a shift in attention from citizenship as a legal category to citizenship as something people do, in specific places and together with others.

Research on children's and young people's citizenship has developed a parallel argument. The lived citizenship approach stresses the spatial, intersubjective, performed and affective dimensions of being a citizen in everyday life, and children and youth are among its main domains of application [28]. Such an idea has been used, for example, to examine young people's engagement with participatory policy [29]. Where this perspective meets the commons, the few studies we identified are mostly situated in the Global North and focus on particular settings: Flanagan, Gallay and Pykett [30] propose an "environmental commons" perspective grounded in urban adolescents' collective action on environmental problems in their communities, and Cappello and Siino [31] study educational commons as spaces in which young people experience peer governance and develop civic intentionality. These works suggest that commons-based practices can nurture young people's civic

identities, but they concentrate on educational or environmental settings, on adolescents, and on Western contexts.

To our knowledge, comparative empirical research on how young adults engage with urban commons, and on how that engagement relates to their everyday citizenship, is still lacking, particularly outside Western cities. This gap matters for two reasons. Conceptually, commons-based notions of urban citizenship risk treating "residents" as an undifferentiated group, whereas young people typically face specific constraints such as, for example, limited decision-making power, scarce resources, and institutional mistrust [13,14,16]. Practically, urban sustainability agendas increasingly expect young people to act as co-creators of urban space [8,11,12]. Indeed, understanding under what institutional conditions this is realistic is a precondition for policies that go beyond tokenistic inclusion [32].

Integrating these frameworks, this study conceptualizes youth civic engagement as shaped by the interplay between individual motivations, social norms, structural opportunities, and local governance contexts, with urban commons serving both as the object and as the enabling arena of youth participation. In doing so, the study treats youth civic engagement as a form of everyday, lived citizenship [28,29] whose scope depends in part on whether young people can take part in the governance of the urban commons, and it addresses the gap outlined above by examining this relationship empirically in two non-Western cities. The findings are then read against three questions that follow from the definition of urban commons adopted here: whether young people see the commons as resources of their community, whether they are involved in managing them rather than merely using them, and whether governance is organized in the horizontal, polycentric way the framework assumes (Section 6.6).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Design

A descriptive, cross-sectional, mixed-methods design was employed, combining a qualitative phase (semi-structured interviews—Phase 1) with a quantitative phase (online survey—Phase 2). The two phases were designed to complement each other: interview findings provided contextual depth and informed the interpretation of survey patterns, while survey data offered a broader picture of perceptions and attitudes across a larger sample of civically engaged youth. Qualitative data were collected and analysed first; insights from this phase informed the contextualization of quantitative results. Fieldwork took place between September 2023 and March 2024.

3.2. Participants

A convenience, non-probabilistic sample was used in both phases. Phase 1 involved 16 expert stakeholders—8 per city—including academic researchers with expertise in youth and civic issues (n = 6), local NGO representatives (n = 6), and international NGO staff (n = 4). Stakeholders were selected based on their professional engagement with youth civic activities in the respective cities, and were recruited through the authors' established research networks. In Almaty, participants represented both Kazakh and Russian ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and covered central and suburban districts. In San José, participants came from across the metropolitan area, including central and peripheral zones. While this distribution was not exhaustive, it was designed to capture variation in social and spatial perspectives.

Phase 2 used snowball sampling to recruit young adults (aged 18–35) with civic engagement experience in the previous three years in either Almaty or San José. Civic engagement was understood as defined in Section 1, and participants' experience with civic engagement was established through self-identification as a criterion for proceeding

with the survey. Snowball sampling was considered appropriate for reaching individuals embedded in informal civic networks. No exclusions were made based on nationality, ethnicity, or organizational type. Respondents who completed less than 75% of the survey were excluded, yielding a final analytical sample of 114 participants (Almaty n = 58; San José n = 56).

It is important to note that both samples consist exclusively of already civically engaged youth, which constitutes a significant limitation: the perspectives of non-participating youth are absent, and findings therefore cannot be taken as representative of broader youth populations in either city.

3.3. Instruments

The semi-structured interview guide comprised 10 open-ended questions organized around five thematic domains (see Table A1): demographic profile, level of civic engagement, actors and mechanisms, degree of participation in urban commons, and achieved results, obstacles, and recommendations. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom 5.10.16, lasted approximately one hour, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. In Almaty, interviews conducted in Russian were facilitated with the support of a native Russian-speaking collaborator, while those conducted in English were carried out by a researcher fluent in English. In San José, interviews were conducted in Spanish by native Spanish-speaking researchers. All transcripts were translated into English by the research team prior to analysis.

The online survey included 55 items (items 1 is consent/introduction; items 2–6 demographics; items 7–55 substantive variables) organized across seven subscales (see Table A2): civic engagement, social norms, motivations, perceived barriers, cost–benefit perceptions, sense of community, and attitudes toward urban commons. Items used five-point Likert scales (1 = Fully disagree; 5 = Fully agree). In Almaty, the survey was available in English, Russian, and Kazakh; in San José, in Spanish. A pilot test was conducted with small groups in each city to confirm item clarity and translation equivalence. Survey Monkey 2023 was used as software to gather and analyze the survey data. All responses were automatically anonymized to protect the privacy of the respondents, while the system guaranteed one single answer from each IP address.

3.4. Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis followed a structured content analysis procedure. A thematic coding frame was developed deductively from the interview guide and refined inductively during analysis to capture emergent themes. Two members of the research team coded the transcripts independently; disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Coding was performed using QDA Miner Lite v3.0.2. Member checking was conducted informally, with selected findings shared with participants and local practitioners to validate interpretations and strengthen the robustness of the analysis. The full measures taken to safeguard the accurate interpretation of participants' views are described in Section 3.6.

Quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) at the aggregate level, computed with the built-in analysis tools of the SurveyMonkey platform, consistent with the exploratory, non-probabilistic nature of the study. Given substantial demographic differences between the two city samples—particularly in age distribution, educational attainment, and occupational status (see Table A3)—cross-city comparisons are presented as descriptive observations rather than controlled comparisons. No inferential or multivariate tests were performed.

Building on these two strands of analysis, a comparative assessment of youth civic engagement in Almaty and San José was conducted, examining motivations, actors, mechanisms, and challenges across both contexts. This mixed-methods triangulation provides a richer interpretation of the data, even though systematic subgroup comparisons were beyond the scope of this study.

3.5. Research Strengths and Limitations

This study provides a foundation for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of civic engagement in San José and Almaty. Its comparative design and mixed-methods approach, supported by the research team's long-standing engagement with both cities, allowed for the identification of commonalities and divergences while capturing both statistical trends and lived experiences.

At the same time, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the research may not capture the full spectrum of factors influencing youth civic engagement due to the complexity of the phenomenon and the limitations of the chosen methodology. Secondly, the study primarily focuses on perceptions and self-reported data, which may be subject to biases and inaccuracies. Thirdly, this study does not explicitly investigate forms of civic engagement considered 'undesirable' from the perspective of state actors (e.g., disruptive protests or confrontational activism). Fourth, subgroup differences by age, gender, education level, or language were not systematically examined in this study. Fifth, member checking was informal and was not designed as a systematic validation procedure. Sixth, the two cities differ in their historical trajectories (Spanish colonial rule in Costa Rica; Russian imperial and Soviet rule in Kazakhstan) as well as in their political systems and civic cultures, so the comparison contrasts different configurations rather than like cases, and observed differences cannot be attributed to any single factor. Finally, the generalizability of findings is constrained by the non-probabilistic, convenience sample chosen for this study.

3.6. Ethical Considerations and Validity of the Interpretation

This study involved interviews and data collection through electronic anonymous surveys with young adult participants in Kazakhstan and Costa Rica. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, while written informed consent was obtained from all survey respondents via an information statement presented at the beginning of the survey. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and/or to decline to answer any questions they did not wish to address.

All data were anonymized at the point of collection to ensure participant confidentiality. In accordance with applicable regulations in both countries, formal institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee approval was not required for this type of social science research. Data analyses and findings are systematically presented in the manuscript (see Appendix A).

Beyond informed consent and anonymization, the study considered the ethical obligation to represent participants' views accurately, which is particularly relevant in a multilingual, cross-national design and on a topic that can be politically sensitive. Five measures supported the accuracy of interpretation. First, interviews were transcribed verbatim, so that the analysis rested on participants' own words. Second, because interviews were conducted in Russian, English and Spanish and then analysed in English, translation was treated as an interpretive step: transcripts were translated by members of the research team and, when needed, checked by native language speakers. The quotations reported in Section 4 come from these translations. Third, two team members coded the transcripts independently and resolved disagreements through discussion until consensus was reached

(Section 3.4). Fourth, member checking was conducted informally: selected findings were shared with participants and local practitioners, whose feedback was used to validate the interpretations. Overall, the feedback largely confirmed the interpretations and did not result in any substantive changes to the findings. Fifth, combining expert interviews with a survey of engaged youth allowed interpretations to be cross-checked across two groups of informants and two types of data (methodological triangulation), and the interpretations in Section 6 are set against the existing literature.

The research team's long-standing engagement with both cities, and the recruitment of interviewees through the authors' networks, facilitated access and contextual understanding, but they also entail risks of confirmation bias and of unequal relations between researchers and participants. These risks were addressed through independent double coding, the validation steps described above, and a cautious presentation of the findings as exploratory and descriptive. Given the political sensitivity of civic engagement in Almaty, particularly after the events of January 2022, quotations are attributed only to a respondent's city context and not to individuals or organizations, and survey responses were automatically anonymized (Section 3.3). For the same reason, and consistent with the anonymization applied at the point of collection, we do not assign participant codes or pseudonyms: with only eight interviewees per city, recurrent identifiers could allow readers to identify individuals or to link statements across sections. Where a view was shared by several interviewees, this is stated (e.g., "several respondents"), and where a quotation illustrates a single voice, it is introduced as such (e.g., "one respondent").

4. Results: Qualitative Analysis of Interviews

4.1. Profiles of Civically Engaged Youth

In Almaty, interviewees described civically engaged youth as predominantly female, well-educated, often Russian-speaking, and aged 18–30. Most enter civic life through school or university programs and deepen their involvement through NGOs.

In San José, engagement peaks among women aged 18–26, often university-driven. Many youth balance studies, work, and civic activities. High leadership turnover was noted: individuals who complete their studies—particularly those from outside the capital—often return to their home regions, reducing sustained participation in the 27–35 age group.

4.2. Level of Youth Civic Engagement

Despite some promising trends, only a few young adults in Almaty are civically engaged. Most participants contribute for one to two years, investing just a few hours per week, though a minority prioritize civic involvement and take leadership roles in NGOs. This suggests a pyramid-like pattern: a broad base of short-term, low-intensity involvement and a small core of committed leaders on whom organizations depend (Section 4.5). The COVID-19 pandemic shifted much of this engagement online, particularly through blogging and digital activism. The January 2022 unrest heightened political sensitivities and, according to several respondents, led some young people to disengage from formal civic activities. As claimed by a respondent: "After the events of January (2022) many youths lost interest in civic engagement and are more concerned about the consequences they could face." This reported chilling effect is consistent with the survey finding that 41% of Almaty respondents, against 17% in San José, considered civic engagement legally risky (Section 5.2.5).

Youth civic engagement in San José is diverse but not widespread, with varying levels of intensity. Interviewees related this variation mainly to the life course. Academics note that youth aged 18–23 are often focused on their studies, with limited time for civic engagement. Programs for those aged 24–29, who are beginning their careers, are crit-

ical to fostering long-term engagement. As individuals approach 30–35, priorities shift toward family and career, requiring tailored engagement strategies. In other words, interviewees portrayed engagement in San José as closely tied to the timing of educational and occupational transitions: participation tends to peak during university and to thin out as young people enter the labor market and family life, which is consistent with the leadership turnover described in Section 4.1. Despite the return to in-person activities after the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual platforms remain key to socializing and civic involvement. In the words of one interviewee: "Social media has changed the way young people engage, becoming key spaces for opinion formation and mobilization. These digital channels are now central to our civic dynamics".

Taken together, interviewees in both cities described youth civic engagement as limited in reach and uneven in intensity, but they explained this in different ways. In Almaty, they stressed political sensitivity, the concentration of engagement in a small number of organizations and leaders, and the disengagement that followed the events of January 2022; in San José, they stressed the life-course transitions and the leadership turnover that accompany them. In both cities, digital platforms were described as an important space for engagement, particularly since the pandemic.

4.3. Actors and Mechanisms

Youth civic engagement can involve diverse actors and take multiple forms. The organizations and programmes named below, as well as the details related to their activities, were specifically mentioned by interviewees. In Almaty, four main groups promote youth civic engagement. Politically supported NGOs, such as Jastar Ruhi and the League of Volunteers of Kazakhstan, focus on self-realization and political activism. International organizations like the World Bank, UNDP, Soros Foundation, and British Council fund social change and youth initiatives. Small local NGOs led by committed founders, such as the Youth Information Service of Kazakhstan, have long-standing impact. Finally, universities, including Almaty Management University, Kazakh-German University, and Narxoz University, run community-oriented projects that often serve as entry points for volunteers.

In terms of mechanisms, respondents often described youth civic opportunities in Almaty as fragmented and difficult to access without the right personal connections. As one participant explained, "There are several opportunities for youth civic engagement in Almaty, but they are fragmented and they generally take place within 'inner circles'." This perspective, echoed by others, underscores how relational access rather than transparent processes shapes participation, limiting inclusivity and reinforcing existing inequalities. Moreover, civic engagement programs often follow a top-down approach, rooted in hierarchical, Soviet-era structures. "Basically, there is a main decision maker and a series of people who have the role of supporting the implementation of his/her choices," as claimed by a respondent. Bottom-up mechanisms, such as online activism and community-based projects, are progressively growing, but they are usually the result of individual efforts rather than systematic planning. For example, one respondent stated: "Bottom-up projects are driven by the personal will of individuals, and the entire initiative revolves around them. They lead from conception through implementation, and without their involvement, the project gradually declines and eventually comes to an end".

In San José, civic engagement is driven by universities, both public and private, with campuses in the Metropolitan Area of San José. They encourage student participation in programs focused on socially beneficial causes, including mandatory community work (Programas de Trabajo Comunal Universitario), which is required for graduation. Likewise, diverse national institutions promote civic participation among the youth in Costa Rica, such as the "Youth Council", which was established under Law 8261 in 2002 to champion

youth public policies, collaborating with different bodies to uphold young people's rights. National NGOs also play key roles in civic projects. For example, TEVU (Transition to a Green Economy) promotes citizen participation to create green, safe, and inclusive spaces in the Metropolitan Area of Costa Rica, while the Associations for Community Development (Asociaciones de Desarrollo de la Comunidad) develop social, cultural, and ecological programs that benefit local communities. Finally, international NGOs (e.g., the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation, the Cultural Center of Spain "El Farolito", and the German Agency for International Cooperation) are instrumental in promoting civic participation through grassroots and community-driven projects.

There are multiple mechanisms of civic engagement in San José. For instance, the Public Policy for Youth's Action Plan, implemented by the Youth Council, facilitates youth participation in shaping public spaces by receiving municipal funding for approved projects. Another notable mechanism is participatory budgeting, which allows youth to propose community projects, although these efforts often follow a top-down approach. The Municipality of Curridabat is distinguished for its more community-driven decision-making processes, facilitated by entities such as the Department of Peace Culture and the use of participation applications. And yet, as claimed by a respondent, "while there are collaboration efforts, there are notable challenges, such as the lack of effective communication and bureaucratic barriers that sometimes hinder joint initiatives." In addition, according to several interviewees, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated feelings of disconnection among youth, further reducing participation.

4.4. Youth Involvement in Urban Commons

In both cities, youth involvement in actively managing urban commons remains limited. Promising examples in Almaty include the WeAlmaty Project (2017–2020), which supported urban regeneration through youth-led community projects; the Theatre of Neighbours, a community cultural initiative around public space; and the Lake Karasu restoration project, which engaged local communities in environmental recovery, ultimately restoring the polluted lake and creating a park, a public amphitheatre and other local amenities. In San José, notable examples include the Ciudad Dulce project in Curridabat, which developed green spaces to support urban biodiversity; the ULatina multi-stakeholder partnership that helped communities reclaim neglected spaces for urban gardens; and the Civic Centres for Peace (CCPs), which function as community hubs for education, conflict resolution, and social inclusion.

Following the definition adopted in this study, these examples can be grouped by the type of commons involved: green and ecological spaces (Lake Karasu in Almaty; Ciudad Dulce and the urban gardens supported by ULatina in San José), cultural spaces and practices (the Theatre of Neighbours), and community infrastructure and public-space regeneration (WeAlmaty and the Civic Centres for Peace).

The examples also differ in the role that young people played. Among those cited by interviewees, only WeAlmaty was described as youth-led; the others were community- or institution- led initiatives in which young people participated as volunteers or beneficiaries. This contrasts with the strongly positive attitudes toward the commons reported in the survey (Section 5.2.7): for instance, 99% of San José respondents agreed that public parks and community courtyards foster a sense of belonging, and 81% of Almaty respondents agreed that public institutions should support youth civic engagement. In other words, young people appear to value the commons highly and to take part in improving them, but interviewees gave few examples of young people governing them, a gap to which we return in Section 6.6.

In both contexts, the most durable initiatives share common features: clear community relevance, intersectoral partnerships, and mechanisms for sustained youth ownership. As a San José respondent observed: "Participation is more effective when linked to issues that are common and relevant to the community at large."

The first two features are visible in the examples above: the Lake Karasu project mobilized local communities around a shared environmental problem, and the ULatina partnership brought together several stakeholders. Sustained youth ownership appears more fragile: in Almaty, bottom-up projects were described as depending on the personal commitment of their initiators (Section 4.3), and in San José, leadership turnover after graduation and limited ownership of projects were reported as obstacles (Sections 4.1 and 4.5).

4.5. Barriers and Recommendations

Youth civic engagement in Almaty faces challenges in public administration, NGOs, and youth motivation. While policies like the 2006 Civil Society Development and 2015 State Youth Policy Act support civil society, public officials often view NGOs with skepticism, tightly controlling projects and limiting collaboration. Youth activism can be perceived as a threat, discouraging meaningful participation. Moreover, many NGOs are highly personalized, dependent on individual leaders, and lack trust with public institutions. Concerns over transparency and merit-based fund allocation further weaken stability. Youth interest is also low due to fragmented civic education, limited incentives, and insecurity shaped by parental fears rooted in Soviet-era experiences.

Recommendations include increasing institutional support for youth leadership, building trust between NGOs and public bodies, and reorganizing the NGO sector for transparency and merit-based funding. Developing incentives—scholarships, skill-training, or academic credits—and enhancing outreach via social media can also attract young participants. Finally, integrating civic education into schools and universities can cultivate civic identity and long-term engagement among youths.

In San José, interviewees highlighted several obstacles to youth civic participation. Initiatives often struggle with limited funding, poor coordination, traditional approaches, leadership turnover, digital literacy gaps, and weak accountability in community projects. Mistrust toward young leaders and limited ownership of civic initiatives further hinder engagement. Moreover, programs like the CCPs face accessibility challenges, especially for youth in metropolitan areas.

To enhance participation, interviewees agree that a multifaceted approach is needed. Youth are more motivated when engagement connects to their life plans. Building trust in young leaders, improving digital access, and leveraging virtual platforms can sustain involvement. Inclusive participation calls, revitalizing historical civic movements, and strengthening governance skills through cross-sector partnerships support long-term impact. Finally, adequate investment in youth-led initiatives is considered essential to maintain meaningful civic engagement.

5. Results: Quantitative Analysis of the Survey Data

5.1. Sociodemographic Description of the Study Participants

Table A3 summarizes demographic characteristics. The two samples differ substantially. Almaty respondents are much younger (70% aged 18–23 vs. 34% in San José) and have lower educational attainment (41% secondary/college vs. 12% in San José). San José respondents are more likely to hold postgraduate qualifications (41% vs. 17%) and to combine work and study (52% vs. 26%). Language use also highlights an important contextual difference: in Almaty, most respondents reported Russian as their main language (74%), followed by Kazakh (21%), and others, while in San José all respondents

were Spanish-speaking. On the contrary, gender composition is similar in both contexts, with women more represented overall (Almaty 60% female; San José 57% female). These compositional differences—alongside differences in political and institutional contexts—are important to bear in mind when interpreting comparative results.

5.2. Study Variables

5.2.1. Civic Engagement

Table A4 shows that civic engagement in Almaty is predominantly light: 49% devote less than one hour per week and 53% describe themselves as only partially involved. In San José, engagement is more differentiated: 40% devote four or more hours per week, and 37% describe themselves as very or completely involved. And yet, both samples include very few respondents at the highest involvement levels and all respondents were pre-selected for their civic activity. Indeed, these findings suggest that while civic opportunities in San José allow for deeper forms of participation than in Almaty, engagement remains unevenly distributed, and many young people continue to feel only marginally connected to civic life.

5.2.2. Social Norms

Table A5 (for Almaty) and Table A6 (for San José) provide insights into social norms and the other study variables.

Civic participation is perceived as socially expected in both cities (Almaty 62%; San José 58%), with family support playing an important role in both contexts. A notable difference is educational institutional support, which is perceived as stronger in San José (63%) than in Almaty (47%), reflecting universities' active role in promoting civic participation through structured programs.

Perceptions of youth involvement in decision-making were rather divided in both cities, even though in Almaty a negative perception slightly prevailed (31% agreement, 37% disagreement), while the opposite result was recorded for San José (42% agreement, 32% disagreement). Likewise, community investment in youth-led programs elicited ambivalent responses (in Almaty 32% agreement, 26% disagreement; in San José 32% agreement, 39% disagreement), indicating uncertainty regarding the depth and sustainability of institutional support.

5.2.3. Motivations

Both samples report strong community-contribution and skill-development orientations, while instrumental motivations (career advancement, status recognition) are relatively unimportant in both contexts.

Young people in Almaty were most strongly motivated by altruistic and collective goals—especially the desire to contribute positively to their community (87%)—alongside personal growth opportunities such as learning skills (67%) and sharing ideas (62%).

Youth in San José were strongly motivated by opportunities for skill development (96%) and community contribution (93%), with nearly all respondents emphasizing these drivers. Sharing ideas (88%), following an acquaintance's example (68%), and fulfilling moral duties (64%) also resonated widely, suggesting that engagement is experienced as both a personal and collective responsibility.

These patterns reflect the limited permeability of civic structures: engagement is framed less as a path to influence or career mobility and more as a form of collective responsibility and self-development.

5.2.4. Perceived Barriers

Lack of visible engagement channels is the leading barrier in both cities (Almaty 47%; San José 59%). Differently, time constraints are more salient in Almaty (49%) than in San José (39%), while, on the contrary, lack of motivational mechanisms is slightly more prominent in San José (46% vs. 37%).

Personal discouragement or concerns about being taken seriously were largely dismissed in both cities, suggesting that barriers lie less in interpersonal relations and more in institutional and organizational weaknesses.

5.2.5. Cost-Benefits Perceptions

Both samples perceive engagement as personally beneficial in terms of skill development (in Almaty 76%; in San José 91%), network expansion (in Almaty 72%; in San José 73%), and improving self-esteem (in Almaty 59%; in San José 61%). In San José fun (54%) also played a role. Comparatively, San José respondents perceive somewhat higher benefits.

At the same time, civic engagement is also perceived as effortful, specifically as time-consuming (in Almaty 47%; in San José 55%) and physically/psychologically demanding (in Almaty 59%; in San José 67%). Legal risks are seen as more significant in Almaty (41%) than San José (17%), consistent with the more restrictive civic environment in Kazakhstan. Differently, while in Almaty stress was not widely acknowledged, in San José stress perceptions were mixed, indicating that while participation is generally viewed as positive, it is not without personal strains. In both cities reputational risks were mostly dismissed.

5.2.6. Sense of Community

Both samples express strongly positive attitudes toward community belonging and the value of urban commons. Nevertheless, levels of agreement are generally higher in San José, which may reflect differences in urban infrastructure quality and civic culture, though compositional sample differences also likely contribute.

In Almaty, most respondents felt good about being part of a community (65%) and believed they could engage in valuable activities to improve their community (63%). Respondents in San José reported a broadly positive sense of belonging and mutual care within their communities, with 73% stating that being part of a community made them feel good about themselves, and 69% believed it allowed them to engage in valuable activities.

Trust in leadership and perceptions of recognition were somewhat weaker in San José, pointing to areas where local communities could do more to foster inclusive and effective participation.

5.2.7. Attitudes and Beliefs Toward Urban Commons

Perceptions of the urban commons were generally very positive in both cities. In Almaty most respondents agreed that public institutions should support youth civic engagement (81%) and that such engagement can improve the quality of life (81%). Positive responses were also given for the importance of libraries and community centers and the need for good environmental maintenance.

Likewise, in San José, views on the urban commons were highly positive and consistent, with 99% agreeing that public parks and community courtyards foster a sense of belonging, and 97% agreeing that the quality of a community is determined by its public places. Similarly, 95% believed that good environmental maintenance is crucial to community prosperity and that civic engagement can improve the quality of life.

These responses highlight a strong normative consensus on the value of accessible, well-maintained commons as key enablers of civic participation and well-being.

6. Discussion: Comparing the Cases of Almaty and San José

This exploratory study set out to compare the profiles, motivations, actors, mechanisms, and barriers of youth civic engagement in Almaty and San José. Across both cases, several patterns align with established theory; others reveal context-specific dynamics that enrich the existing literature.

6.1. Who Are the Young Adults Civically Engaged in Almaty and San José

In Almaty, the participants are mainly Russian-speaking young women aged 18 to 23. They are either working or studying, with a completed or ongoing bachelor's degree. In San José, the profile is similar in terms of gender but includes more mature participants aged 24 to 35, who are mostly Spanish-speaking and hold postgraduate degrees. They frequently work and study at the same time.

The extent of civic involvement differs in the two cities. San José's youths tend to dedicate more time and feel more involved compared to their counterparts in Almaty where over half (53%) of respondents are categorized as only partly interested, with fewer people at the extremes of engagement.

6.2. What Motivates Them?

In both Almaty and San José, social norms generally reflect a positive attitude toward youth involvement in civic activities, with family support playing an important role in encouraging participation. These findings align with earlier studies by Camino [32] and Pavlova and Silbereisen [24].

Participants in both cities also reported mixed perceptions regarding youth involvement in decision-making processes and the extent to which communities invest in civic engagement. In this context, the United Nations [33] emphasizes the importance of promoting "meaningful youth engagement" rather than tokenistic participation.

A notable difference emerges in perceptions of educational institutions' support for youth civic engagement, which appears stronger in San José than in Almaty. This difference may reflect the active role universities in San José play in promoting civic participation through mandatory community service and extension programs for students.

In both cities, young adults identified several key motivations for civic participation, including learning new skills, sharing ideas, fulfilling a sense of moral responsibility, and contributing to community development. These motivations have been widely recognized in the literature as central drivers of youth civic engagement [23].

Respondents from both cities also acknowledged multiple benefits of civic engagement, such as personal growth, skill development, and expanded social networks. Previous research similarly links civic participation to positive outcomes including improved educational and social competencies and the strengthening of social networks [34]. Participants further noted that engagement can enhance self-esteem, increase employment opportunities, and provide personal satisfaction.

Youth in both contexts emphasized that feeling part of a community contributes positively to their self-perception. Likewise, the belief that they can contribute to improving their local environment strengthens their sense of belonging. These findings correspond with earlier work by Dávila, Zlobina, and Alvarez-Hernandez [35]. However, some differences were observed. Participants in San José reported stronger perceptions of mutual care within the community, whereas respondents in Almaty expressed greater confidence in the presence of strong community leaders.

Overall, while some differences exist in the degree of agreement across specific dimensions of civic engagement, both cities demonstrate a strong orientation toward community participation and the promotion of urban commons. The higher levels of consensus in

San José regarding sense of community and attitudes toward urban commons may reflect differences in urban infrastructure, cultural traditions, and governance structures. For instance, Valle and Ramírez [36] found that access to public spaces and community participation tend to be stronger in compact urban environments than in cities characterized by urban sprawl. Nevertheless, further research is required to better understand these dynamics.

6.3. Who Are the Actors Involved in the Promotion of Youth Civic Engagement

The cases of civic engagement in Almaty and San José present distinct approaches and contexts. On one side, there are four main typologies of actors that support youth civic engagement in Almaty: (1) state-sponsored NGOs and politically supported organizations; (2) internationally sponsored programs; (3) local NGOs; (4) students' clubs and/or projects within universities. Collectively, these diverse civic institutions in Almaty have achieved noteworthy results in terms of capacity building, participatory planning, and community development, thus progressively fostering a culture of active citizenship and social responsibility. And yet, they failed to reach massive participation among young adults. Moreover, the overall scenario is still highly fragmented. Such a condition constrains the building of constructive processes of cooperation and the development of cohesive plans of action.

On the other hand, in San José, there are also four main typologies of actors that support youth civic engagement. Similar to Almaty, there are (1) local NGOs, (2) international NGOs, and (3) students' clubs and/or projects within universities. All these actors are recognized for their contributions to cultivating civic awareness and grassroots initiatives. However, the fourth type of actor, with a strong presence in the MASJ, are the national or governmental institutions. Overall, the city of San José has a dynamic and supportive landscape that is designed to foster youth social engagement. Nevertheless, despite the presence of a comprehensive municipal and governmental strategy designed to protect the rights of Costa Rican youth and stimulate their social involvement, there is an urgent need for an improved coordination among public entities, community organizations, and both international and local NGOs.

6.4. Which Mechanisms Sustain Youth Civic Engagement

In comparing youth civic engagement mechanisms and involvement in urban commons management in Almaty and San José, distinct patterns emerge. In Almaty, civic engagement mechanisms are characterized by a predominantly top-down approach, often driven by hierarchical structures and/or individual decision-makers. In contrast, San José's combination of top-down and bottom-up initiatives, while occasionally constrained by financial constraints and a lack of public awareness, promotes a rather inclusive and participatory civic culture.

In both cities, however, youth agency plays a crucial role beyond institutional frameworks. Like global youth-led movements, participants in our study also initiated bottom-up actions—such as online activism in Almaty or community gardening in San José—highlighting that youth engagement is not only cultivated from above but often emerges organically from within youth networks. While bottom-up initiatives are still less common than top-down approaches, especially in Almaty, they are progressively gaining visibility and importance in the broader landscape of youth civic engagement, often producing highly valued results.

Beyond the levels and mechanisms of participation, the substantive focus of youth engagement also reflects the broader mood of each city. In Almaty, civic participation often revolved around environmental recovery, cultural identity, and cautious debates on civic freedoms, particularly in the tense political climate following the January 2022

unrest [19,20,37]. In San José, youth activism was strongly tied to ecological sustainability, gender equality, and community safety, aligning with Costa Rica's long-standing democratic ethos and contemporary urban debates on liveability and sustainability [38–40].

Overall, these findings suggest that civic engagement carries different local meanings: in Almaty, it is often tied to cautiously negotiated spaces within NGOs and community projects, while in San José it is more openly associated with urban commons such as environmental and community organizations. This divergence underscores how inclusivity and accessibility of civic engagement depend heavily on local political and institutional contexts, even when youth are mobilizing around comparable issues.

6.5. What Are the Main Barriers and Recommendations

In examining the barriers to and recommendations for youth civic engagement in Almaty and San José, several shared patterns emerge alongside city-specific challenges.

In Almaty, the relationship between public administration and civic organizations constitutes a major barrier. Governmental scepticism toward NGOs often results in strict project control and limited collaboration, while the personalization of NGOs, opaque funding practices, and limited institutional trust further constrain civic action. Youth participation is also affected by fragmented awareness of opportunities, limited free time, and fear of repercussions—concerns echoed in previous studies [16,19,20,41]. Kazakhstan's political context, combining Soviet legacies with elements of liberal democracy [42,43], reinforces these challenges: the state seeks to engage youth while limiting their independent expression [37], and civil society lacks a coherent advocacy strategy [44].

In San José, sustaining leadership within civic organizations remains difficult due to high turnover after university. Urban sprawl fragments communities and weakens the sense of belonging necessary for sustained engagement [36,38]. Many young people lack the governance skills needed to navigate complex cross-sector structures [45], while limited ownership over projects, digital literacy gaps, and adult-centric institutional cultures further hinder participation [40,46].

Both cities share a lack of visible and accessible engagement channels [19], though appropriate responses differ: Almaty requires greater transparency and trust-building between government and civil society, while San José needs stronger mechanisms to sustain youth participation and leadership continuity. The cost–benefit calculus of engagement also differs by context: in Almaty, where institutional support is weaker, costs are often perceived to outweigh benefits; in San José, engagement is more frequently associated with personal and social gains despite ongoing barriers [16,17].

Methodological approaches to engagement also play a role. Linovski and Baker [47] demonstrate the potential of community-designed participation in urban planning to address inequities, yet our findings suggest that mechanisms transferring real decision-making power to youth remain scarce in both cities. Likewise, D'Agostino and Visser [48] highlight the importance of targeted support and partnerships, echoing respondents' calls for stronger intersectoral cooperation and sustained investment in youth-led initiatives.

These findings resonate with broader scholarship. The civic support paradox [18] is visible in both cities—inner-circle access in Almaty and the privileging of already-organised groups in San José—underscoring the need for inclusive participation mechanisms. Opportunities for critical civic engagement [17] remain scarce and are largely mediated through adult-led frameworks, while mechanisms transferring real decision-making power to youth are limited in both contexts [47,48]. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that youth activism can be perceived as a threat to stability in contexts where it challenges state institutions [49]—a dynamic explicitly reported by interviewees in Kazakhstan, especially in relation to the post-2022 January events.

Notwithstanding these challenges, participants in both cities proposed several recommendations to strengthen youth participation. In Almaty, respondents emphasized the need for greater governmental support, stronger trust between public institutions and NGOs, and more transparent funding practices. Integrating civic education into school curricula and offering incentives such as scholarships or skills-development programs could also help foster civic identity among youth. In San José, stakeholders highlighted the importance of aligning engagement initiatives with long-term development goals so that young people can see the value of sustained participation. Revitalizing historical civic movements may also inspire contemporary engagement, particularly when combined with efforts to build emotional connections to civic projects and strengthen alliances across sectors such as education, business, and government.

6.6. Contribution to the Field and Implications for Research and Practice

This study advances the field in three ways. First, it brings together two studies that, as argued in Section 2, have rarely been connected empirically: by examining young people's engagement with urban commons as an expression of everyday, lived citizenship [28,29], it shows how commons-based notions of urban citizenship [26,27] play out for a specific age group and in two non-Western settings. Second, it qualifies the expectation that positive attitudes toward shared urban resources will translate into participation in their governance. In both cities, near-consensus on the value of the commons (Section 5.2.7) coexists with limited youth involvement in managing them (Section 4.4), and the barriers reported most often are institutional—the visibility of engagement channels, trust, and funding—rather than interpersonal (Section 5.2.4). This is consistent with the civic support paradox [18], which we observe in both cities in different forms (Section 6.5). Third, it shows that similar motivations (community contribution and skill development) coexist with different mechanisms and barriers, which suggests that interventions aimed at young people's motivation will succeed or fail depending on the institutional channels through which that motivation can be expressed.

Returning to the urban commons' framework outlined in Section 2, the findings can be organized around three questions that follow from the definition adopted in this study [7,25]. First, do young people see the commons as resources of their community? At the level of attitude, they largely do: 70% of Almaty and 99% of San José respondents agreed that public parks and community courtyards foster a sense of belonging, and 72% and 90%, respectively, agreed that local commons are better managed by the people who belong to the community concerned (Section 5.2.7; Tables A5 and A6, items 52 and 55). Second, are they actively involved in managing the commons rather than merely using them, which is the lens the framework proposes? Here the evidence is lighter: interviewees gave few examples of young people managing shared spaces, as opposed to taking part in initiatives led by others (Section 4.4). Third, is governance organized in the polycentric, horizontal way the framework assumes? In both cities, interviewees pointed to institutions and organized networks as the main gatekeepers of youth involvement: inner-circle access and hierarchical, Soviet-era structures in Almaty, and participatory mechanisms that often remain top-down, together with mistrust toward young leaders, in San José (Sections 4.3 and 4.5). Read in this way, the gap between attitudes and governance is not only a matter of motivation or information but also of how the governance of the commons is organized: the horizontal, co-created governance that the framework and the right to the city [8] envisage is largely absent from the experiences reported by young people. This reading remains interpretive: because both samples include only engaged youth and are non-probabilistic, we present it as a set of hypotheses for further research rather than as a test of the framework.

For research, the findings suggest four concrete priorities. First, studies should include non-participating youth, whose absence limits what can be said about barriers to entry. Second, longitudinal designs could test whether mandatory community work in San José, or university-based programmes in Almaty, lead to durable involvement in the governance of the commons or only to short-lived participation, for example by following students after graduation, when leadership turnover was reported to occur. Third, extending the comparison to other post-Soviet and Latin American cities would show whether the patterns identified here—top-down mechanisms and inner-circle access in Almaty, and the privileging of already-organized groups in San José—are specific to these cases or recur in comparable institutional settings. Fourth, participatory and action-research designs with young people as co-researchers, building on educational-commons and civic-science approaches [30,31], could document how young people actually govern specific commons over time, which cross-sectional data cannot do.

For intervention practice, the recommendations that emerge from the interviews and the survey are addressed to different actors, and this distinction affects how they should be framed (Table A7). Some fall mainly on national and local authorities, which control the conditions that other actors cannot change: the regulation of, and relations with, NGOs, funding rules, and the design of participatory mechanisms such as participatory budgeting. Others fall on universities, which are the main entry point to civic life in both cities, or on NGOs, which shape access, incentives and leadership continuity. Framing the recommendations by addressee also clarifies what the findings do not show: they cannot indicate which measures would be most effective, only which ones stakeholders consider relevant and which are consistent with the barriers reported by engaged youth.

7. Conclusions

This exploratory comparative study contributes to the sociology of youth civic engagement and civil society, as well as to the literature on urban sustainable development, in three ways. First, it brings into dialogue two under-researched non-Western urban contexts—one post-Soviet and one Central American—highlighting how structural constraints, institutional frameworks, and political environments shape distinct civic configurations while also sharing common motivational dynamics. In doing so, it connects the literature on lived youth citizenship and on urban commons, which have so far been discussed largely separately (Section 2). Second, by integrating qualitative and quantitative data, it captures both the statistical landscape of youth engagement perceptions and the contextually grounded mechanisms through which participation is enabled or constrained. Third, it illustrates the tension between positive attitudes toward urban commons and the limited extent of actual youth governance of public spaces, pointing to an important implementation gap in both cities.

These findings suggest several avenues for policy and practice. In Almaty, priority interventions for national and local authorities include greater transparency and trust-building between government and civil society, reduced administrative barriers for NGOs, and the integration of civic education into school curricula. In San José, where universities, NGOs and municipal authorities share responsibility, sustaining youth leadership continuity, improving intersectoral coordination, and strengthening mechanisms that extend civic opportunities beyond already-organized groups merit attention. In both cities, developing visible and accessible engagement channels—including through digital platforms—and building genuine decision-making power for youth (rather than tokenistic inclusion) are identified as priorities.

Future research should develop studies based on larger, probabilistic samples—ideally including non-participating youth—to enable more robust comparative conclusions. Lon-

gitudinal designs would allow for the assessment of how civic engagement trajectories evolve over time and in response to changing political and institutional conditions.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.F., C.K. and C.G.M.; methodology, A.F., C.K. and C.G.M.; formal analysis, A.F., C.K. and C.G.M.; investigation, A.F., C.K. and C.G.M.; writing—original draft preparation, A.F.; writing—review and editing, A.F., C.K. and C.G.M.; funding acquisition, A.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Cintana Alliance Research Grant 2023.

Institutional Review Board Statement: In accordance with applicable national regulations in Kazakhstan and Costa Rica, formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required for this type of research. The study was nonetheless conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, and all data were anonymized at the point of collection to protect participant confidentiality and privacy.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Verbal informed consent was secured from interview participants, while written informed consent was obtained from survey respondents through an information statement presented at the beginning of the online survey.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the reported results are presented in the tables included in this article (Appendix A). The original raw datasets generated during the study are no longer available.

Acknowledgments: Special thanks go to Dayana Duisenbek (AlmaU) who helped to translate the survey for Almaty city into Kazakh and Russian, Ivana Rodriguez (ULatina) and Alexa Miranda (ULatina) for their invaluable support with translations of the survey and the data collection for San Jose/Costa Rica, and Mary Esther Rojas (ULatina) for support in the statistical analysis of the data. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI—Claude.ai (Claude Sonnet 5.5)—for final language editing. The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Appendix A

The following tables provide the full interview guide and survey results referenced in the main text.

Table A1. Guide to the Semi-Structured Interviews.

Variable	Questions
Demographic variables of participants	1. What is the common profile of the youths participating in civic activities?
Level of youth civic engagement	2. What is the state of youth civic engagement in Kazakhstan/Costa Rica? 3. How is the state of youth civic engagement in Almaty/San José?
Main actors and mechanisms	4. What are the main institutions promoting youth civic engagement in Almaty/San José? 5. Does the process follow a top-down or bottom-up approach? Why? 6. What are the main mechanisms used to promote youth civic engagement?

Table A1. *Cont.*

Variable	Questions
Degree of participation of youths and achieved results	7. How are youths specifically engaged in the management of the urban commons? 8. Could you briefly describe an example of success of youth civic engagement in Almaty/San José?
Perceived problems and proposed recommendations	9. What are the factors still constraining youth civic engagement in Almaty/San José? 10. What kind of recommendations would you provide to enhance youth civic engagement in Almaty/San José?

Source: The authors.

Table A2. Survey Variables.

Variable	No. Item
Demographic variables: age, gender, most frequently used language, education level, and occupation to explore potential variations in civic engagement patterns.	2–6
Civic engagement: measure the perceived level of civic engagement among youths and the number of hours per week dedicated to civic activities.	7–8
Social norms: analyze how perceived social norms, such as expectations and attitudes of peers, families, and communities toward civic participation, affect youth civic engagement.	9–13
Motivations: explore the motivations driving youth civic engagement, including intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.	14–21
Perceived barriers: identify perceived barriers that hinder youth civic engagement	22–29
Cost–benefit perceptions: examine the perceived costs and benefits associated with engaging in civic activities.	30–39
Sense of community: measure the extent to which youth feel a sense of community and belonging within their local neighbourhoods and/or urban commons spaces.	40–47
Attitudes and beliefs toward urban commons: assess youth attitudes and beliefs towards urban commons and their importance for the development of local communities.	48–55

Source: The authors.

Table A3. Demographic Features of Respondents in Almaty and San José.

Variable	Item No.	Almaty %	San Jose %
Sample Size		**n = 58**	**n =56**
Age	2		
18–23 years		70	34
24–29 years		21	34
30–35 years		9	32
Gender	3		
Male		34	37
Female		60	57
Non-binary		2	5
Prefer not to answer		4	0
Most Used Language	4		
Kazakh		21	0
Russian		74	0
English		2	0
Spanish		0	100
Other		4	0

Table A3. *Cont.*

Variable	Item No.	Almaty %	San Jose %
Highest Level of Education	5		
Primary education		7	0
Secondary education—college		41	12
Bachelor's degree		35	43
MBA/MSc/Lic degree *		12	41
PhD		5	0
Other		0	4
Occupation	6		
Studying		43	29
Working		29	16
Working & studying		26	52
Unemployed		0	4
Prefer not to answer		2	0

Source: The authors. Note: * In Costa Rica, following completion of a university bachelor's degree, students can also opt for a "Licenciatura degree" consisting of two years of academic coursework with a thesis, similar to a master's degree.

Table A4. Civic Engagement of Respondents in Almaty and San José.

Subscale	Item No.	Almaty %	San Jose %
Dedicated hours per week	7		
Less than 1 h		49	38
Between 1 and 4 h		38	23
Between 4 and 8 h		9	27
More than 8 h		4	13
Level of civic engagement	8		
Completely not involved		3	20
Not much involved		16	21
Only partially involved		53	21
Very involved		19	23
Completely involved		9	14

Source: The authors.

Table A5. Survey Results—Almaty.

Subscale	Item	% Percentage/Response Options				
		Fully Disagree	**Disagree**	**Indifferent**	**Agree**	**Fully Agree**
Social Norms	9. Expectation of young adults getting involved	2	6	30	47	15
	10. Young adults regularly involved in decision-making that affects their communities	13	24	32	23	8
	11. Community regularly invests money in youth-led programs/projects	9	17	42	23	9
	12. Educational institution encouragement/support for youth civic engagement	15	13	25	34	13
	13. Family encouragement to get civically engaged	6	11	23	34	26

Table A5. *Cont.*

Subscale	Item	% Percentage/Response Options				
		Fully Disagree	**Disagree**	**Indifferent**	**Agree**	**Fully Agree**
Motivation	14. Share my ideas	4	8	26	43	19
	15. Achieve status recognition	10	28	28	26	8
	16, Engagement with local decision-makers	11	30	28	25	6
	17. Satisfy my moral needs and public duties	7	9	23	38	23
	18. Learn new skills	2	8	23	41	26
	19. Follow the experience of someone close to me	6	30	30	23	11
	20. Positively contribute to the development of my community	4	0	9	49	38
	21. Desire to develop a career in the NGO sector	15	28	34	15	8
Perceived Barriers	22. I am not taken seriously in my activities of civic engagement	10	41	33	14	2
	23. There are not so many visible and accessible channels to get civically engaged	2	8	43	39	8
	24. There is no real appreciation of youth involvement in the community where I live	12	12	37	29	10
	25. I am engaged only in minor activities, instead of being involved in the decision-making process	8	14	39	31	8
	26. People around me discourage and undermine my civic engagement	18	33	37	10	2
	27. There are no mechanisms to keep you fully motivated	10	16	37	31	6
	28. I don't really have enough time for being actively involved in my community	4	20	27	31	18
	29. I do not see any effective progress in my community notwithstanding my efforts	4	29	39	24	4
Cost/Benefit	30. Civic engagement improves my self-esteem and personal fulfilment	2	10	29	47	12
	31. Civic engagement increases my job opportunities	10	10	39	35	6
	32. Civic engagement helps me to extend my network of friends	2	12	14	45	27
	33. Civic engagement enhances my knowledge and skills	0	2	22	51	25

Table A5. *Cont.*

Subscale	Item	% Percentage/Response Options				
		Fully Disagree	**Disagree**	**Indifferent**	**Agree**	**Fully Agree**
Cost/Benefit	34. Civic engagement brings fun into my life	4	8	43	31	14
	35. Civic engagement causes me stress	8	31	41	20	0
	36. Civic engagement is time-consuming	0	18	35	39	8
	37. Civic engagement requires important physical and/or psychological efforts	0	2	39	43	16
	38. Civic engagement is legally risky	10	22	27	27	14
	39. Civic engagement negatively affects your reputation	29	37	20	6	8
Community Sense	40. Being a member of my community makes me feel well	2	4	29	51	14
	41. Being a member of my community allows me to develop valuable activities for the place where I live	2	2	33	45	18
	42. I can trust the people of my community	2	6	45	39	8
	43. Most of my community members know me	4	12	33	35	16
	44. My community has good leaders	4	2	35	35	24
	45. My community can positively influence other communities	2	2	31	47	18
	46. Members of my community care about each other	2	8	23	49	18
	47. I expect to be part of my community for a long time	2	10	31	35	22
Attitudes and beliefs about urban commons	48. Civic empowerment can foster the social wealth of a community	0	0	26	34	40
	49. Young adults' civic engagement can improve the local quality of life	0	0	19	36	45
	50. Local public institutions should support young adults' civic engagement in community projects	2	4	13	30	51
	51. The quality of a community is largely determined by its public places	0	6	26	36	32

Table A5. *Cont.*

Subscale	Item	% Percentage/Response Options				
		Fully Disagree	**Disagree**	**Indifferent**	**Agree**	**Fully Agree**
Attitudes and beliefs about urban commons	52. Urban commons, like public parks and community courtyards, foster a sense of belonging in urban areas	0	0	30	38	32
	53. Urban commons, like libraries and community centers, play a vital role in promoting equal access to resources for everyone	0	2	19	43	36
	54. Good maintenance of the surrounding environment is crucial to a community's prosperity	0	0	21	30	49
	55. Local commons can be better managed by people belonging to the related community	0	2	26	36	36

Source: The authors.

Table A6. Survey Results—San José.

Subscale	Item	% Percentage/Response Options				
		Fully Disagree	**Disagree**	**Indifferent**	**Agree**	**Fully Agree**
Social Norms	9. Expectation of young adults getting involved	9	9	24	42	16
	10. Young adults regularly involved in decision-making that affects their communities	9	23	27	38	4
	11. Community regularly invests money in youth-led programs/projects	18	21	29	30	2
	12. Educational Institutions encouragement/support for youth civic engagement	7	16	14	43	20
	13. Family encouragement to get civically engaged	13	7	23	38	20
Motivation	14. Share my ideas	2	5	5	53	35
	15. Achieve status recognition	5	7	50	30	7
	16. Engagement with local decision-makers	0	5	39	30	25
	17. Satisfy my moral needs and public duties	4	7	25	39	25
	18. Learn new skills	0	0	4	39	57
	19. Follow the experience of someone close to me	7	2	23	48	20

Table A6. *Cont.*

Subscale	Item	% Percentage/Response Options				
		Fully Disagree	**Disagree**	**Indifferent**	**Agree**	**Fully Agree**
	20. Positively contribute to the development of my community	0	0	7	32	61
	21. Desire to develop a career in the NGO sector	2	14	39	29	16
Perceived Barriers	22. I am not taken seriously in my activities of civic engagement	14	29	50	5	2
	23. There are not so many visible and accessible channels to get civically engaged	7	20	14	46	13
	24. There is no real appreciation of youth involvement in the community where I live	5	29	30	29	7
	25. I am engaged only in minor activities, instead of being involved in the decision-making process	13	32	25	27	4
	26. People around me discourage and undermine my civic engagement	21	39	20	18	2
	27. There are no mechanisms to keep you fully motivated	11	20	23	23	23
	28. I don't really have enough time for being actively involved in my community	14	32	14	25	14
	29. I don't see any effective progress in my community notwithstanding my efforts	18	32	34	11	5
Cost/Benefit	30. Civic engagement improves my self-esteem and personal fulfilment	2	2	27	48	21
	31. Civic engagement increases my job opportunities	4	7	45	39	5
	32. Civic engagement helps me to extend my network of friends	4	4	20	49	24
	33. Civic engagement enhances my knowledge and skills	0	2	7	55	36
	34. Civic engagement brings fun into my life	4	7	36	36	18
	35. Civic engagement causes me stress	14	30	23	29	4
	36. Civic engagement is time-consuming	0	14	30	48	7
	37. Civic engagement requires important physical and/or psychological efforts	2	9	23	54	13
	38. Civic engagement is legally risky	43	21	20	13	4
	39. Civic engagement negatively affects your reputation	57	25	13	5	0

Table A6. *Cont.*

Subscale	Item	% Percentage/Response Options				
		Fully Disagree	**Disagree**	**Indifferent**	**Agree**	**Fully Agree**
Community Sense	40. Being a member of my community makes me feel well	0	0	27	46	27
	41. Being a member of my community allows me to develop valuable activities for the place where I live	4	4	23	48	21
	42. I can trust the people of my community	2	18	20	45	16
	43. Most of my community members know me	7	16	27	39	11
	44. My community has good leaders	9	20	25	36	11
	45. My community can positively influence other communities	2	11	30	43	14
	46. Members of my community care about each other	5	11	20	52	13
	47. I expect to be part of my community for a long time	2	7	29	41	21
Attitudes and beliefs about urban commons	48. Civic empowerment can foster the social wealth of a community	0	0	9	34	57
	49. Young adults' civic engagement can improve the local quality of life	0	0	5	38	57
	50. Local public institutions should support young adults' civic engagement in community projects	0	2	5	25	68
	51. The quality of a community is largely determined by its public places	0	0	4	36	61
	52. Urban commons, like public parks and community courtyards, foster a sense of belonging in urban areas	0	0	2	36	63
	53. Urban commons, like libraries and community centers, play a vital role in promoting equal access to resources for everyone	0	4	9	41	46
	54. Good maintenance of the surrounding environment is crucial to a community's prosperity	0	0	5	27	68
	55. Local commons can be better managed by people belonging to the related community	0	2	9	29	61

Source: The authors.

Table A7. Recommendations by primary addressee.

Addressee	Almaty	San José
National and local public authorities	Provide greater institutional support for youth leadership. Build trust between public bodies and NGOs. Reduce administrative barriers and project-level control over NGOs. Integrate civic education into school curricula.	Invest adequately in youth-led initiatives. Issue inclusive participation calls. Improve digital access. Strengthen coordination among public entities, community organizations and NGOs.
Universities	Offer incentives such as scholarships, skills training or academic credits. Integrate civic education into university programmes.	Strengthen governance skills through cross-sector partnerships. Develop mechanisms to retain graduates, especially those returning to other regions, as volunteers and leaders.
NGOs and civil-society organizations	Reorganize the sector towards transparency and merit-based funding. Expand outreach through social media.	Build trust in young leaders. Use virtual platforms to sustain involvement. Link engagement to young people's life plans. Revitalize historical civic movements.

Source: The authors.

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