BEST PRACTICES IN DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION SERIES

Co-ordinating Action for Civic Space

Toolkit for implementing the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance

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Foreword

The DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance, adopted in July 2021, underpins DAC members' commitment to enable civil society's contribution to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and to protect and strengthen democracy. The Recommendation guides DAC members and other development co-operation and humanitarian assistance providers in protecting and promoting civic space and working with civil society actors, underscoring enhanced effectiveness, transparency and accountability.

The Recommendation contains 28 provisions outlining adherents' commitments. As many provisions are interlinked and mutually reinforcing, the OECD has clustered some into toolkits to help DAC members translate the Recommendation into practice. Toolkit topics and priorities were identified in consultation with the DAC Community of Practice (CoP) on Civil Society and informed by input from the DAC Civil Society Organisations Reference Group (CSO RG). The first thematic cluster focused on supporting civil society in partner countries as independent development and humanitarian actors to strengthen local ownership and leadership. The first toolkit, *Funding Civil Society in Partner Countries*, was published in May 2023 and the second one, *Shifting Power with Partners*, was published in July 2024. The present toolkit is developed under the thematic cluster on respecting, protecting and promoting civic space in partner countries.

Co-ordinating Action for Civic Space: Toolkit for Implementing the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance draws on desk research and a literature review as well as various national policies, reports and evaluations. It has benefited from peer-learning exchanges and sharing of practices, particularly with the CoP on Civil Society, including during meetings in November 2023, and May and November 2024. The CoP assigned a sub-group (the Sounding Board) to this toolkit, which contributed evidence, shared knowledge and provided input throughout 2024 and 2025. Three CSO RG representatives, one from the Global North and two from the Global South, were also members of the Sounding Board. Additional consultations included written inputs from the CSO RG, the OECD Development Co-operation Directorate (DCD), and from across the OECD.

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Table of contents

TABLES

BOXES

Executive summary

Civic space is under pressure around the world. Providers of development co-operation and humanitarian assistance can play a crucial role in protecting it, but they need to co-ordinate better. They must also remain cautious that their support does not inadvertently lead to a backlash that increases restrictions on civic space, particularly in politically constrained environments.

This toolkit provides guidance on:

- **Actions providers can co-ordinate on, in order to jointly protect and promote civic space in partner countries,** including monitoring openings and restrictions of civic space, enhancing access to and sharing of information, engaging in dialogue with partner-country governments, and fostering stronger, more coherent proactive and preventive actions, while doing no harm and avoiding unintended consequences (OECD, 2021[1]).
- **Actors with whom to co-ordinate in partner countries:** civil society, provider governments, other providers, international bodies and other development actors, also recognising the need to co-ordinate with partner-country governments throughout (OECD, 2021[1]).

Overarching messages

- **All actions to protect and promote civic space must be context-specific.** Taking informed, relevant and appropriate actions requires a deep understanding of local contexts, needs and priorities.
- **Co-ordination is a long-term investment.** It requires upfront effort, particularly in the early stages, to build trust, align objectives and establish effective mechanisms. It allows the simplification of complex and duplicative structures, reducing rather than adding to the burden on all actors.
- **Flexible approaches are needed to tailor and align programmatic and diplomatic responses to different threats to civic space**, whether they require an urgent response, or preventive actions in the medium- to long-term.
- **Preventive actions are effective mitigation measures to counter trends towards civic space closure.** The monitoring of civic space enables providers to anticipate restrictions (early warning signs) and identify openings. Taking preventive actions can be an effective way to counter restrictions when they are still in the making, and to protect and support civic space openings.
- **Engaging with diverse civil society actors in partner countries makes it easier to understand complex social, political and cultural dynamics** in the partner country. This inclusive approach allows for more representative partnerships and can foster trust between civil society and providers. Recognising the complementarity of diverse civil society perspectives also helps avoid unintentionally reinforcing existing power imbalances that may undermine civic space.

Summary of guidance for co-ordinating action on civic space

	Actors to co-ordinate with	Actions to jointly co-ordinate
With partner-country governments	**With civil society**	• Establish a meaningful, structured, regular and institutionalised dialogue with CSOs • Enable diverse civil society presence in key international events and multilateral fora and amplify CSO messages as appropriate • Support CSOs to co-ordinate among themselves • Provide space for ad hoc co-ordination based on CSO needs • Tailor co-ordination with, and support for, CSOs in closed civic spaces
	Within provider governments	• Secure sustained, high-level political commitment and leadership on civic space • Ensure whole-of-government co-ordination mechanisms to exchange on civic space issues across line ministries • Leverage various policy tools to protect civic space • Foster regular dialogue and build capacities across and within embassies and field offices • Co-ordinate to avoid unintended consequences of anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorism financing initiatives
	Among providers	**On dialogue and monitoring openings and restrictions of civic space** • Share information on a regular basis • Inform actions with context analysis, diagnostics and early warning tools • Seek synergies among providers on policy dialogue with partner-country governments • Adopt context-specific responses for dialogue with partner-country governments, with particular attention in closed civic spaces **To support stronger, more coherent proactive and preventive actions** • Seek complementarities and co-ordinate funding for civic space • Adapt programmes and funding based on local needs and priorities
	With international bodies and other development actors	• Support the work of relevant international and regional bodies mandated with the protection of civic space • Co-ordinate dialogue and diplomatic efforts with and within international and regional bodies • Build synergies with other development actors, notably with philanthropy and the private sector

1 The Case for Co-ordinating Action for Civic Space

On 6 July 2021, the DAC adopted the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance (hereafter, "DAC Recommendation") (OECD, 2021[1]). The OECD Development Co-operation Directorate is developing toolkits to offer guidance on what the Recommendation's provisions could look like in practice, in consultation with the DAC Community of Practice (CoP) on Civil Society1 and the CSO Reference Group (CSO RG).[2] Each toolkit addresses a cluster of related provisions in the DAC Recommendation and is directed to its adherents and prospective adherents, namely governments and international organisations that are providers of development co-operation and humanitarian assistance (hereafter "providers")[3]. This toolkit is part of the thematic cluster on respecting, protecting and promoting civic space in partner countries. It focuses on how providers can co-ordinate actions to protect and promote civic space in partner countries.

The protection and promotion of civic space is a precondition for development and democracy

Civic space is intrinsically linked to an enabling environment for civil society.[4] The DAC Recommendation identifies "respecting, protecting and promoting civic space" as the first of three intertwined pillars on how development co-operation and humanitarian assistance providers can enable civil society.

> *Civic space is defined as "the physical, virtual, legal, regulatory, and policy space where people can, among other things, securely exercise their rights to the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression, in keeping with human rights" (OECD, 2021[1]).*

Civic space is fundamental to development co-operation and humanitarian assistance, particularly regarding the role of civil society organisations (CSOs). CSOs are development and humanitarian actors in their own right, and partners or implementers of provider-funded actions. CSOs' ability to fully exercise the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression – both offline and online – is contingent on protected civic space. Only under such conditions can CSOs operate freely and securely, thereby maximising their impact in their varied roles as programme implementers, watchdogs, advocates for public policies and representatives of their communities. As reflected in the DAC Recommendation, CSOs also need an enabling environment to operate in, with support for CSO leadership and ownership, availability and accessibility of direct, flexible and predictable financial support, as well as dialogue and engagement, capacity strengthening and incentives for CSOs' own effectiveness, transparency and accountability (OECD, 2021[1]).

When CSOs are enabled, they can better contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to protecting and strengthening human rights and democracy, including safeguarding against potential restrictions of civic space. If civic space is under pressure in a partner country, this has negative implications for the country itself as well as for its civil society to operate freely

and fulfil its role as a key development and humanitarian actor. It also has negative implications for providers' efforts to advance development and humanitarian programmes, including actions to support partner country CSOs, affecting the quality and effectiveness of development co-operation, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding.

Civic space, the role of civil society and development outcomes are closely linked. An ACT Alliance/Institute of Development Studies report found that "*shrinking civic space is overall highly likely to halt or reverse progress towards reducing inequality, ensuring inclusion and improving sustainability, because it is often precisely those at greatest risk whom civil society seeks to empower and protect*" (Hossain et al., 2019[2]). Two recent studies commissioned by the International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL) illustrate that an empowered civil society operating in an open civic space is strongly associated with positive socio-economic and governance indicators – such as food security, government effectiveness, anti-corruption, and gender equality – while restrictions on civic space are linked with negative indicators (Gupta, 2025[3]; Spencer, 2025[4]). Civil society actors are better positioned to protect civic space when operating in an open civic space and enabling environment.

Civic space is under pressure around the world

According to many reports and analysis, civic space is shrinking, or closing, around the world, and shrinking civic space is one of the first symptoms of democratic backsliding. Data and evidence from ICNL, the OECD, the V-Dem Institute, CIVICUS and International IDEA, among others, have pointed to a deterioration of civic space and a general democratic backsliding across the world (CIVICUS, 2024[5]; IDEA, 2024[6]; ICNL, n.d.[7]; Nord et al., 2024[8]; OECD, 2021[1]; OECD, 2022[9]). Although measures to shrink or close civic space are not universal across countries and regions, this worrying trend of threats to fundamental freedoms worldwide has been on the rise over the years (CIVICUS, 2015[10]; ICNL, n.d.[11]). The CIVICUS Monitor indicated that 72.4% of the world population lived in closed or repressed countries in 2024 (2024[12]). The V-Dem *2024 Democracy Report* found an alarming loss of freedom of expression, a decline in clean elections, in freedom of association and in rule of law (Nord et al., 2024[8]). The *Global State of Democracy Report* from International IDEA also highlighted a significant decline in the quality of elections across the world (IDEA, 2024[6]). The DAC Recommendation recognised that the diminishing respect for human rights and democracy in a context of rising autocratisation has resulted in the erosion of the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association and expression (OECD, 2021[1]). In contexts of democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space, there is often a backlash against women's rights (Ortiz, 2023[13]) and other marginalised groups.

Several compounding challenges impact civic space. An OECD Report analysing the status of civic space in 52 countries (of which 33 are OECD Members) pointed to "*changing demographics, tensions related to immigration, polarisation due to mis- and disinformation, and threats such as COVID-19*" (OECD, 2022[9]). The OECD *Development Co-operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System* noted that shifting geopolitics are shaking the foundations of the international paradigm that emerged in the post-World War II era, grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (OECD, 2023[14]). The 2025 OECD *States of Fragility* report highlighted an alarming rise in armed conflicts and multi-layered violence, such as non-state violence, violence against women, homicide rates and organised crime, together with a worrying decrease of resources towards peace and conflict prevention (OECD, 2025[15]). Governments unwilling or unable to respond to citizens' demands grow fearful of the rising agency of social movements and can attempt to suppress dissent. More recently, civil society is facing ever-more financial pressures due to provider funding freezes or reduced budgets and changing provider priorities, hindering their capacity to operate.

Box 1. Threats to civic space

The following is a non-exhaustive list of examples of threats to civic space that build from indicators and reports from V-Dem, CIVICUS Monitor, ICNL, UNDP and the OECD Observatory of Civic Space.

- **Legal and regulatory barriers**
  - Excessive registration, fiscal obligations and reporting requirements.
  - Restrictions on permissible actions (in particular, activities that may be deemed "political") and foreign funding, labelling foreign-funded CSOs as "foreign agents."
  - Prior approval needed for funding, activities and reporting across administrative levels.
  - Misapplication and misinterpretation of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing standards.
- **Administrative and judicial pressure**
  - Burdensome administrative processes, such as onerous registration procedures and excessive administrative demands.
  - Punitive legal actions, such as exorbitant fines, revocation of registration for minor non-compliance and strategic lawsuits (e.g. defamation, corruption).
  - Legal harassment through arbitrary detentions, short-term incarcerations and material sanctions such as fines, firings and denial of services.
  - Restrictions to operating bank accounts and other financial constraints.
- **Repression, harassment and intimidation**
  - Smear campaigns and vilification of civil society actors, mis- and disinformation on the activities of CSOs, online and in-person harassment and hate speech.
  - Arbitrary detention, inflated or disproportionate sentencing, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.
  - Establishing government-organised NGOs (GONGOs)[5] or infiltrating CSOs to undermine independent civil society.
  - Targeting of activists and CSOs, such as prosecuting and detaining human-rights defenders, CSO leaders, staff and volunteers.
  - Attacks, detentions and other forms of suppression towards journalists.
  - Surveillance and privacy violations in person and online, such as in CSO meetings.
  - Misuse of technology to intimidate and categorise activists, such as with drones, facial-recognition software, hacking, internet smear campaigns, doxxing and artificial intelligence.
- **Restrictions towards freedoms of peaceful assembly, association and expression**
  - Restriction and repression of protests through harassment, detention of protestors, protest disruption and violent crackdowns on public gatherings.
  - Excessive advance notice requirements and lack of explicit legal recognition of legitimate spontaneous assemblies, sometimes resulting in covert or *de facto* authorisation regimes.
  - Censorship and restrictions on free speech via Internet laws, blasphemy laws, security laws and other legal measures.
  - Defamation or psychological threats against CSO representatives to deter their activities.

Sources: (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024[12]; ICNL and UNDP, 2021[16]; FATF, 2023[17]; Nord et al., 2024[8]; OECD, 2022[9]).

Reports point to shifts in the types of civil society actors that gain more space and influence public life. Shrinking or closed civic space tends to restrict CSOs operating according to democratic values, social justice and human rights. These include, but are not limited to, human rights defenders, women rights groups and environmental activists. As a result, many of these actors are forced to operate undercover and under constant threats. Some actors find other ways to participate in public life, such as in the digital sphere or art, culture and community networks (Hossain et al., 2019[2]; Sharp, Diepeveen and Collins, 2023[18]). Civil society actors are diverse, represent a range of interests and beliefs and play varied roles, from watchdogs to advocates, experts and service providers (OECD, 2023[19]). While civil society actors cannot be characterised as having a common mandate, the Recommendation and this toolkit focus on actors "*characterised by relationships of social solidarity with marginalised populations and concerns for social justice*" (OECD, 2010[20]).

Providers can play a crucial role in protecting civic space. They can affect "*civil society's capacity to safely contribute to protecting basic rights and social and economic indicators, as well as address humanitarian crises*" (Silva, 2021[21]). Providers can do, and in many cases are already doing, a lot to expand civic space in partner countries, including through specific strategies, dedicated funding schemes, mainstreaming dialogue with partner-country governments and engaging with partner-country CSOs, among others. Co-ordinating the action of providers that aim to protect civic space – to complement their individual, bilateral efforts – can be particularly beneficial, adding value to their actions and potentially increasing impact.

Provider co-ordination has long been recognised as critical to development effectiveness. Particular attention to co-ordination, also referred to as harmonisation, began with the *Rome Declaration on Harmonisation* (2003) and the OECD DAC *Guidelines on Harmonising Donor Practices for Effective Aid Delivery* (OECD, 2003[22]), followed by the various declarations on development effectiveness from Paris (2005) (OECD, 2005[23]) to Geneva (2022) (GPEDC, n.d.[24]). Broadly speaking, provider co-ordination helps to pool resources and expertise, creating synergies and sharing knowledge while avoiding duplication and overlap. Effective provider co-ordination can thus maximise the impact of development co-operation, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding (Schreiber and Swithern, 2023[25]). A forthcoming joint evaluation of the collective international development and humanitarian assistance response to the COVID-19 pandemic found benefits of co-ordination and coherence for the effectiveness of the crisis response. In particular, scaling-up previously established co-ordination mechanisms was identified as a key enabler in building trust among existing partners (Schwensen, 2023[26]).

Provider co-ordination is equally important for more effective actions to protect and promote civic space. Building a common position on civic space in providers' dialogue with partner-country governments can highlight the importance of open civic space in co-operation frameworks with partner countries. Joint programming and pooled funding for the promotion of civic space can lead to synergies, more resources and enhanced efficiency. Joint consultations with partner-country civil society can lighten the "consultation burden" on CSOs and equip providers with better inputs for the design, implementation and monitoring of their policies and programmes. Provider co-ordination may also mean making strategic choices that play to different provider strengths. One country may be better positioned in terms of economic leverage while another may be more usefully outspoken in the media.

Although recognised as beneficial, co-ordination can be challenging for providers. Evidence shows that providers follow a certain playbook when dealing with a sudden political rupture or autocratic turn (e.g. a *coup d'état*). However, providers are often un-co-ordinated and less apt to co-ordinate when responding to the gradual erosion of institutions and democratic values.[6]

Protecting and promoting civic space as part of development co-operation may not be a straightforward choice. It may trigger dilemmas not only on what would be the best strategy, approach and tools, but also consideration of trade-offs when balancing other foreign policy interests and other development objectives with the support to civic space. In contexts where the space for a constructive

political dialogue on development outcomes is hampered or absent (sometimes referred to as politically constrained environments), the dilemma may go as far as to question whether and what roles providers have to play. Politically constrained environments are no longer the exception (OECD, 2023[27]). Staying engaged over the long term in politically constrained environments allows providers to be prepared for civic space openings and to retain the possibility of some form of political dialogue, "to keep the lights on" (OECD, 2023[27]).

Providers need to be cautious that support for civil society, particularly in politically constrained environments, does not inadvertently lead to a backlash against civil society and increase restrictions on civic space. Context-specific responses tailored to the diversity of civil society actors are always needed with close attention to upholding the do-no-harm principle. Assumptions that provider funding inherently builds resilience in partner countries may overlook the reality that, without careful consideration of its broader impact, such funding can unintentionally undermine civic space, alienate local communities, and fuel narratives that delegitimise civil society actors. This underscores the urgent need for providers to incorporate regular context analysis informed by local actors.

Scope of this toolkit – Co-ordination with partner-country governments is inherent throughout

The scope of this toolkit is on the joint actions that providers can co-ordinate on with other actors to support civic space in partner countries.[7] While acknowledging that there are also wide-ranging individual actions by providers and partner-country governments that can and do protect civic space and enable civil society, the toolkit does not look at the individual strategies and programmes of providers to support civic space, nor at partner-country governments' actions to respect civic space.

The guidance of this toolkit is structured around the different actors with whom providers can co-ordinate their actions. It focuses on co-ordination with civil society, within provider governments, among providers, and with international bodies and other development actors.

This toolkit recognises that partner-country governments are inherent actors to co-ordinate with on civic space. Co-ordination with partner-country governments on civic space can both contribute to preventing restrictions on civic space (through ongoing dialogue) and to countering threats (ad hoc dialogue when there are early signs of potential threats). The guidance in this toolkit therefore integrates co-ordination with partner-country governments within the actions to co-ordinate with other actors.

The role of providers is to support, not direct, development processes in partner countries. Building from the ongoing push towards more locally led development and more equitable partnerships, providers' assessments of civic space in partner countries need to recognise the responsibility and agency of local actors' own development for sustainable change, identifying the challenges they face, and considering the most context-appropriate modalities needed to overcome them. Providing support in a way that enables ongoing locally led processes is a way to mitigate negative narratives that partner-country civil society is a proxy for foreign interests. The OECD toolkits on *Funding Civil Society in Partner Countries* and *Shifting Power with Partners* provide guidance to support civil society in partner countries so that it can protect and promote civic space.

Understanding the partner-country context, including that related to sovereignty and potential or perceived foreign influence, is necessary. Providers need to be cognisant of the trust deficit that can exist between partner-country governments and providers, and scepticism of both provider- and partner-country stakeholders towards development co-operation in general, and work towards inclusive communication, abandoning harmful and stereotypical narratives (OECD, 2024[28]). Providers need to reflect on and articulate the values and principles that guide their development co-operation and

humanitarian assistance, including when working with civil society and promoting civic space (OECD, 2023[19]).

An open, transparent, and coherent development and foreign policy can help strengthen providers' ability to address civic space in partner countries. This includes fostering fundamental freedoms, protecting human rights and other democratic values whilst respecting and adapting to local needs and context. Transparency and coherence are especially important in the current global geopolitical context of competing development co-operation paradigms, struggles for influence, amidst development co-operation and humanitarian assistance funding freezes and cuts.

2 Guidance on Co-ordinating Action for Civic Space

This chapter guides providers to co-ordinate actions to protect and promote civic space in partner countries in line with the DAC Recommendation. The guidance is structured around the different actors with whom providers can co-ordinate their actions. For each actor, it outlines why co-ordination is important, then describes the actions that providers can co-ordinate, offering examples of tools and practices. The guidance focuses on:

- **Actions providers can co-ordinate on, in order to jointly protect and promote civic space in partner countries,** including monitoring openings and restrictions of civic space, enhancing access to and sharing of information, engaging in dialogue with partner-country governments, and fostering stronger, more coherent proactive and preventive actions, while doing no harm and avoiding unintended consequences (OECD, 2021[1]).
- **Actors with whom to co-ordinate in partner countries:** civil society, provider governments, other providers, international bodies and other development actors, also recognising the need to co-ordinate with partner-country governments throughout (OECD, 2021[1]).

The guidance from this toolkit addresses a cluster of provisions from the DAC Recommendation related to the protection and promotion of civic space. It primarily focuses on Pillar One, Provision #3 of the Recommendation: "*Co-ordinate among providers and with international, regional and national bodies to monitor openings and restrictions of civic space, enhance access to and sharing of information, and foster stronger, more coherent proactive and preventive actions*" (OECD, 2021[1]).

The toolkit also integrates other related provisions of the Recommendation, in particular Pillar One, Provision #2 ("*Seek to engage in dialogue with partner country or territory governments and raise public awareness on the value of an inclusive and independent civil society and civil society participation and on respecting, protecting, and promoting civic space*"), Provision #4 ("*Take reasonable steps to do no harm to civic space in partner countries or territories*"), and Provision #5 ("*Support and engage with international, regional, and national bodies and initiatives that work to respect, protect, and promote civic space*"). In addition, the toolkit integrates Pillar One, Provision #6 and Pillar Two, provision #10 on the potential unintended consequences on CSOs of anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorism financing (AML/CTF) standards, and Pillar Two, Provision #2 on dialogue with civil society (OECD, 2021[1]).

Overarching messages

- **All actions to protect and promote civic space must be context specific.** Taking informed, relevant and appropriate actions requires a deep understanding of local contexts, needs and priorities. The importance of conducting regular context analysis guided by partner-country civil society actors is highlighted throughout. This includes an understanding of the political economy, power balance, and civil society landscape in partner countries.

- **Co-ordination is a long-term investment.** It requires upfront effort, particularly in the early stages, to build trust, align objectives and establish effective mechanisms. While it may initially demand more time and resources, this investment is essential to achieving the efficiency gains and streamlined processes that co-ordination ultimately enables. It allows complex and duplicative structures to be simplified, reducing rather than adding to the burden on all actors, and scales-up effort for more and better results (Schreiber and Swithern, 2023[29]).
- **Flexible approaches are needed to tailor and align programmatic and diplomatic responses to different threats to civic space.** There are different ways in which civic space can be threatened or restricted, which may also be experienced differently by diverse civil society actors in a given country. For instance, some civil society actors are specifically under greater threat than other groups, e.g. women's human rights defenders or LGBTQI groups. A flexible approach allows providers to tailor and align their programmatic and diplomatic responses based on the threats to civic space, whether these are short-term, requiring an urgent response, such as to protect partner-country civil society actors at risk, or whether they are medium-to-long-term preventive or proactive actions, such as monitoring civic space, or responding to reported or anticipated legal or regulatory restrictions.
- **Preventive actions are effective mitigation measures to counter trends towards civic space closure.** Monitoring of civic space enables providers to anticipate restrictions (early warning signs) and identify openings. Taking preventive actions can be an effective way to counter restrictions when they are still in the making and to protect and support civic space openings, especially in young or weak democracies with limited capacity to deliver development outcomes. Monitoring is best informed by local actors.
- **Engagement with diverse civil society actors in partner countries makes it easier to recognise the varied dynamics and perspectives within the local context.** Civil society actors differ in their geographic location, scope, size, structure, constituencies, governance model and more. They can include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foundations, co-operative societies, trade unions and other entities. Civil society can also be organised with varying formality, inclusive of community-based/grassroots organisations, and non-violent social movements for example (OECD, 2024[30]). Engaging with a broad spectrum of partner-country civil society actors helps providers understand the complex social, political and cultural dynamics within a partner country. This inclusive approach allows for more representative partnerships and can foster trust between civil society and providers. Recognising the complementarity of diverse civil society perspectives also helps avoid unintentionally reinforcing existing power imbalances that may undermine civic space.

Co-ordination with civil society

Description

Co-ordination with civil society can help providers take informed, relevant and appropriate actions based on a joint understanding of local context, priorities and needs. Co-ordination with diverse civil society actors allows providers to recognise the different dynamics and perspectives across the civil society landscape in partner countries. Partner-country civil society in particular can shape, guide and support implementation and monitoring of strategies or actions undertaken by providers to protect and promote civic space, avoiding doing harm to partner-country civil society, provoking repression, harassment, or intimidation, or undermining local advocacy for expanded participation and civic space.

There are many ways in which providers can better co-ordinate with civil society actors on the protection of civic space. Co-ordination can take the form of regular meetings, consultations,

institutionalised dialogue, or more advanced forms of engagement such as co-creation, as well as different types of financial support for civil society.

Table 1. Co-ordination with civil society

1. Establish a meaningful, structured, regular and institutionalised dialogue with CSOs • Foster formal and informal engagement and dialogue with CSOs • Institutionalise dialogue on a regular basis with diverse civil society actors in partner countries • Make further use of existing dialogue mechanisms at all levels
2. Enable diverse civil society presence in key international events and multilateral fora and amplify CSO messages as appropriate • Provide financial and administrative support for CSO participation • Consider whether and how to appropriately convey CSOs messages while doing no harm • Support existing initiatives and programmes led by CSOs on the international stage • Include provider-country civil society as part of a provider government's official delegation to key UN and international events
3. Support CSOs to co-ordinate among themselves • Fund CSO coalitions, cover overhead (indirect) costs, or cover specific budget lines for co-ordination • Support engagement mechanisms that allow for CSOs to convey their inputs to international bodies
4. Provide space for ad hoc co-ordination based on CSO needs • Provide space for CSOs to convey new ways in which co-ordination may be needed
5. Tailor co-ordination with, and support for, CSOs in closed civic spaces • Maintain dialogue with civil society to mitigate risks and to avoid unintended consequences • Consider alternative approaches based on context, such as adopting thematically focused policies and programmes • Anticipate possible responses based on early warning systems

Possible actions

1. Establish a meaningful, structured, regular and institutionalised dialogue with CSOs

Establishing regular dialogue with CSOs can help providers to monitor openings and restrictions of civic space in partner countries. Monitoring informed by local actors enables providers to have an understanding of the context, anticipate potential threats (early warnings) and identify openings**.** For example, partner-country CSOs can warn providers of potential risks to civic space, such as discussions over a draft law that would restrict funding for CSOs or unduly limit freedom of expression or the rights of certain groups. Identifying early signs of restrictions in co-ordination with CSOs allows providers to assess which proactive and preventive actions are needed for the specific context and when they are needed. There is potential for engaging CSOs in the whole cycle of strategies or actions, to enable them to shape, guide and support implementation and monitoring.

Box 2. The Renewed Women's Voice and Leadership Program (RWVL) in Canada

With support from Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the Renewed Women's Voice and Leadership Program (RWVL) prioritises the leadership of Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) and lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex plus (LBTQI+) groups in partner countries. The programme centres on a feminist approach, grounded in four key principles that shape its design and implementation, including feminist monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (fMEAL).

The first principle, locally led development, ensures that programming is designed and driven by WROs and LBTQI+ groups and supports their priorities as they define them. Meaningful engagement in decision-making processes is supported though mechanisms such as governance structures with WRO participation and the co-creation of knowledge products in local languages. The second principle,

intersectionality, promotes an inclusive approach that actively reaches structurally excluded groups, including but not limited to LBTQI+ communities, women and girls with disabilities, Indigenous women, and young feminists. This is achieved through intersectional analysis, targeted resource allocation and the systematic collection of disaggregated data.

The third principle commits to transformative change by addressing power imbalances and fostering leadership and sustainability among WROs and LBTQI+ groups. This involves strengthening organisational capacity, building WRO-led decision-making mechanisms, and promoting regular and transparent communication. The fourth principle, flexibility, ensures that funding and support remain flexible to context-specific and evolving local needs by prioritising learning and adaptation throughout the programme cycle. This is reflected in co-created performance management frameworks, the piloting of alternative reporting methods that respect local narratives, and a dedicated feminist learning partner that supports continuous adaptation.

Sources: (Government of Canada, n.d.[31]; Government of Canada, n.d.[32]).

There are many elements providers can consider to enable meaningful and regular dialogue. These include, but are not limited to: the institutionalisation of dialogue on a regular basis (as opposed to ad hoc); inclusiveness (reaching out to marginalised and traditionally underrepresented civil society actors, including those outside the capital cities); transparency and timeliness of information; allowing enough time for CSOs to prepare; and providing feedback to CSOs on how their inputs have been considered (Bozzini and Pascual Dapena, 2025[33]). Ideally, dialogue should be co-planned with CSO representatives, to clarify expectations, jointly identify the most relevant topics and co-design the most appropriate format. When possible, providers could co-ordinate among themselves to organise joint dialogue sessions with civil society to avoid duplication of effort or over-burdening CSOs with multiple dialogue demands. Whether in-person or online, providers need to be mindful of the potential security risks for civil society actors (Box 1) and take appropriate measures such as allowing anonymity where relevant (Box 10.).

Many DAC members report conducting consultations and dialogue with CSOs in their countries (often with CSOs and CSO platforms/networks from the providers' country), in partner countries, and at the international level (OECD, 2020[34]).[8] Consultations with CSOs are sometimes conducted on an ad hoc basis, for example prior to an international summit, when developing a new programme, or on a specific topic, while others are more systematic. France, for example, established the National Council for Development and International Solidarity (CNDSI) in 2014 to discuss the direction, objectives and resources for French development policy. The CNDSI is a multi-stakeholder consultation body composed of nine groups representing French society (CSOs, trade unions, economic stakeholders involved in sustainable development, members of parliament, local authorities, companies in the social and inclusive economy, foundations, universities and research centres, and multi-stakeholder platforms) and a tenth group of non-French members, including from partner countries, that bring unique external expertise (OECD, 2024[35]). In 2021 the CNDSI produced a strategy report on how to address shrinking civic space and defend civil liberties worldwide (MFA France and CNDSI, 2021[36]). In developing all of its Civil Society Roadmaps, the European Union (EU) engages in systematic dialogue with CSOs in partner countries (Box 7).

Providers can also make further use of existing dialogue mechanisms at all levels to enable exchanges with CSOs in partner countries. For example, the German Federal Ministry, BMZ, has a variety of mechanisms for dialogue, including regular structured dialogue and informal exchanges among implementing organisations and other stakeholders, strategic exchanges among EU Member States, thematic exchanges with implementing partners, meetings between CSOs and relevant ministries and deep-dive discussions on specific topics, such as climate, democracy and human rights (BMZ, 2025[37]). Other examples at the international level include the development of Action Plans and the multi-

stakeholder processes of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) or the monitoring and follow-up exercise of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC).

Box 3. Community of Democracies' Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society

A relevant example of structured co-ordination on civic space at the international level between states and CSOs is the Community of Democracies' (CoD) Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society. Founded in 2020, the CoD is a global intergovernmental coalition that provides a forum for countries to discuss and advocate on issues related to democracy.

The Working Group (WG) on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society aims to foster collaboration among states, civil society and international organisations to spotlight the growing global trend of constraining civil society. The WG allows governments, international organisations and CSOs to discuss global trends and to mobilise to protect civil society from threatening legislation. In some cases, when a case of concern is identified, the group drafts a call for action. The calls for action, which are not public, usually include an analysis of the legislation and suggestions for a series of measures that can be taken or supported. They are sent to a limited distribution list of other embassies and CSOs that are not members of the WG to raise awareness about specific situations. The role of the CSOs in the WG is crucial as they help identify cases and contribute context and legal analysis.

Sources: (CoD, n.d.[38]; CoD, n.d.[39]; CoD, n.d.[40]).

2. Enable diverse civil society presence in key international events and multilateral fora and amplify CSO messages as appropriate

Providers can foster CSOs' access to and participation in international events and multilateral fora so that CSOs can convey their messages on open civic space. To do so, providers can offer financial and administrative support for CSO participation, including support for existing initiatives and programmes led by CSOs. For example, Women for Women International, an international CSO, actively works to amplify the voices of women in local communities affected by conflict in global decision-making arenas, including the United Nations (UN) (Women for Women International, n.d.[41]).

Providers can dialogue with CSOs about CSOs' statements and positions on civic-space-related issues. Dialogue can allow providers to understand CSOs' experiences and concerns and consider, following the do-no-harm principle, whether and how to appropriately convey or amplify them in relevant spaces identified by CSOs, such as with partner-country governments or in international events and multilateral fora. Dialogue can ensure the content and formats of providers' messages are relevant and helpful for provider-country CSOs. Providers may also consider, where relevant, including some of the CSOs' inputs in their official positions. Again, dialogue with CSOs can help craft, or even co-create appropriate messages. Providers can also increase the impact of CSOs' inputs in international fora, for example by jointly strategising with them to identify the appropriate timing, format and target for their advocacy messages.

Providers can also include provider-country civil society as part of their government's official delegation to key UN and international events, applying a whole-of-society approach. For instance, Denmark has been including Danish CSOs and parliamentarians in the country's official delegation to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) since 2019. Denmark developed criteria to deliver ten official delegation cards to CSO platforms working on global issues (such as development and climate). Besides UNGA, Denmark has also provided CSOs access to other key international events on an ad hoc basis, including the UN Climate Change Conference (COP) and High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development,

although in a limited format. On a thematic level, several providers have funded women-led CSOs to participate in the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

There are several entry points into multilateral fora where providers can encourage an increase of CSO access and participation. A relevant example in the UN system is the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) which reports to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This Committee is responsible for reviewing the accreditation of NGOs with consultative status at the UN (ECOSOC, n.d.[42]). While it has faced criticism for politicised decision-making and related concerns about transparency and efficiency, reforms led by Costa Rica and the United Kingdom in 2024 marked a step forward (Democracy Without Borders, 2024[43]; ECOSOC, n.d.[44]; ISHR, 2023[45]). Monitoring of the effectiveness of these reforms and support from providers via the Committee could further facilitate CSO access and participation in the UN system.

Box 4. Co-ordination between UN Member States and CSOs for civic space: the #UNmute campaign

The *#UNmute Civil Society Action Coalition* is a collaborative effort launched in 2020 between United Nations (UN) Member States and civil society actors to raise awareness of the need to expand – rather than shrink – the space of civil society at the UN.

To support this initiative with concrete actions, the Permanent Missions of Denmark and Costa Rica to the UN developed "*Recommendations to ensure meaningful civil society participation at the United Nations*", in close collaboration with the UN Foundation and some international CSOs (CIVICUS, Action for Sustainable Development, Global Focus, Action Aid International and Forus) in June 2021. The recommendations call for, among other measures, ensuring meaningful participation at all stages of UN meetings and processes, creating an annual Civil Society Action Day and appointing a UN Special Envoy for Civil Society.

By 2024, #UNmute was supported by more than 500 CSOs from around the world as well as 50 UN Member States. As part of the initiative, Member States are currently working on a handbook for UN Missions in New York on how to involve civil society in their work at UN level. The campaign's diverse multi-stakeholder nature makes it a prime example of co-ordination among providers, recipients and CSOs to promote civil society participation and expand civic space at the global level.

Sources: (MFA Denmark, 2022[46]; UNmute Civil Society, 2021[47]; UNMute Initiative, n.d.[48]).

3. Support CSOs to co-ordinate among themselves

Providers can fund CSO coalitions, cover overhead (indirect) costs or support specific budget lines to strengthen CSO capacity for co-ordination and dialogue among CSOs. At partner-country level, providers can fund initiatives such as civil society days, national CSO forums, and meetings of national or decentralised CSO coalitions. Providers can also support engagement mechanisms that allow for CSOs to convey their inputs to international bodies and forums or preparatory events in which civil society can debate and provide joint CSO inputs to the official event.

For example, the UN Civil Society Conference held in May 2024 in Nairobi was designed as a preparatory CSO event to the Summit of the Future, and was jointly supported by four funders (the EU, Denmark, the Ford Foundation and the UN Foundation) (UN, 2024[49]). Adjacent to the conference, Denmark – together with CSO networks – ensured a national hearing process for Danish civil society and partners in Kenya to gather input for the Summit of the Future. A similar process is also well-established for the UN Climate Change Conference (COP) and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

4. Provide space for ad hoc co-ordination based on CSO needs

Providers need to be open to CSOs' identification of new ways in which co-ordination may be helpful in a particular context or to address an arising issue. Ad hoc ways in which providers can co-ordinate with civil society on civic space matters can include conducting joint events, co-organising workshops, intervening in each other's meetings, joining forces on research projects, planning capacity strengthening initiatives for both CSOs and provider-country government officials, or carrying out joint field missions and joint evaluations, among others.

For example, the United Kingdom's (UK) Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) engaged the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) in Ghana and Bond UK to oversee a reflection on how to shape FCDO's civil society and civic space programming. WACSI and Bond engaged in several dialogues with CSOs in West Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific. As a result, they presented a report with recommendations to help frame FCDO's programming (WACSI, 2025[50]).

5. Tailor co-ordination with, and support for, CSOs in closed civic spaces

In contexts of closed civic space, co-ordinating with and supporting civil society requires care and caution. It may entail risks for providers and for civil society actors and may have unintended consequences. Support for CSOs may become highly politicised and instrumentalised, whether to build legitimacy for a particular side in a polarised environment, or to demonise it. Conflicting parties might view CSOs as a threat and obstruct their work, harming local populations. Providers must be aware of the risk of playing into the negative narratives of governments seeking to restrict civic space. A lack of understanding of the partner-country context may indirectly contribute to shrinking civic space even further. (Cheeseman and Desrosiers, 2023[51]). Solid knowledge of a country's political economy and of the civil society landscape, is critical for avoiding actual or perceived exacerbation of conflict and competition.

Maintaining dialogue between providers and civil society can help to mitigate risks and to avoid unintended consequences. In these contexts, it may be appropriate to conduct such dialogue in a confidential way and/or virtually, if CSOs themselves prefer these dialogue approaches for safety reasons. In such cases, provider-country and international CSOs can play a role in facilitating dialogue with, and channelling inputs from, partner-country civil society.

Some of the tools that providers use in more 'open' contexts, such as pooled funds or institutionalised dialogue with partner-country governments, **may not be feasible in closed contexts**. Alternative approaches may include, but are not limited to, extending protection for civil society actors (e.g. access to legal services), expressing solidarity, or providing a safe space for dialogue. In contexts of closing civic space, providers may also consider adopting thematically focused policies and programmes in their work with civil society, such as economic empowerment, education, heath, the environment, or youth, through which civil society can continue to be active, contribute to society and demonstrate its value added while working to open civic space (see Box 10 for further measures providers can take in closed contexts). Working with external civil society, including international and regional organisations, may be an appropriate means to protect partner-country civil society actors in such contexts (OECD, 2023[19]).

Early warning systems are of particular relevance in contexts where civic space is closing. They allow providers to anticipate their possible responses to different closing of civic space scenarios, tailor their co-ordination with and support for civil society actors and position themselves to seize any opening opportunities. Supporting civil society in closing or closed civic space requires in-depth understanding of the context, a great degree of flexibility in programming and funding (see toolkit on *Funding Civil Society in Partner Countries* (OECD, 2023[19])), as well as specific and innovative tools and approaches. This can include an array of means, all of which need to be guided by advice from partner-country civil society on what would be helpful: public meetings, joint statements, trial monitoring and supporting representation at

multilateral fora, among others. Co-ordinated action by providers in any of these areas will be more effective than unilateral action (see Section "Co-ordination among providers").

Box 5. The EU System for an Enabling Environment (EU SEE) to monitor civic space

In 2024, the EU launched the *EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society* (EU SEE) programme. The EU SEE brings together civil society actors from 86 countries to – among other functions – monitor laws and administrative practices as well as the digital and media environments which provide the context for civil society operations.

The programme established an Early Warning and Monitoring Mechanism led by CSOs in the 86 countries. This mechanism gathers near-real-time data on event-based shifts in the enabling environment for civil society and civic space, informed by regular inputs submitted by CSOs. These can lead to triggering an alert and consequently advocacy actions to respond to early signs of restrictions. CSOs also report on positive developments for the enabling environment for civil society, to support potential openings early in the process. In one African country, the EU SEE programme supported a key CSO confronting restrictive legislation on CSOs and cybersecurity. This support involved rallying CSOs for joint positions and facilitating a meeting with the country's President for direct dialogue, as well as facilitating connections and peer support from CSOs from a neighbouring country who had faced a similar legislative challenge and could provide strategic insights and lessons learnt. Through these efforts, CSOs advocated successfully for the suspension of the proposed restrictive legislation.

The EU SEE also develops annual country reports compiling and assessing data on key issues affecting the enabling environment for civil society, including legal frameworks, funding and respect for fundamental freedoms, among others.

Sources: (European Commission, 2024[52]; EU SEE, n.d.[53]; Hivos, n.d.[54]).

Co-ordination within provider governments

Description

Internal co-ordination is about policy coherence between the promotion of civic space and democratic values alongside other policy priorities with cross-border impacts and is a crucial element of providers' efforts to protect civic space in partner countries. Policies with cross-border impacts can include foreign policy, security, migration, energy and trade, all in an ever-changing geopolitical context. Having a coherent approach to civic space means being aware of the impact that a provider-country's policies and programmes, designed to meet various different objectives, can have on civic space in partner countries.

These considerations are in line with the do no harm to civic space provision of the DAC Recommendation (OECD, 2021[1]). They also build on the general principles of policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD), as the imperative is ultimately for providers to balance the protection of civic space with foreign, security and trade policies, making sure the latter are supportive of – and do no harm to – partner countries' civic space.

Table 2. Co-ordination within provider governments

1. Secure sustained, high-level political commitment and leadership on civic space
• Secure sustained political commitment and leadership to develop coherent policies and strong co-ordination mechanisms
• Pay attention to communicating the value of actions on civic space in partner countries to provider's domestic publics
2. Ensure whole-of-government co-ordination mechanisms to exchange on civic space issues across line ministries
• Establish mechanisms for whole-of-government co-ordination and a do-no-harm approach across policy areas
• Build from existing co-ordination mechanisms to include civic space considerations in regular exchanges with line ministries
3. Leverage various tools to protect civic space
• Integrate development co-operation considerations into foreign policies
• Use diplomatic and policy tools and capabilities to improve the coherence between development co-operation and other policies
4. Foster regular dialogue and build capacities within and across and embassies and field offices
• Create spaces for dialogue across provider-country embassies and field offices within and across different partner countries
• Build the capacities of officials working in embassies and field offices to raise awareness and to equip them with diagnostic tools
• Develop tools to determine context-appropriate responses
5. Co-ordinate to avoid unintended consequences of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing standards
• Foster whole-of-government co-ordination to avoid unintended consequences
• Establish strong channels for regular dialogue between officials in charge of AML/CTF, financial compliance, and civil society support

Possible actions

1. Secure sustained, high-level political commitment and leadership on civic space

High-level political commitment and leadership is a precondition to enhancing policy coherence, as recognised by the OECD PCSD Recommendation's five-year report (OECD, 2024[55]). In this vein, strong and sustained political leadership is needed to shape national debate within provider countries and arbitrate policy change, and to promote the pursuit of a whole-of-government agenda on civic space. To translate this into action, leadership requires investment in analysis, development of coherent policies and strong co-ordination mechanisms. These can help to increase understanding across provider-country ministries and agencies of the value of protected civic space in partner countries, as well as its value in attaining various provider-country policy aims including for example in trade and security. They can also clarify how a provider-country's interventions can contribute, or at least do no harm, to civic space, and ultimately help find a consistent approach that strikes the best balance among competing priorities.

Providers have wide-ranging development co-operation strategies that encompass a number of different thematic priorities, approaches and modalities. Providers may, in some cases, decide to prioritise support for socio-economic goals over support for civic space, rights and democracy, which can be regarded as more sensitive. However, the existence of open civic space and an empowered civil society can be essential to the effectiveness of and accountability for socio-economic development programmes, bolstering inclusive outreach, community trust, relevant design and implementation, and appropriate and flexible monitoring and feedback. Thus, supporting varied and complementary development goals in a partner country can contribute to policy coherence. Political leadership on civic space can help enable providers to make coherent choices of what to support where and provide the necessary, sustained backing for their implementation.

Provider governments need to pay careful attention to communicating the value of actions on civic space in partner countries to their own public domestically as a means to help maintain political commitment and leadership. A recurring challenge for provider countries is to increase understanding of and support for civic space as a cross-cutting topic of importance in its own right, and one that also enables the effective delivery of development co-operation efforts. For example, the UK published a White Paper on laying out the vision for development co-operation, including the importance of defending civic space and fundamental freedoms and working with civil society, and local organisations, including WROs (UK FCDO, 2023[56]). Reinforcing this vision, the FCDO's Minister for Human Rights delivered a speech at a

stakeholder event marking International Human Rights Day in 2024, emphasising the defence of civic space and fundamental freedoms as the foremost priority (UK FCDO, 2024[57]).

2. Ensure whole-of-government co-ordination mechanisms to exchange on civic space issues across line ministries

Ensuring coherence for civic space protection in partner countries requires whole-of-government co-ordination across key institutions at provider-country level. As noted by the OECD Council Recommendation on PCSD's five-year report, co-ordination mechanisms "*are fundamental to the resolution of divergences between sectoral policies and the promotion of mutually supporting actions across sectors and institutions*" (OECD, 2019[58]; OECD, 2024[55]). The OECD *Practical Guide for Policymakers on Protecting and Promoting Civic Space* presents a four-step conceptual guide for governments wishing to adopt a comprehensive, strategic and co-ordinated whole-of-government approach to protecting and promoting civic space, including in non-Member countries, as part of a coherent policy approach and in line with the DAC Recommendation (OECD, 2024[59]).

Policies, strategies, programmes and response initiatives in the field of civic space are usually developed in ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) and in development co-operation agencies. Co-ordination mechanisms provide established channels for MFAs and agencies to engage with other line ministries working domestically on policy areas with potential cross-border effects on civic space in partner countries (e.g. wider foreign policy, security, energy, trade and environment), so that they can consider civic space dimensions as they develop and implement these varied policies. A recurring challenge is the trade-off with competing policy priorities in a challenging and ever-changing international context. Lack of intragovernmental co-ordination may result in contradictory measures and approaches, which in turn may weaken policy responses to threats to civic space. Areas such as counter-terrorism, migration, border control, access to energy sources, trade and financial interests can all benefit from a do-no-harm approach. MFAs and development agencies may want to sensitise and advise public officials working on these issues as to their potential impacts on civic space.

Providers could build from existing co-ordination mechanisms on development co-operation to include civic space considerations in regular exchanges with line ministries. For example, Portugal's Interministerial Commission for Co-operation, operating alongside Camões – the Institute for Co-operation and Language – mobilises the expertise of line ministries and institutions in its development co-operation policies, which has enabled strong dialogue and partnerships between Portuguese institutions at both provider-country and partner-country levels (OECD, 2022[60]).

3. Leverage various tools to protect civic space

Many DAC members have integrated development co-operation considerations into their foreign policies. This allows for a more deliberate use of diplomatic capabilities alongside development co-operation in order to improve the coherence of foreign policy and development objectives. For example, Italy's National Action Plan on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development is oriented towards enhancing co-ordination domestically to mainstream sustainable development across policy sectors and levels of government, while taking into account the impact of domestic policies on partner countries. The Action Plan provides institutional co-ordination mechanisms and tools to enact the whole-of-government, multi-level and whole-of-society approach (OECD, 2022[61]; OECD, 2024[55]). International instances that provide recommendations on civic-space matters can also be an entry point for partner-country policy dialogue by provider embassies. Such is the case, for example, of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) (see section "Co-ordination with international bodies and other development actors").

However, critics point out that while providers do raise concerns with partner-country governments about threats to civic space, they rarely exploit the full potential of their diplomatic capital (Baldus et al., 2019[62];

Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2019[63]; CIVICUS, 2018[64]). In addition, critics highlight cases where, despite diplomatic efforts, providers have continued or intensified their economic and security engagements (Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2019[63]). Another set of critiques points to the recent threats to civic space, including rhetoric hostile to civil society, in democracies that are development co-operation and humanitarian assistance providers. This type of criticism highlights the need for providers to ensure that their approach to civic space at home is consistent with their approach to support for open civic space abroad.

Sweden's Drive for Democracy initiative, launched in 2019, can be seen as an example of an effort to integrate democracy promotion and foreign policy, supporting democratic institutions through the joint use of development assistance, diplomatic and other tools. It strives to provide coherence between support to democracy and other foreign policy interests, in particular trade, as it states that "*Sweden's trade policy is a part of strengthening democracy in the world*" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021[65]). The Government of Sweden's more recent 2024 reform agenda for development assistance speaks to the Government's intent to strengthen internal co-ordination for coherence across development, foreign, security, trade, climate and migration policies, including through the use of country strategies, so that Sweden speaks with *"one voice"* (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024[66]).

4. Foster regular dialogue and build capacities across and within embassies and field offices

Dialogue across provider-country embassies and field offices of development agencies within and across different partner countries can foster coherence across programming and raise awareness on the importance of protecting civic space. Regular dialogue can help public officials exchange on common challenges and good practices, identify lessons learned on protecting civic space, and foster ideas to address threats to civic space or other challenges faced by civil society at the local level. Exchanges can also address the approaches for engaging in dialogue with partner-country governments, to learn what works in different country contexts. Coherence in programming is also crucial to ensure that different programmes and initiatives don't contradict each other, and that they contribute to protecting, or at least do no harm to, civic space.

Building the capacities of officials working in embassies and field offices is equally important, as lack of knowledge on civic-space-related issues is a common challenge for officials. Increasing awareness and building capacities can contribute to a common understanding of civic space challenges, of opportunities for positive change, of the key stakeholders and of the actors or processes that the embassy/agency could support. Providers' development co-operation and diplomatic sections need to work together in responding to challenges to civic space. Responses may need to be twofold, both programmatic, through a new funding scheme or adjusting the priorities of a programme for example, as well as sensitive diplomatic engagement.

The development of tools can allow staff to determine what actions are the most appropriate for the context in which they are operating. These tools can take the form of practical toolkits or guidelines that help staff in embassies and field offices identify threats to civic space through early-warning tools and appropriate actions to protect it, including different development co-operation and diplomatic levers. Tools need to include regular context analysis.

For example, the UK developed a civic space diagnostic toolkit and separate guidance for protecting human rights defenders, targeted at the UK's embassies. The toolkit includes a political economy analysis, highlighting the importance of understanding the context, relationships and drivers to identify levers to prevent potential - or counter actual - civic space restrictions. These tools are being rolled out with training for embassy officials, including senior leadership, with civic space issues being discussed over several days. Similarly, the Netherlands developed guidelines for Dutch embassy officials to address protecting

and strengthening civic space and its defenders as part of their work. It provides practical guidance on preventive actions, proactive actions and emergency responses in varied country contexts and scenarios.[9]

5. Co-ordinate to avoid unintended consequences of AML/CTF standards

Whole-of-government co-ordination is particularly relevant to avoid unintended consequences of misinterpretation or misapplication of AML/CTF standards. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an inter-governmental body setting international standards in this field. More than 200 countries and jurisdictions have committed to implementing FATF's standards as part of a co-ordinated global response to preventing organised crime, corruption and terrorism (FATF, n.d.[67]). However, in recent years, many CSOs around the world have faced operational and legal restrictions due to the misinterpretation or misapplication of AML/CTF-related rules and regulations, in particular flowing from FATF Recommendation 8.[10] The measures reported include intrusive supervision of Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) without any consideration of risks; restrictions on NPOs' access to funding and bank accounts; and forced dissolution, deregistration or expulsion of NPOs (FATF, 2023[68]). Governments and financial institutions – both in provider and in partner countries – often justify these measures by citing the requirements of the FATF recommendations. CSOs, on the other hand, experience FATF standards as leaving space for misinterpretation (HSC, n.d.[69]).[11] CSOs have argued that jurisdictions and financial institutions continue to fail to adopt or misapply the risk-based approach, leading to the misapplication of FATF recommendations in ways that place undue restrictions on the CSO sector (ICNL, 2023[70]).

FATF amended Recommendation 8 in an effort to address its misapplication and misinterpretation, which had led countries to apply disproportionate measures restricting CSOs, calling for a more risk-based approach (FATF, 2023[17]). FATF issued and updated its Best Practices Paper to help countries, regulated entities, and NPOs apply a risk-based approach to implementing measures to mitigate terrorism financing risk in the NPO sector and discourage wholesale de-risking of NPOs. The Best Practice Paper emphasises that typically, only a marginal portion of NPOs present a "high risk" of terrorism financing abuse; that a "one-size-fits-all" approach is inconsistent with a risk-based approach; and that countries should implement such measures based on actual identified risks. (FATF, 2023[71]). Building from past reforms, new procedures were also adopted to ensure that FATF can identify, consider and address NPO-related unintended consequences of misapplication of Recommendation 8 in assessment processes including mutual evaluations and the different follow-up processes. Other efforts include an e-learning course (FATF, n.d.[72]) and an updated Financial Inclusion Guidance, which aims to ensure that NPOs have access to financial services, including in higher risk situations such as conflict zones (FATF, 2025[73]).

It is crucial to ensure that the legitimate determination to fight money laundering and to counter terrorist financing is operationalised in a way that minimises or nullifies unintended (or intended) negative consequences on the operating ability of CSOs. Whole-of-government co-ordination can be challenging, since these two aspects are usually dealt with by different ministries and structures within governments, typically with ministries of finance and related structures leading the former, and MFAs and development co-operation agencies the latter. Establishing strong channels for regular dialogue between officials in charge of AML/CTF and financial compliance more broadly and of civil society and civic space support can help create mutual understanding and avoid unintended consequences. Another challenge is the fear of fines for non-compliance with AML/CFT regulations in financial institutions. This underscores the importance of building trust and information-sharing protocols between regulators, the private sector and CSOs to foster a shared, more nuanced understanding of risk and help prevent the blanket de-risking of financial services to CSOs.[12]

For example, Germany, via the German Agency for International Co-operation (GIZ), supported the development of a report in Peru to assess the exposure to AML/CTF risks in Peru's CSO sector. The study was elaborated in collaboration with the Superintendency of Banking, Insurance, and Pension Fund Administration (SBS). It found that effective implementation of FATF's Recommendation 8 pertaining to

civil society requires a comprehensive understanding of the civil society sector's diversity and the specific risks associated with different types of organisations. The study recommended that the government engage in continuous dialogue with CSOs and financial institutions to identify and assess these risks accurately. Such dialogue can ensure that measures adopted are proportionate and do not unduly hinder civil society activities (SBS, 2022[74]).

Box 6. Norad's internal co-ordination on unintended consequence of FATF regulations on CSOs

In 2023, Norwegian CSOs funded by Norad initiated a dialogue with Norway's FATF delegation to address the unintended consequences of FATF regulations, based on challenges faced by Norwegian CSOs' local partners. These challenges included difficulties in opening bank accounts, transferring funds and navigating shrinking civic space. With increasing attention to this issue within FATF, Norad, as part of Norway's FATF delegation, participated in a working group on the matter. Following initial exchanges between CSOs and Norad, a broader forum was convened, bringing together CSOs, ministries, the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), the Financial Supervisory Authority, and Norad representatives working on governance, anti-corruption, and civil society. This platform enabled stakeholders to assess challenges from multiple perspectives, leading to the formulation of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a more structured dialogue.

The MoU established a "roundtable forum" as a confidential consultative platform where stakeholders can discuss the unintended effects of AML/CFT measures on CSOs, shrinking civic space, financial inclusion and regulatory frameworks. The forum aims to foster mutual understanding and potentially devise and advocate for policy input to FATF. Members include three ministries, Norad, the Financial Supervisory Authority, and five Norwegian CSOs, with the possibility of involving other relevant governmental, non-governmental and financial sector actors. Co-facilitated by Norad and Forum, a CSO umbrella organisation, the initiative reflects Norad's commitment to breaking silos, enhancing internal policy coherence and improving the effectiveness of CSO funding while supporting global AML/CFT efforts in line with the SDGs.

Source: Author's interviews with Norwegian officials.

Co-ordination among providers

Description

Co-ordination among providers is widely recognised as contributing to development effectiveness as it helps create synergies, build alliances, share knowledge and avoid duplication, thus enhancing the impact of development co-operation, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding (Swithern and Schreiber, 2023[75]). This is also true in the field of civic space protection and promotion. There are two sets of actions in which providers can co-ordinate among themselves on civic space: 1) on dialogue and monitoring; and 2) to support proactive and preventive actions.

Table 3. Co-ordination among providers

On dialogue and monitoring openings and restrictions of civic space
1. Share information on a regular basis • Conduct regular dialogue to obtain the most accurate and up-to-date information and analysis • Designate a civil society focal point in embassies or in field offices • Establish secure communication channels or mechanisms to share information
2. Inform actions with context analysis, diagnostics and early warning tools • Monitor potential restrictions and openings of civic space • Share access with other providers to existing monitoring initiatives and tools • Identify gaps and develop additional or complementary tools if needed, based on local needs • Structure monitoring and follow established methodologies
3. Seek synergies among providers on policy dialogue with partner-country governments • Share information and context analysis to inform dialogue with partner-country governments and find synergies to leverage diplomatic capital
4. Adopt context-specific responses for dialogue with partner-country governments, with particular attention in closed civic spaces • Consider the most context-appropriate means for communication with partner-country governments • Recognise that there are varied roles among providers and multilateral organisations based on current working relations • Adopt responses informed by shared lessons learned and guided by partner-country civil society
To support stronger, more coherent proactive and preventive actions
1. Seek complementarities and co-ordinate funding for civic space • Seek complementarities and a coherent approach to programmes on civic space • Co-ordinate programming that specifically supports CSOs' work on the promotion and protection of civic space • Consider multi-donor pooled funds as a funding modality
2. Adapt programmes and funding based on local needs and priorities • Share information and co-ordinate design, implementation and ongoing adaptation of programmatic efforts • Adapt programmes and funding based on real local needs and priorities • Show adaptability in supporting and engaging civil society to enable their work

Possible actions to co-ordinate among providers on dialogue and monitoring openings and restrictions of civic space

1. Share information on a regular basis

Providers are encouraged to conduct regular dialogue among themselves in partner countries to maximise their chances of obtaining the most accurate and up-to-date information and analysis. For this, they could use existing co-ordinating mechanisms and include a permanent check-in specific to civic space. Designating a civil society focal point in embassies or in field offices could help in gathering, analysing and sharing information on civic space-related issues on an ongoing basis.

Providers could also establish secure communication channels or mechanisms such as provider co-ordination groups and roundtables, to share information (including sensitive information to the extent possible), compare how they track potential restrictions, discuss their respective analyses, and brainstorm on potential response strategies.

Box 7. The EU Civil Society Roadmaps

The EU Civil Society (CS) Roadmaps began as a result of a structured dialogue involving 700 CSOs across the world. The CS Roadmaps aim at improving "*impact, predictability and visibility of EU actions, ensuring consistency and synergy throughout the various sectors covered by EU external relations*". They are also meant to enhance co-ordination and exchange of best practices among EU Member States and other international actors.

The first generation of CS Roadmaps was developed in 2014-2017, a second generation in 2018-2020 with an effort to formulate more concrete actions and more specific indicators, while the third generation is ongoing, and will cover 2025 and beyond. Their development is led by EU delegations in partner countries, supported by the European Commission's (EC) headquarters and technical experts, and is designed to be a participatory process informed by civil society. The CS Roadmaps typically include two main parts. The first is an analytical section that assesses the state of civil society in the country, examining the enabling environment, CSOs' capacity and their involvement in domestic policies. It identifies challenges and opportunities, and the lessons learnt from past EU engagement with CSOs. The second part presents the strategy, priorities and action plan for future EU engagement (including Member States and other aligned providers), including concrete actions and the means to implement them, as well as indicators and targets for monitoring and evaluation purposes. The aim is that all Delegations should have strategic and structured engagement with partner-country civil society.

The CS Roadmaps are being updated to ensure that civil society is fully involved in the roll-out of the EU's Global Gateway investments to help establish a value-based approach which benefits local communities.

Source: Author's interview with EU officials; (European Commission, n.d.[76]).

2. Inform actions with context analysis, diagnostic and early warning tools

Co-ordinating to monitor openings and restrictions of civic space requires context analysis, diagnostics and early-warning tools relevant to the specific provider-country and partner-country CSOs' context. Several initiatives and tools have already been put in place, whether by providers or by partner-country or international CSOs, covering part, or all, of these elements. Rather than duplicating efforts, providers need to co-ordinate to share access to these existing initiatives and tools, identify gaps and develop additional or complementary tools if required, based on local needs. Co-ordinating access to existing monitoring tools can yield efficiencies in identifying early signs of threats to civic space and organising joint responses. As argued in the section "Co-ordination with civil society", ensuring partner-country CSOs are part of co-ordination efforts is essential, as they can provide timely information from the ground and informed advice on potential provider responses.

Monitoring should not focus solely on potential restrictions of civic space but also on potential openings, as providers have a role to play in supporting instances in which a restrictive measure is being repealed or there is momentum for a more conducive enabling environment for civil society. The EU System for an Enabling Environment (SEE) initiative in Box 5 is a prominent example.

Monitoring can be a structured exercise, based on specific tools or following established methodologies. This is the case for ICNL's Civic Freedom Monitor, which provides up-to-date information on legal issues affecting civil society and civic freedoms in more than 50 countries worldwide (ICNL, n.d.[7]), or the CIVICUS Monitor, which provides frequently updated data, reports and analyses on civic space developments on a global scale (CIVICUS, n.d.[77]). These tools are frequently used as a reference by many providers, international organisations and other CSOs, informing their dialogue and actions. There

are also guidelines and toolkits to help providers monitor civic space, such as the OXFAM Civic Space Monitoring tool that explains how to conduct monitoring and assess what is happening in civic space at national and decentralised levels in partner countries (OXFAM, 2019[78]). Monitoring can also be ad hoc and based simply on regular dialogue with CSOs who can inform providers about the evolving context, potential threats and openings.

3. Seek synergies among providers on policy dialogue with partner-country governments

Providers can share information and context analysis among themselves to inform their dialogue with partner-country governments and find synergies to leverage their diplomatic capital. Depending on the country context, providers might want to discuss which information and context analysis can be shared without endangering local actors, agree on main messages they would like to convey, and identify entry points for civic space discussions or any other policy issue with civic-space-related dimensions. Inviting civil society, especially partner-country CSOs, to provide inputs ahead of dialogue sessions with partner-country governments is advisable (see section "Co-ordination with civil society"). In-country examples of co-ordination on policy dialogue include the EU policy dialogue with partner-country governments, where EU Member States co-ordinate their messages and positions in advance, and thematic provider co-ordination groups which exist in many partner countries. France promotes the role of partner-country national human rights institutions and promotes dialogue with them towards developing a supportive space and regulatory frameworks for civil society (French MEAE, 2023[79]). At the international level, an example is the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society (Box 3).

Box 8. Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative

Launched in 2021, the Team Europe Democracy (TED) initiative includes 14 EU Member States as well as European institutions and aims to foster a co-ordinated strategic European response in support of democracy both at the level of EU Member State MFAs and development co-operation agencies and in partner countries. The initiative has three main pillars: 1) Research on democracy support best practices and policies; 2) TED Network (at global level); 3) Providing expertise at partner-country level. The TED Network's aim is to facilitate the exchange of information and engagement in strategic dialogue, and includes EU institutions, EU Member States and their implementing agencies, CSOs, think-tanks and universities based in Europe, as well as Europe-based multilateral organisations.

For example, in 2023, TED supported the EU Delegation in Jordan with a mapping of EU and Member States' initiatives in civic engagement and political participation, focusing on youth and media. The process brought together eight EU embassies in Amman to enhance co-ordination, identify synergies, and support inclusive, rights-based engagement. As a follow-up of this process, TED cross-checked key findings of the mapping with ongoing efforts such as the EU CS Roadmap for Jordan and the recommendations of the 2024 EU Election Observation Mission to further support the EU and Member States in strategically aligning on overlapping aspects across the three initiatives.

Source: (European Union, n.d.[80]) ; email communication from EC official (May 2025).

4. Adopt context-specific responses for dialogue with partner-country governments, with particular attention in closed civic spaces

Co-ordination among providers on dialogue with partner-country governments is particularly important given the rise of politically constrained environments. In such environments, bilateral

communication between a provider and partner-country government may be more appropriate than communication by a well-co-ordinated community of providers. Providers can co-ordinate to identify which among them might be best placed, due to historical or current working relations with a partner-country government, or to the nature of the provider (e.g. bilateral or multilateral organisation) to broach the civic space topic. Switzerland, for example, often acts as an "anchor donor" by supporting complex projects, paving the way for further provider support. In Zimbabwe, Switzerland has helped revamp provider co-ordination as co-chair of the Zimbabwe Development Partners Forum and as co-lead of the dialogue with the government on compensation for loss of farms (OECD, Forthcoming[81]).

At the same time, dialogue between governments might be directly challenged and, to varying degrees, limited when partner-country authorities do not engage in an inclusive national development process, or where providers find it difficult to engage because of contested elections, military coups, sanctions or grave human rights violations, or due to felt risks of exacerbating already challenging government-to-government relations. It is important to recognise that there are varied roles, and opportunities, among providers and multilateral organisations, that might influence dialogue with partner-country governments.

Providers need flexibility to adopt context-specific responses to dialogue with partner-country governments informed by context analysis (see section "Co-ordination with civil society"). There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Dialogue with partner-country governments takes place through a variety of channels, whether these are providers' local agencies, embassies, multilateral organisations, or at times, line ministries of provider governments engaging in dialogue on thematically focused policies and programmes. Due to its sensitive nature, dialogue in closed civic space contexts is less documented and more informal. This leaves providers with limited evidence to build their responses based on past lessons. Dialogue among providers is even more relevant in these contexts to exchange on lessons learned and find synergies in their approaches.

A comparative study between two CSO campaigns against repressive legislation in two countries highlights the importance of providers adapting approaches to the context. While both examples are country- and time-specific, findings from the study suggest that applying context-specific responses can allow providers to maintain dialogue with partner-country governments while also supporting civil society and protecting civic space (Cheeseman and Dodsworth, 2023[82]). Responses may range from closed-door diplomacy, indirect support for local CSOs, public statements of support for civic space and/or of statements of concern regarding ongoing threats and restrictions towards civil society (Box 10.).

A provider country example from Italy shows that regular co-ordination between the Italian development agency (AICS), Italian embassies and Italian CSOs based in partner countries has contributed to fruitful dialogue with partner-country governments. In Côte d'Ivoire for example, dialogue between the Italian Embassy and government officials informed by CSOs clarified the scope and implications of new legislation on registration for CSOs to operate locally. Informed by this dialogue, AICS was able to revise their 2024 call for proposals to better enable local CSOs in Côte d'Ivoire to participate. Similarly, when operating in closed contexts, Switzerland supports spaces for dialogue through cultural programmes. This approach allows for the protection of human rights, in particular freedom of expression, and the maintenance or creation of spaces for democratic and pluralistic dialogues that foster diversity of narratives and opinions (SDC, 2024[83]).

Possible actions to co-ordinate among providers to support stronger, more coherent proactive and preventive actions

1. Seek complementarities and co-ordinate funding for civic space

Providers can seek complementarities within and between their programmes that support civil society and those that respond to civic space restrictions or protect democratic openings. Seeking complementarities and a coherent approach to programmes is important to enhance providers' co-

ordination on dialogue with partner governments and with civil society, as programming is one crucial way – albeit not the only one – through which providers can contribute to strengthening civic space in partner countries. Complementarities can be sought through information-sharing at a minimum, and potentially an agreement on the division of labour between providers, or joint programmes. Providers can also co-ordinate the programme conception phase by conducting joint context analysis with partner-country CSOs, agreeing on shared priorities and co-designing certain programmes. Closely involving civil society in the conception, implementation and monitoring of programmes can enhance ownership by civil society and alignment with CSOs' needs.

Box 9. Digital Democracy Initiative

The Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI) is a global multi-donor programme and Team Europe Democracy Initiative launched at the *2023 Summit for Democracy* by the Danish Government and the EC, with Norway joining by the end of 2023. The Initiative aims to support human rights defenders and civil society activists in the Global South in their fight for democracy and human rights in the digital age, including combatting technology-facilitated gender-based violence, leveraging digital technologies for climate activism and strengthening youth engagement in the digital democratic space.

The Initiative works directly with a number of civil society actors as implementing partners. In turn, these CSOs sub-grant to partner-country civil society actors through rapid response mechanisms and other funding instruments to provide digital and physical assistance to human rights defenders and partner-country CSOs in acute need, as well as support for advocacy campaigns toward governments, international organisations and tech companies.

Source: (DDI, n.d.[84]).

An effective funding modality to co-ordinate among providers is multi-donor pooled funds (Baguios et al., 2021[85]). These funds are generally managed or co-managed by providers, multilateral institutions, CSOs, partner-country governments or private sector actors (e.g. consulting firms). Some follow thematic areas, such as women's rights or democracy, and can begin as or evolve into public fundraising foundations and receive grants from a range of actors (OECD, 2023[19]). In Ethiopia, for example, the British Council manages the *Civil Society Support Programme*, a multi-donor pooled fund that strengthens locally led development by providing grants and capacity support to partner-country CSOs. The fund enables smaller providers to contribute indirectly and has engaged with key government stakeholders to help create space and platforms for effective civic engagement and learning. In its first phase, it supported over 600 organisations and was key in implementing the 2019 CSO law, offering valued flexible support in a challenging context (OECD, 2024[86]).

Multi-donor pooled funds can help providers increase support for, and broaden their reach to, a greater diversity of partner-country civil society actors (OECD, 2020[34]). For partner-country civil society actors, pooled funds minimise the need to apply for funding across multiple providers, with participating providers harmonising their administrative requirements and procedures. In partner countries with restrictive civic space, pooled funds can provide greater collective solidarity for civil society than individually funded programmes (OECD, 2023[19]). Providers can contribute to existing funds or create new ones jointly with other providers. When creating a new fund, providers can involve partner-country civil society in its development and consider entrusting a CSO (or a consortium of CSOs) to manage or administer the pooled fund, paying attention to power dynamics and developing a sound grant-selection process to help foster a level playing field among applicants. Building and learning from existing initiatives, the UN has a centre of expertise on pooled funding mechanisms called the *Multi-Partner Trust Fund* (MPTF) *Office*. Since 2004, the MPTF has administered and managed over 150 pooled funds covering various humanitarian-development-peace programmes (UN MPTF, n.d.[87]). Some funds are focused on

civic space, including: *Promoting Rule of Law in Palestine*, *Joint Programme for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Philippines*, and the *Human Rights Mainstreaming Fund*.

In Madagascar, some providers (the EU, Embassy of France, GIZ, and Monaco, later joined by the French Development Agency [AFD]) launched a pooled fund in 2017 to support partner-country CSOs – and dialogue with civil society – towards democratic and inclusive governance. This initiative evolved into the *Fanainga+* programme, with the overarching objective of supporting partner-country CSOs as development actors in their own right. The programme is led by a steering committee made up of the contributing providers and of CSOs elected by their peers (Fanainga, n.d.[88]).

Providers can also pool funds at the international level to promote civic space or to protect CSOs and civil-society activists in this field. The *Equality Fund* is an example funded by Canada and managed by a WRO. The fund provides long-term, flexible funding for WROs worldwide by mobilising provider-government funding, philanthropic contributions and gender-lens investing (OECD, 2024[89]).A multilateral example is the *United Nations Democracy Fund* (UNDEF), created in 2005 to support democratisation efforts around the world with contributions from more than 40 traditional and more recent providers from every continent. UNDEF-funded programmes are mostly implemented by partner-country CSOs. The UNDEF Advisory Board, which offers guidance and considers proposals for funding, comprises a number of UN Member States but also representatives of international CSOs and individual experts, thus representing an example of civil-society engagement in a providers' co-ordination initiative supporting civic space (UNDEF, n.d.[90]).

2. Adapt programmes and funding based on local needs and priorities

Providers can also share information on and co-ordinate the design, implementation and ongoing adaptation of their programmatic efforts to protect and promote civic space, informed by partner-country CSOs, to **tailor programmes and funding based on real local needs and priorities and more effectively deploy support**. A deep understanding of the local political economy and the civil society landscape is needed to tailor programmes and funding to local needs and priorities (Vandeputte, 2024[91]).

An example is the *Civil Society Support Fund* in a Latin American country,[13] which was conceived in the early 2000s as an instrument for supporting partner-country civil society in its efforts to contribute to democratic governance. It functioned as a multi-donor pooled fund managed by Oxfam, through which funding from various providers was channelled to support civil society as well as the indigenous territorial governments of the country. Over the time, as civic space in the country began to narrow, this pooled fund expanded its scope to create a forum in which providers could also discuss sensitive issues among themselves and with civil society, sharing information and strategising on how to respond to threats to civic space.

The Star Ghana Foundation is an example where a multi-donor pooled fund evolved into a national structure. The Star Ghana programme was established as a pooled fund in 2010, supported by USAID (from 2010-2015), the UK's FCDO, the Danish Development Co-operation Agency (DANIDA) and the EU, and provided grants to 157 CSOs. To enhance its sustainability, the programme evolved in 2018 into an independent Ghanaian foundation. The foundation now defines itself as *"a national centre for active citizenship and philanthropy"* and while its mandate is quite broad, civic space remains at the core of its activities, with inclusive and accountable governance, media and the right to information, active citizenship and civil-society sustainability among its thematic priorities (Star Ghana Foundation, n.d.[92]).

Providers can show adaptability in supporting and engaging civil society to enable their work, such as through increased flexibility in funding mechanisms, diversity of funding portfolios, improving the adaptability of programmes, and streamlining and making administrative and financial requirements more flexible (OECD, 2024[28]). This is particularly relevant in closed civic-space contexts, where adaption, flexibility and context-based responses are key to enabling CSOs to be responsive to in-country developments in a timely manner and to manage risk.

Box 10. Measures to protect and support civic space, particularly in closed contexts

- consider funding channels that favour partner-country civil society based on context analysis, whether it is direct funding to partner-country civil society, or indirect funding through intermediaries such as international CSOs;
- consider cash transfers in cases where even sub-granting proves too difficult;
- revisit approaches to risk management, including providing flexibility in programming and funding;
- adopt thematically focused policies and programmes, such as education, health, the environment or youth, through which some civic space messages can still be conveyed;
- support informal and grassroots civic groups, as well as individual activists and human rights defenders (including bloggers and citizen journalists), in addition to formal CSOs;
- expand focus beyond the central level and major cities to local level and rural contexts;
- protect civic infrastructure, i.e. both online and offline spaces where activists and civil society can meet and discuss;
- foster spaces for dialogue with, and among, diverse partner-country civil society actors, including CSOs, trade unions, journalists and other informal groups;
- move provider offices away from the partner-country and operate from outside through informal points of contact based in the country;
- help partner-country CSOs to register abroad so that they can continue receiving funds while maintaining connections with actors inside the country;
- provide specific technological solutions, such as secure communication and information tools, that can be vital in restricted contexts;
- provide other forms of non-financial support such as training, hardware, legal aid and psychological support, depending on local needs;
- establish protection mechanisms for individuals at risk, such as human-rights defenders, including emergency/temporary relocation out of a country when appropriate, and lifelines to threatened CSOs;
- encourage and fund initiatives for civil society actors from different restricted countries to exchange experiences, co-ordinate and learn innovative push-back strategies and operational tactics;
- respect and follow international humanitarian law (IHL) when engaging in humanitarian assistance in armed conflicts.

Note: This is a non-exhaustive list.
Source: Authors' interviews and email communications; (Nicolas Bouchet, 2022[93]).

Co-ordination with international bodies and other development actors

Description

Co-ordinating actions with international bodies and other development actors in the promotion and protection of civic space can complement co-ordination with other actors covered in previous sections of this toolkit. Providers can co-ordinate with international bodies and mechanisms mandated to

address civic space and related issues, such as the UN Human Rights Committee and the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, as well as the Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression and on human-rights defenders. Additional relevant bodies include for example, UN agencies (OHCHR, UNDP, UNESCO, etc.), the UPR of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), OGP, International IDEA and GPEDC. Regional bodies include, for example, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights, and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, among others. Other development actors, such as philanthropy and the private sector, can also play an important role in protecting civic space in partner countries and thus also merit co-ordination efforts.

Table 4. Co-ordination with international bodies and other development actors

1. Support the work of relevant international and regional bodies mandated with the protection of civic space
• Share data and analysis with international and regional bodies
• Fund international and regional bodies with a mandate on civic space
• Hold dialogue with these bodies and support, through funding and diplomatic channels, the bodies' work
• Build from existing international and regional mechanisms to pursue accountability on civic space
2. Co-ordinate dialogue and diplomatic efforts with and within international and regional bodies
• Join dialogue and diplomatic efforts with international and regional bodies in the support of civic space
• Recognise the convening role of international bodies for co-ordination on dialogue and programmes to support civic space
• Co-ordinate positions within international or regional bodies to enhance support for civic space
3. Build synergies with other development actors, notably with philanthropy and the private sector
• Co-ordinate with foundations to complement efforts towards the protection and promotion of civic space
• Recognise the role of foundations to conduct advocacy efforts and share knowledge and expertise
• Foster more public-private-philanthropic-people partnerships
• Engage further with the private sector in the context of development co-operation and the protection of civic space
• Promote responsible business-conduct actions to maintain an open civic space
• Recognise the role of trade unions in defending civic space and in alerting companies of risks that may disrupt their operations

Possible actions

1. Support the work of relevant international and regional bodies mandated with the protection of civic space

Providers can share data and analysis with international and regional bodies or ask for the bodies' inputs during their programme development and implementation phases. Providers can also fund or hold joint meetings and events with international or regional bodies to share and gather information and show their support. Providers can hold dialogue with these bodies and support, through funding and diplomatic channels, the bodies' work, such as secretariat functions and country visits, and the follow up of the bodies' recommendations.

International and regional bodies may have entry points to pursue accountability on civic-space-related issues, such as reporting progress on the SDGs, that providers can leverage. Civic space and human rights are part and parcel of the SDGs through SDG 16: *Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies*, and are also needed to achieve all the SDGs. At UNGA discussions for example, UN Special Rapporteurs may follow up on members' obligations related to the SDGs from that angle. Providers can support and make use of UN Special Rapporteurs' annual reports as diplomatic levers in partner countries. Support can also be provided to these bodies to ensure compliance with international or regional agreements that contain binding commitments on civic space, such as the *Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean*, known as the Escazú Agreement (ECLAC, 2018[94]).

There are many examples of providers supporting international bodies in the promotion of civic space. For instance, Finland supported International IDEA, working closely with the University of Helsinki's Rule of Law Centre, to improve transparency of political financing in Albania through promoting the role of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and civil society (OECD, 2024[95]). Another example is the European Union's support to the UNDP in Guinea-Bissau for the *Ianda Guiné Djuntu* programme (Ianda Guiné!, n.d.[96]). Launched in 2020, the programme allowed for the creation of a civil-society co-ordination mechanism aimed at enhancing civil society's role and civic space in the country, leading in particular to the organisation of the *Citizen Convention* in 2024 (Citizen Convention, n.d.[97]).

The OGP is another international mechanism intended to support the co-creation and implementation of civic space reforms. As part of their national Action Plans, 48 countries have made 136 commitments related to civic space (OGP, n.d.[98]). For example, in 2024, the Government of the Dominican Republic committed, via the OGP, to develop the country's first *National Strategy for Civic Space* and requested the OGP Support Unit to help co-create it with civil society. Funded by the FCDO as part of a wider programme on digital governance and rights, the OGP Support Unit commissioned an expert to aid in co-creating the strategy with government agencies and civil society. The resulting strategy covers actions across five strategic objectives, including: the enabling environment for civil society; the protection of freedom of assembly, peaceful demonstration and defence of human rights; among other key civic space themes (OGP, n.d.[99]).

Box 11. The UN Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space

The UN developed the *Guidance Note on the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space* in response to the Secretary-General's *Call to Action for Human Rights* launched in February 2020. The Call to Action reaffirms the crucial role of UN entities in the pursuit of fundamental rights and freedoms, recognising stakeholder participation and civic space as priority areas for more responsive policies and resilient communities.

The Guidance Note outlines key steps for UN entities to take, individually or jointly, to enhance civic space engagement, tailored to each entity's role and capacities. It was developed in collaboration with staff from UN entities and civil society. The Guidance is structured around three main steps, each one describing the role of the UN and the recommended actions and providing practical examples: 1) participation: ensuring meaningful civil-society participation; 2) protection: protecting those at risk as a precondition for a vibrant civic space; and 3) promotion: promoting inclusive participation channels and fundamental freedoms. The Guidance Note serves as a co-ordination tool among UN entities, ensuring a unified and effective approach to strengthening civic space in their operations.

Source: (United Nations, 2020[100]).

2. Co-ordinate dialogue and diplomatic efforts with and within international and regional bodies

Providers can unite their dialogue and diplomatic efforts with those of international and regional bodies in the support of civic space. There is limited evidence and examples, as diplomatic efforts are often conducted discreetly and are one among various factors leading to an outcome. In an indicative example, analysts believe that pressure by several provider governments and international institutions, such as the UN OHCHR and OSCE, was key in stopping a so-called foreign agents' law presented in 2013 in Kyrgyzstan. International pressure ultimately led to the law being rejected in 2016 (Susan Dodsworth, 2018[101]).

International bodies can also play a convening role, **facilitating co-ordination among providers or between providers and CSOs on dialogue and programmes to support civic space**. In countries with

shrinking civic space, international bodies can also act as intermediaries through which providers can channel their CSO funding at partner-country level.

The *Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment* is an example of an international multi-stakeholder body that co-ordinated actions on civic space. Its objective was to support CSO participation in development processes, focusing on creating a CSO-enabling environment and fostering CSOs' development effectiveness in line with the international development effectiveness principles and commitments of the GPEDC. The Task Team brought together providers, partner country governments and CSOs to engage in open and inclusive dialogue, raising awareness of these international commitments and offering practical guidance to advance implementation (GPEDC, 2019[102]; UN DESA, n.d.[103]).

Also at the international level, the OECD DAC is an institutionalised mechanism for providers' dialogue, which can include civic space-related matters among other topics. For example, civic space was a topic of focus in the 2020 and 2021 annual DAC-CSO Dialogues, helping to shape the DAC Recommendation. The theme of the 2025 edition of the *OECD DAC Civil Society Days* is on civic space, the discussions of which will inform the review of the five-year implementation of the DAC Recommendation. Moreover, the *OECD Civic Space Network for Public Officials*, established under the auspices of the OECD Working Party on Open Government, provides a forum for policymakers from OECD Member and partner countries to exchange on civic-space-related issues.

Providers can also co-ordinate their positions within international or regional bodies to enhance support to civic space, when appropriate and relevant. As part of a coherent approach, foreign policy and development co-operation concerns can inform providers' positions at the UN and in other multilateral fora, including concerns related to the promotion of civic space. Co-ordination among providers can help respond to civic-space threats and be pursued – among others – at the UN HRC and in UPR processes. Co-ordination can also take place during FATF country reviews and during discussions to potentially trigger response mechanisms such as the OGP Response Policy (OGP, n.d.[104]). Some of the 'democracy cohorts'" established under the Summit for Democracies, in particular the civic space cohort co-led by Norway, Czechia and ICNL, are examples of this type of provider co-ordination within an international body, with the additional advantage of being co-led by governments and civil society (Summit for Democracy, n.d.[105]).

3. Build synergies with other development actors, notably with philanthropy and the private sector

Co-ordination with foundations can be an effective means of complementing providers' efforts towards the protection and promotion of civic space. Some foundations generally have more flexibility than official providers, for example in funding partner-country CSOs, grassroots and informal organisations directly, and with simpler and more risk-tolerant approaches. These assets can be especially useful in closed civic-space contexts. In addition, foundations can conduct advocacy to complement providers' diplomatic efforts, as well as share their knowledge and learning with embassies and field agencies. Foundations can also pool resources with providers or complement providers' funding, including on ad hoc initiatives such as the 2024 *UN Civil Society Conference* (see section "Co-ordination with civil society"). Beyond funding, a study from The Partnering Initiative (TPI) analysing philanthropy's role in multi-stakeholder partnerships, suggests that local and international foundations contribute not only financially but also in non-financial ways, such as convening private sector and civil society in these partnerships and ensuring transparency and accountability to local communities (Harrison, 2023[106]). Findings from the study reveal other roles of the philanthropic sector, including co-designing programmes, convening and co-ordinating with different actors, facilitating technical expertise, de-risking by testing interventions, and investing to create a multiplier effect that unlocks local resources for development.

Fostering more public-private-philanthropic-people partnerships represent an opportunity for development co-operation, engagement with civil society, and protecting civic space. This was

highlighted as a key recommendation in the *Civil 20 Working Group 9 on Philanthropy For Sustainable Development* during the Brazil presidency of the G20 in 2024 (C20 Brazil, 2024[107]). For example, WINGS, a global network of philanthropy support and development organisations, as part of the *Philanthropy Transformation Initiative*, together with TPI, will develop a programme on multi-stakeholder partnerships, and develop case studies on how philanthropy is partnering with business, governments and other development actors.

The private sector can also be a meaningful ally in promoting open civic space. Private sector actors have a responsibility to respect and promote human rights and civic freedoms in their operations, in line with the UN *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* (OHCHR, 2011[108]), the *Kampala Principles for Effective Private Sector Engagement in Development Co-operation* (GPEDC, 2019[109]; GPEDC, 2023[110]), and the OECD *Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct* (OECD, 2023[111]). For example, the *Better Work* programme is a collaboration between the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation, bringing together all levels of the garment industry to improve working conditions and respect of workers' labour rights, and to boost the competitiveness of apparel and footwear businesses in 13 countries. Factories that have participated in *Better Work* have steadily improved compliance with the ILO's core labour standards and national legislation covering compensation, contracts and working time. This has promoted responsible business conduct, improved working conditions and enhanced factories' productivity (Better Work, n.d.[112]).

Government actions to promote responsible business conduct can further help the implementation of practices that are supportive of maintaining an open civic space. For instance, the Government of Canada has a dedicated strategy aimed at helping Canadian businesses implement responsible business practices in their international activities, including meaningful stakeholder engagement and human-rights due diligence (Government of Canada, 2021[113]). The EU's *Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive* issued in July 2024 is another regulatory example in that regard. The Directive encourages businesses to identify and address "potential and actual adverse human rights and environmental impacts in the company's own operations", including in their value chains in partner countries (European Commission, 2024[114]). A practical example to implement this EU Directive in production countries is the *Bottom-up Outreach to Stakeholders Human Rights Due Diligence* (BOOST HRDD) programme (2024-2025), led by Dutch trade unions CNV Internationaal and Mondiaal FNV, as well as the Fair Wear Foundation. By equipping trade unions, suppliers and business associations with the tools and knowledge to actively participate, the BOOST programme fosters equal partnerships rather than one-sided mandates. This approach ensures that due diligence is an inclusive effort, reflecting the needs and perspectives of all actors in global supply chains (CNV International; Fair Wear; Mondiaal FNV, 2025[115]).

Trade unions can play an important role in protecting civic space by defending freedom of association and other fundamental labour rights, while also alerting companies of risks to civic space that may disrupt their operations and damage their brands (Chatham House, 2021[116]). Trade unions are important development co-operation actors that, through unionisation and collective bargaining, have proven to be effective not only in tackling poverty and inequality, including by fostering living wages, but also in strengthening social cohesion and civic space more broadly (OECD, 2024[117]). Social dialogue between governments, employers and trade unions is a tool that providers can tap into in order to learn about civic space constraints in partner countries and the potential role of the private sector in protecting civic space (ILO, 2024[118]).

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Notes

[1] The DAC CoP on Civil Society comprises technical experts and leads on civil society in development co-operation and humanitarian assistance from DAC members' Ministries of Foreign Affairs and/or Development Co-operation agencies. It was created in 2019 to facilitate peer learning, exchange, and evidence-gathering among DAC members. It helped develop the 2020 *DAC Members and Civil Society* study and spearheaded the 2021 DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society. It serves as the primary forum for peer-learning and mutual, practical support to DAC member and other adherents' efforts to implement the DAC Recommendation.

[2] The CSO RG is an open platform that facilitates CSO engagement with the DAC and DCD in line with the Framework for Dialogue between the DAC and Civil Society Organisations, https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC%282018%2928/FINAL/EN/pdf.

[3] The term "provider" is used throughout the toolkit for governments and international organisations that are providers of development co-operation and humanitarian assistance. Actions proposed in the toolkit can be undertaken by provider officials at all levels: managers, policy analysts, and programme officers, at headquarters, in partner countries, and in the international and regional organisations officials are assigned to. Co-ordination of responsibilities for these actions within and between Ministries of Foreign Affairs and development co-operation agencies will be necessary.

[4] In this series of toolkits, and in line with the DAC Recommendation, civil society refers to uncoerced association or interaction by which people implement individual or collective action to address shared needs, ideas, interests, values, faith, and beliefs identified in common; and the formal, semi- or non-formal associations and the individuals involved in them. Civil society actors are distinct from states, private for-profit enterprises, and family. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are an organisational representation of civil society, including all not-for-profit, non-state, non-partisan, non-violent, and self-governing organisations outside of family, in which people come together to pursue shared needs, ideas, interests, values, faith, and beliefs, including formal legally registered organisations and informal associations without legal status. As per the DAC Recommendation, adherents seek to enable civil society actors that hold positive social and/or democratic values.

[5] Government organised movements or NGOs, known as GONGOs, are NGOs established, financed and/or controlled by governments, sometimes by legislations or decrees. ICNL considers GONGOs as "a threat to civil society, when used to monopolise the space of civil society-government dialogue, attack legitimate NGOs, defend government policy under the cover of being "independent," – or otherwise inappropriately reduce the space for truly independent civic activity – all of which make GONGOs difficult to categorise", https://www.icnl.org/resources/research/ijnl/defending-civil-society.

[6] Finding from draft work from the OECD International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) and DAC Network on Governance (GovNet) on engagement in politically constrained environments.

[7] Civic space is a concern across the world, as recognised in chapter 1 of this toolkit. However, the guidance is focused on provider actions to enable open civic space in partner countries, in line with the DAC Recommendation. Recognition is made to the importance of whole-of-government co-ordination at provider-country level to foster coherence for civic space protection.

[8] DAC Members also report orally at the bi-annual meetings of the DAC CoP on Civil Society on their strategies and experiences of conducting consultations with CSOs.

[9] The UK civic space diagnostic toolkit and the Netherland's guidelines for strengthening and protecting civic space are internal documents. Both documents are not public, and therefore, not available online.

[10] FATF's Recommendation 8 objective is to ensure that Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) *"are not abused by terrorists and terrorist organisations"*, https://www.fatf-gafi.org/content/dam/fatf-gafi/recommendations/FATF%20Recommendations%202012.pdf.coredownload.inline.pdf.

[11] However, the FATF revised the narrative that all CSOs are particularly vulnerable to terrorist abuse. In November 2023, the FATF released amendments to Recommendation 8 and its Interpretive Note *"to address the misapplication and misinterpretation of Recommendation 8, that had led countries to apply disproportionate measures on Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs)",* https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Fatfrecommendations/protecting-non-profits-abuse-implementation-R8.html. The amended Recommendation requires countries to periodically identify organisations that fall within the FATF definition of NPOs, assess the TF risks posed to them, and put in place focused, proportionate and risk-based measures to address TF risks identified.

[12] Finding from draft work on de-risking, financial exclusion and illicit financial flows (IFFs) from the OECD Anti-Corruption Task Team within the OECD DAC Network on Governance (GovNet).

[13] The country has been anonymised upon request of the interviewees.