

# Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative

## Team Europe Democracy (TED) Working Group 2 (WG2)

### Webinar

4<sup>th</sup> of September 2025, 10:00 - 11:35 CET



### *Civil Society at a Narrative Crossroads*

#### ANALYTICAL REPORT & ANNEX

#### Executive Summary

The Team Europe Democracy (TED) Working Group (WG) 2 webinar brought together representatives from the EU Institutions, EU Delegations (EUD) and Member States (MS) alongside TED Network members and external experts, to explore how narratives are reshaping civic space and the role of civil society in democracy support.

Legitimacy emerged as a critical resource for civil society organisations (CSOs). It can be drawn from expertise, rooted membership bases or strong community-level networks. However, CSOs cannot rely solely on intrinsic assets. Discussions revealed a shifting context where delegitimisation campaigns (postcolonial terms, labelling of “foreign agents” etc.) often precede legal repression, where donor dependency risks undermining perceptions and where the funding landscape is changing dramatically with the retrenchment of USAID.

Against this backdrop, civil society is increasingly called upon to adapt its strategies, strengthen its local roots and experiment with unconventional approaches. For the EU and MS, this requires moving beyond short-term projects towards more resilient partnerships, flexible financing and genuine civic participation in geopolitical instruments, like the Global Gateway and next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The discussions underscored the urgency of rethinking both funding models and the narratives that underpin the legitimacy and communication of democracy support.

#### Context

WG2’s co-chair Belgium and [European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes \(EADI\)](#) highlighted that civic space is shrinking globally, not only in authoritarian regimes but increasingly within democracies. Legal harassment, digital surveillance and smear campaigns are now common tactics, with 72.4% of the world’s population living in countries where civic space is restricted or closed (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024). Civil society actors, journalists and aid organisations face escalating threats, blockages and death - making protection, relevance, legitimacy and survival pressing concerns. Repressive regimes often delegitimise civic actors as “foreign agents” or elite-driven, while autocracies co-opt democratic language on rule of law, elections and participation to mask authoritarian practices: a pattern recognised as “electoral authoritarianism.” Initiatives such as



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the Belgian Civic Space Initiative (currently undergoing an evaluation) can play a role in supporting human rights defenders, participation, even in politically constrained or fragile contexts.

Narratives are central in this struggle. Civil society operates in a space marked by polarisation, erosion of trust but also opportunities for solidarity, accountability and renewed engagement. Donors and partners face difficult trade-offs: stepping back risks abandoning local actors, while engagement may be portrayed as foreign interference. Large-scale initiatives such as the EU's Global Gateway could strengthen civic trust and accountability, but only if local participation and context-specific priorities are integrated. Flexible, risk-informed and trust-based engagement is therefore essential to avoid reinforcing harmful narratives.

Despite these pressures, civic actors are showing resilience through reinvention and revitalisation. Youth movements, feminist networks, digital communities and informal alliances are adapting strategies – like decentralised structures, using encrypted platforms and value-driven organising - to maintain agency and legitimacy. Donor approaches must move beyond rigid, transactional models towards co-created context-sensitive support that amplifies civic voices, protects democratic space and sustains long-term resilience.

Coordinated EU-MS/Team Europe engagement, together with civil society will be key, prioritising narrative legitimacy, adaptive funding and locally grounded strategies to strengthen democratic resilience in complex political environments.

## **Framing the Discussion: Questions from the Audience**

The discussion opened with the audience outlining the key challenges they face, posing questions to the panellists from the [German Institute of Development and Sustainability \(IDOS\)](#), [Oxfam](#) (Intermón) and [European Centre for Development Policy Management \(ECDPM\)](#).

## **Operating under Pressure - Challenging Environments and Confrontations**

Democracy practitioners shared operating in increasingly constrained and complex environments, they and civil society face multiple, intersecting threats to legitimacy, influence and operational capacity. Disinformation and polarising narratives are widespread, portraying civil society actors as “foreign agents,” state adversaries or part of the “anti-woke” or anti-rights agenda. Amplified by political actors and corporate media/propaganda, these narratives erode public trust, distort understanding of civil society’s role and restrict the sector’s ability to contribute effectively to accountable, inclusive and participatory governance.

Legal restrictions, shrinking freedom of expression and intimidation, particularly in contexts with restrictive “foreign agent” laws or hostile political climates, exacerbate these challenges, discouraging civic engagement and constraining donor support.

Civil society’s legitimacy is increasingly contested both domestically and internationally. Over-formalisation, combined with perceptions that donor-funded entities define the boundaries of “civil society,” can weaken independent credibility and sustainability, further constraining space for autonomous voices. International support is sometimes weaponised to delegitimise local organisations, while public discourse often fails to recognise their contributions.

Even more concerning, narrow, polarised narratives may co-opt the existence of vulnerable groups to pit communities against one another, undermining social cohesion and further eroding civil society’s credibility. Rising societal inequalities, coupled with limited recognition



from authorities, restrict the reach and influence of civil society narratives, while heightened service demands and shrinking budgets constrain its operational capacity.

Donor priorities and conditionalities can further misalign support with local realities, leaving civil society under-resourced, precisely when ambitious, context-sensitive advocacy is most needed.

Amid intersecting repression, legal and political restrictions, polarisation and structural inequalities, democracy practitioners must navigate both operational and narrative challenges. They need to reconcile external expectations, societal scepticism and donor imperatives while sustaining credible, impactful and locally grounded work. The cumulative effect is a climate of uncertainty, where civil society’s contributions are insufficiently acknowledged and where narratives, both defensive and aspirational, must be carefully calibrated to maintain legitimacy, resonance and effectiveness.

## **Putting the Panellists to the Test - Clustered Questions**

<b>Local Definitions</b>	Civil society and democracy practitioners face tensions between foreign and local or indigenous narratives, particularly in contexts of postcolonial critique. Key challenges include evolving structurally, strategically and narratively to remain relevant; acknowledging and addressing the diversity of civil society across and within countries; and reconsidering the roles and positioning of INGOs and Northern NGOs to better align with local realities. Practitioners also seek guidance on engaging beyond like-minded actors including those with differing values while balancing principles and on whether to adapt narratives tactically under external pressures or maintain consistent, value-driven messaging.
<b>Resilience and Coping Strategies</b>	Civil society and democracy practitioners face persistent pressures, including daily attacks on rights, shrinking budgets, USAID/institutional closures and broader societal challenges. Key concerns include maintaining motivation and energy while defending others, strengthening organisational resilience through localisation and adaptation and countering cyber threats and disinformation. Practitioners also seek strategies to demonstrate the long-term value of democracy support to donors and to defend the relevance of the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) amid political, institutional and donor criticism.
<b>Donor Narratives</b>	Donors face the challenge of addressing shrinking civic space and harmful narratives that attack the legitimacy of civil society and development cooperation funding simultaneously at home as well as in their international relations. Key questions include how to support social movements and civil society actors without over-formalising them or inadvertently reinforcing “foreign agent” narratives, how to engage with less formalised or grassroots movements and how to reconcile European or donor interests with civic space values and leverage philanthropic or private-sector resources to strengthen democracy and civic engagement. Donors must also address accountability pressures and reduced ODA, measuring impact effectively while adapting messaging to align interests with values.



## Integrating Civic Participation into MS and EU Approaches (e.g. Global Gateway, MFF)

Civil society and democracy practitioners highlighted the need to ensure that civic participation and democratic principles are fully embedded in EU initiatives such as the Global Gateway, moving beyond optional consultation toward systematic and mandatory integration. The draft MFF needs clear targets and a thematic focus on civil society. Questions centred on how to include CSOs critical of EU approaches, strengthen local participation in (Global Gateway) project design and monitoring and engage governments and political actors to translate intentions into action rather than token gestures. Participants also expressed interest in understanding existing mechanisms for monitoring democratic principles and addressing negative branding/perceptions of the Global Gateway. Reiteration given to the importance of designing interventions that actively promote inclusion and equality, avoiding approaches that reinforce existing divisions.

## Narratives as Levers of Power

Representing a regional perspective from Latin America, [Oxfam](#) highlighted the growing challenges faced by civil society in contexts where civic space is obstructed, repressed or closed.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on experience across more than 60 countries, the organisation emphasised that threats to civil society are increasingly driven by narratives and public discourse, rather than solely through legal or direct governmental repression. CSOs, independent media and journalists play a central role in exposing human rights violations and holding authorities accountable, making them targets for governments seeking to consolidate authoritarian mechanisms.

In Latin America, strategic campaigns by elites and governments delegitimise civil society long before formal restrictions are imposed. Countries such as El Salvador and Peru have reactivated foreign agent laws and introduced measures such as taxes on NGOs, but these legal tools follow months of narrative campaigns questioning the contribution of civil society to national development. Nicaragua represents an extreme case, where independent media and critical journalists have been expelled, allowing authorities to fully control public narratives. These strategies exploit polarisation, framing civil society as interfering groups or threats to national sovereignty, often justified in the name of “the common good,” sovereignty or security/anti-terrorism. This discursive and ideological approach “divide and conquer” has become a key mechanism for closing civic space, leveraging public perception as much as legal instruments.

This hostile environment raises fundamental questions about legitimacy. Many CSOs derive legitimacy from their expertise, rooted membership bases or community networks, yet these assets are often insufficient against systematic delegitimation. Oxfam stressed, civil society needs proactive legitimisation and renewed business models, since overreliance on one or two external funders exposes them to both financial and political risks. Donors face a parallel challenge: how to support civil society authentically without being perceived as geopolitical actors engaged in a “scramble for influence.” Dependence risks perceptions of co-optation, where organisations are seen as working primarily for donors rather than for their constituencies.

<sup>1</sup> According to the CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor, 11 countries in the region have obstructed, repressive or closed civic spaces.



Additionally, the contested definitions of democracy and civil society further complicate the landscape. Democracy is often narrowly understood as voting, while authoritarian actors use elections to legitimise restrictive policies. Populist or assistance-based promises frequently enable governments to consolidate power over parliaments and municipalities, while citizens, frustrated with corruption or inefficiency, demand solutions to social needs distrusting public institutions, may support “iron fist” policies or private-sector interventions. This creates fertile ground for narratives that justify authoritarian measures or privatisation of services. Postcolonial narratives are also used to challenge collaboration with international actors and civil society, framing them as external intrusions, further limiting the space for advocacy.

Oxfam’s experience demonstrates that protecting and expanding civic space requires both narrative and structural strategies. Building alternative narratives is an iterative process of research, experimentation and recalibration. Programmes in Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador and Peru illustrate approaches that sustain advocacy, democratic debate and strengthen alternative narratives. These initiatives combine capacity-building, digital security, youth engagement and community organisation, alongside research, digital listening, narrative campaign design and spokesperson training, to counter disinformation and authoritarian messaging at local and national levels.

- In Costa Rica, exiled Nicaraguan activists are being supported to shape democratic debate without incurring immediate repression at home.
- In Guatemala, CSOs and local actors are leveraging a more open political context to reintroduce narratives on historical memory and youth engagement.
- In El Salvador, where civil society faces overt attack, actors are working on digital rights and alternative narratives to counter authoritarian communication strategies.
- In Peru, long-standing efforts have focused on embedding community needs and values into national political discourse through innovative communication models.
- Collaboration with independent media is also central to amplifying alternative perspectives, particularly given the growing prevalence of disinformation, fake news and restrictive educational systems.

These cases demonstrate both the diversity of civil society functions, far beyond the reductive “human rights watchdog” label and the importance of nuanced, context-sensitive support. They also underline the need for cooperation models that are adaptive, political in vision and rooted in mutual legitimacy. Without such recalibration, both donors and CSOs risk being trapped in unsustainable dynamics that weaken the very democratic resilience they seek to uphold.

International cooperation and donor engagement play a critical role in shaping narratives and enabling civil society. But it must move beyond transactional, project-based models towards long-term, flexible partnerships rooted in a shared vision of systemic change. Funding should also not be a tool of control but an instrument for collective political action.

The Global Gateway, Oxfam cautioned for example, prioritises private-sector-led projects framed around efficiency and innovation, often sidelining participatory mechanisms for civil society. Without meaningful consultation, such approaches risk reinforcing negative narratives and undermining civic engagement. Oxfam argued for flexible, people-centred and decolonial cooperation that recognises civil society as a core actor in development and democratic governance not as a mere accessory. By centring human rights, local knowledge and participatory mechanisms, interventions can strengthen democratic resilience, counter polarising narratives and empower citizens to challenge authoritarian practices.



## Rethinking Donor Engagement

Research by [German Institute of Development and Sustainability \(IDOS\)](#), including fieldwork recently conducted in Togo and Bolivia, highlighted the complex dynamics shaping donor engagement with civil society, especially in contexts of autocratisation or political polarisation. Donors face both internal and external constraints when supporting civil society and democratic development. Internal constraints include competing objectives, such as balancing geopolitical or security interests with commitments to human rights and democratic governance. While these objectives can conflict, they can also align, for instance, promoting democracy often supports broader goals of stability and peace. Externally, donors encounter challenges in engaging with grassroots organisations and social movements, which are often amorphous and lack formalised structures. Identifying legitimate representatives or accounting for internal factions can be difficult, making conventional NGOs (formalised, structured civil society actors) potential intermediaries to bridge the gap between donors and grassroots movements. In authoritarian contexts, donors and their local partners are also exposed to potential reprisals from host regimes, further complicating engagement and risk management.

Field research in Bolivia demonstrated how these dynamics play out in practice. Following a period of democratic transition, civil society initially played a critical role in political mobilisation. Over time, however, societal and political polarisation, compounded by reductions in development cooperation funding, has fragmented civil society, weakened organisational capacity and left movements vulnerable. Delegitimising narratives deployed by political actors have created a basis for restrictive legal measures, while successive reductions in donor support have left NGOs and social movements exposed to operational and financial risks.

These findings underscore the importance of strategic donor engagement that reconciles interests with values while maintaining support for civil society actors in politically sensitive contexts. Supporting innovative and flexible approaches, investing in grassroots movements and sustaining engagement even amid authoritarian pressures are critical to strengthening civil society resilience. Formalised civil society actors can serve as bridges, enabling donors to reach grassroots movements and social actors effectively while navigating political and operational constraints. Ultimately, aligning donor support with participatory approaches and long-term democratic resilience is essential to ensure civil society remains a robust actor in defending human rights and advancing democratic governance.

IDOS also stressed the importance of rethinking cooperation models in democracy and civil society support. Donor-partner relations should be reframed around “mutual democratic learning,” moving beyond one-sided support towards genuine partnerships. This requires identifying mutually beneficial interests and designing interventions on equal footing, where both donors and partners jointly define priorities, programming and projects. This reciprocity not only strengthens legitimacy but also counters accusations of external imposition. In this sense, the EU has an opportunity to reframe democracy support as a two-way exchange rather than a one-directional transfer.

Such approaches call for restructuring development cooperation to open new channels for exchange and joint learning. Trilateral cooperation models where a donor, a partner country and a third actor collaborate offer one promising avenue. There is a need to design cooperation that is less hierarchical, more reciprocal and better able to encourage systemic innovation in democracy support.



## Trilemma: Aligning EU Interests, Civil Society Roles and Democratic Values

[European Centre for Development Policy Management \(ECDPM\)](#) observed that both EU institutions and partner countries face growing investment needs, while the private sector also requires support to address stretched budgets. This reflects not only economic pressures but also a political choice by the EU to be more assertive in advancing its strategic interests. The objective is not primarily to meet partner needs, but to raise its own interests and then identify mutually beneficial overlaps. This creates a “trilemma” in development cooperation, requiring alignment between EU values, strategic interests and partner countries’ needs. Reconciling these dimensions signals a shift from the EU’s traditional “moral compass” towards a more political, competitiveness-oriented framework.

For civil society, this transition carries significant implications. Historically seen as watchdogs of democracy, CSOs have increasingly become implementing partners of donor programmes. With funding for democracy support shrinking as resources are redirected to other priorities, the question is less what kind of support the EU should provide and more how to redefine the nature of partnerships. Civil society’s contribution must extend beyond cooperation projects, including its role in shaping narratives and influencing international partnerships. The proliferation of new actors (many unfamiliar with one another or not speaking the same language) further underlines this point: banks and other institutions are showing interest in engaging CSOs but often lack a shared framework. ECDPM’s research for TED ([Exploring EU and Member States’ approaches and options to addressing the shrinking civic space | Capacity4dev](#), 2024) confirmed this gap, highlighting the need to explore civic space more deliberately and engage “unusual suspects” at multiple levels beyond the traditional NGO community.

The upcoming negotiations on the next MFF will be a crucial test. The European Commission’s proposal includes a 360-degree approach aligned with the Global Gateway, but it remains unclear how values such as democracy and governance will be safeguarded in an increasingly interest-driven framework. Standards are being developed with the private sector, yet the space left for governance and democracy issues is uncertain. Keeping democracy and human rights central in the next financial instrument is vital, not simply mainstreamed as secondary objectives.

ECDPM emphasised the need to rethink partnerships in a shifting landscape while insisting that democracy, human rights and civil society must remain core to donor strategies. Investing in youth engagement, in particular, is essential for renewing civil society and sustaining democratic resilience over time. At the same time, civil society itself must reflect on its role and adapt. In restrictive environments this is especially difficult, yet even under constrained conditions local organisations need to identify allies, explore entry points and signal their relevance to donors. EU Delegations and MS in-country often seek credible information on civic actors but lack the resources, time or mandate to do so. Without a stronger two-way effort, this gap risks limiting awareness of evolving civic spaces. Donors must stay open to diverse voices and civil society must proactively engage to ensure democratic values remain part of the agenda.

## Operationalising Democratic Participation: Localisation, Flagships and Funding

### Localisation

[ForumCiv](#), drawing on experiences from Colombia, underscored the centrality of localisation to civil society resilience. Membership-based organisations and community-rooted networks have proven more durable than NGOs reliant almost entirely on external funding, because



they are anchored in social trust and local legitimacy. By contrast, externally dependent NGOs face greater risks of stigmatisation, delegitimisation and financial precarity. This highlights the need to re-centre legitimacy on communities, expertise and membership rather than on donor alignment.

ForumCiv stressed that localisation cannot remain rhetorical: for many civic actors, it is a survival strategy in increasingly repressive environments. Grassroots partners often report that donor commitments to localisation have not yet translated into resources reaching communities or enabling genuinely community-led action. To shift this dynamic, resources must be channelled closer to grassroots actors through flexible, long-term funding arrangements that strengthen community leadership and ownership.

The EU and MS have a key role to play in operationalising this agenda. Flexible and predictable funding, combined with efforts to diversify resourcing through philanthropy, diaspora engagement and local resource mobilisation can reduce over-dependence on donor cycles and reinforce community-rooted legitimacy. Moreover, supporting multistakeholder partnerships anchored in community values can create the “lifeboat strategies” needed for civic survival in closing spaces. In this framing, localisation is not only about efficiency or inclusion but about safeguarding the democratic role of civil society itself.

## ***Integrating Democratic Governance into the Global Gateway***

The [Directorate General International Partnerships \(DG INTPA\)](#) positions the Global Gateway as a value-based offer, built on six guiding principles that include equal partnership, transparency, democratic values and high standards. Yet questions persist as to whether it can truly deliver on this promise. While the initiative promotes a 360° approach, in practice it remains largely dominated by infrastructure and private-sector-driven projects. This raises a practical challenge: how to translate democratic governance and civic participation into the concrete design and implementation of Global Gateway programmes.

For the democratic governance community, a first step is to bridge the gap between colleagues working on democracy, governance and civil society participation and those leading Global Gateway projects. Investment-heavy initiatives ranging from bank guarantees and blended finance to vocational training and TVET operate with their own logics, timelines and delivery mechanisms. To engage meaningfully, democracy practitioners must first understand how these projects are structured and identify entry points where civic participation and democratic principles can be embedded.

One potential entry point lies in the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) standards already being applied by banks, companies and implementing entities within Global Gateway projects. These frameworks provide a foundation for embedding accountability and participation standards. For democracy and civil society actors, the challenge is to interrogate how ESG norms are being applied in practice, whether they genuinely reflect democratic values and where additional safeguards or participatory mechanisms may be needed. However, participants emphasised that without structured civic participation and transparent monitoring mechanisms, Global Gateway risks replicating top-down models that exclude local voices.

Colleagues engaged in Global Gateway implementation have expressed openness to feedback, provided it is adapted to operational realities. This creates space for proposals that demonstrate how governance and civic engagement can reinforce project outcomes, rather than appearing as an external add-on. To achieve sustainability and legitimacy, however, civil society and local actors must be integrated not as an afterthought, but as central actors in





design, oversight and accountability. This shift requires changes in both operational culture and financial modalities, moving beyond rhetorical alignment to ensure Global Gateway lives up to its claim of being a genuinely value-based offer.

## ***Financing Democracy***

The MFF has emerged as a critical mechanism for sustaining democracy, human rights and civil society support, particularly in the context of significant funding reductions from other major donors. A discussion involving [Article 19, Directorate General International Partnerships \(DG INTPA\)](#) and the [European External Action Service \(EEAS\)](#) highlighted that while the EU is acutely aware of gaps created by the withdrawal of US funding, it is neither politically nor operationally positioned to fully replace these resources. The hallmark of Global Europe and other EU instruments is that they are largely programmed and therefore predictable but also connected to the EU's specific policy priorities.

DG INTPA emphasised the need to make strategic choices in supporting civil society and democratic governance, balancing limited capacities against growing pressures on civic actors worldwide. EU would in any case follow its own strategic approach – US and EU civil society and democratic governance support have always differed in both substance and approaches. While the EU cannot compensate for the total shortfall, there is scope within the MFF to refine policies and funding approaches to make EU interventions more effective.

The EEAS highlighted that funding shortfalls are not purely a financial issue but carry narrative implications. Withdrawal of donors sends signals about shifting international priorities and can influence perceptions of legitimacy and leadership in democracy support. EU engagement must therefore be guided not only by the allocation of resources, but also by the strategic framing of its role as a global actor in defending human rights and enabling civic space.

Article 19, who had raised the question on the EU filling the funding gap, emphasised the importance of translating these commitments into practice, ensuring that civil society actors retain the capacity to operate, advocate and hold authorities accountable despite funding constraints.

The MFF can be explored to provide a platform to integrate these considerations systematically into programming ensuring resources strengthen democratic resilience, sustain local civil society actors under pressure and reinforce the EU's position as a values-based actor in the global arena. While the EU cannot fill all gaps left by other donors, careful policy design, targeted funding and strategic narrative framing can maximise impact and maintain continuity in civil society support.

A noteworthy experience shared by the [European Delegation \(EUD\) in Zimbabwe](#), brought the webinar's discussions together into practice: combining coordination, capacity-building and experimentation with alternative funding models to sustain civil society under pressure, while also contributing to broader learning among development partners.

Underscoring the challenges faced by local civil society actors, particularly human rights and governance organisations, in a context of shrinking funding opportunities, the EUD has responded by intensified coordination with other development partners to map the current funding landscape, assess emerging gaps and identify opportunities for sustaining critical actors. This coordinated approach has helped maintain continuity for organisations providing essential services and advocating for human rights, ensuring that the most at-risk actors are supported despite broader funding constraints.



Beyond short-term support, the EUD in Zimbabwe is piloting initiatives aimed at enhancing the long-term financial resilience of CSOs. This includes building capacities to diversify revenue streams, particularly by engaging with philanthropic actors and the private sector. A dedicated pilot study with a supported organisation is underway to explore how such alternative funding mechanisms can complement traditional donor support. Insights from the study will be shared with the broader development partner community to inform collaborative strategies across the region. Drawing on regional examples, such as private sector funding for gender-based violence response services in Southern Africa, the EUD is exploring innovative, locally adapted approaches to strengthen the sustainability and independence of civil society in Zimbabwe under constrained funding conditions.

## Strategic Directions and Conclusions

Civil society (support) stands at a critical narrative crossroads. Shrinking civic space is shaped not only by legal and institutional constraints but also by perceptions, narratives and disinformation campaigns. For Team Europe, this underscores the need to adapt democracy support strategies, ensuring that civil society actors remain resilient, independent and able to operate in highly constrained environments. The forthcoming MFF negotiations represent a pivotal moment to determine whether democracy support remains central to EU external action or becomes secondary to more transactional geopolitical priorities.

The discussions highlighted several strategic directions and takeaways.

- Public attention spikes during crises but sustaining operations in the quieter periods requires deliberate strategic support.
- Democracy practitioners need to deepen their understanding of local realities and narratives, reflecting the necessity for targeted reform in how support is conceptualised and delivered.
- Vulnerabilities vary across sectors. Human rights, governance and advocacy organisations are particularly exposed to suppression and defunding, whereas other actors may face lower political risk. Recognising these differences is critical for designing targeted interventions and assessing the feasibility of funding diversification or alternative financing models.
- Civil society requires investment in narrative resilience, digital advocacy and capacities to counter disinformation and delegitimisation efforts.
- Partnerships must move away from rigid project log frames, toward adaptive, long-term cooperation, grounded in local realities and participatory design, while supporting advocacy- and human rights-based approaches rather than purely donor-driven implementation.
- Sustainable financing is essential. Funding models should be diversified to reduce donor dependency, including engagement with philanthropy, private sector and hybrid funding. The EU Delegation in Zimbabwe's efforts to pilot alternative financing pathways exemplify how donors can support civil society continuity and adaptability under constrained conditions.
- Supporting multifunctionality and organisational agility allows civil society to diversify activities and funding streams, respond dynamically to evolving pressures and avoid being typecast in a single role.
- Civic participation and the voices of local actors should be systematically embedded in flagship initiatives such as Global Gateway, ensuring that programming is context-driven and responsive to local needs.
- Mutual learning should be promoted, valorising democratic innovations emerging from partner countries and strengthening the EU's role as a values-driven actor globally.



## Resources

### European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM):

- [Exploring EU and Member States' approaches and options to addressing the shrinking civic space | Capacity4dev](#)
- [A savvy approach for meaner times: The EU's external promotion of democracy – ECDPM](#)
- [Is the EU becoming distracted from civil society and human rights in Africa? - ECDPM](#)

### German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS):

- [Debating Trump 2.0 and Implications for Africa – The Multiple Pressures on Civil Society Organizations - Megatrends Afrika](#)

### ForumCiv:

- Flagship methodology for participatory and rights-based development: [Right\(s\) Way Forward | ForumCiv](#)

### Wilde Gänzen:

- [Can domestic resource mobilisation by civil society organisations \(CSOs\) open up civic space in the Global South?: Development in Practice: Vol 35, No 4 - Get Access](#)

### International Institute of Social Studies | Erasmus University Rotterdam:

- [Urban Public Perceptions of NGOs' Accountability and Legitimacy: A Social Media Analysis of #UgandaNGOsExhibition | VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations](#)

## ANNEX

## Mentimeter Results

**Warm-up:** the **biggest challenge regarding narratives** that you face as a civil society actor or when engaging with civil society in contested settings?

rising legitimisation of anti-rights / 'anti woke' crowd	Fear of oppression / intimidation	weaponisation of one vulnerable groups existence against another by bad actors (eg co-opting women's movements to attack trans community or people of colour)	Intimidation
Disequality	That civil society refers only to those organizations that are funded by donors.	de-legitimization and politically polarizing narratives	International support used to delegitimize CSO



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disinformation	Chilling effects	reluctance of donors	Loss of national media neutrality and impartiality
Legal restrictions to funding	Contradictory narratives around Civil Society	cooperation in times of foreign agent laws	Shrinking budgets
Intimidation against dissent	Shrinking budget	Donor interest	Anti-woke, corrupt, enemy of the State
Repression, shrinking freedom of expression	Narratives need to be both ambitious and related to (potential) reality.	Narrative that civil society are not legitimate, and the uptake of that message from corporate media outlets	Disinformation
Intolerance	The narrative of Civil Society not being impactful	Limited recognition of governments regarding the weight of CS and its demands	Shrinking budgets and high needs
Fear of accusations of being foreign agents	opposition with donors interest or common interest (no deal or economic interests)	Hypocrisy (speech for me not for thee)	Legitimacy of civil society is being challenge (perception that they are foreign agents)
Poor capacity and will to discuss	Too much formalisation of civil society undermines their legitimacy and sustainability	the importance of civil society's work is not acknowledged in the public discourse	Extremely narrow spectrum and narratives around civic rights, and identity is equalised to lgbt



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**Ask & comments for panellists:** definitions/narratives, resilience/coping strategies, donor roles, civic participation in MS & EU approaches (e.g. GG)?

just going online and seeing your own rights being attacked every day is super tiring, how do you keep motivation to keep working

how to ensure civic participation and democratic principles are fully part of GG? how to make it compulsory?

How do you support civil societies that actively criticise and stand against EU approaches like GG?

How can donors best support social movement building processes that shift away from too much focus on formalising civil society (and resourcing that come with it?)

How to support independent CSO without doing harm in the sense of indirectly fuelling narratives of foreign agents?

Civic participation in MS&EU approaches

How can we maintain energy to stand up for others when we also have to increasingly defend ourselves too?

How can we reconcile the current emphasis on European interests and the promotion of the values that uphold civic space?

what kind of monitoring mechanisms exist to ensure democratic principles in GG?

How can donors support more unconventional/less formalised civil society actors e.g. movements?

The world is changing, CSOs need to change too, how? What would be the elements that need to be changed? How a positive narrative could be created?

How do we genuinely grow towards equality rather than division in eu policy? No or each but act?

Change of role of INGO or partner NGO in the North?

How to prove the value of your work to donors, as the outcomes of e.g. democracy support are usually long-term and not straightforward to measure

How to address and balance the diversity of civil society between and within countries?

postcolonial ambitions and narratives?

How does EU values citizen engagement in times when civic space is shifting and can take in different (and emergent) forms?

How do we combat populist narratives that have no regard for the truth?

Will the EU work with Social Result of Investment?

give advice for effective participation of local civil society and communities to the process and GG projects?

How do we measure success in CSO support (given pressure on ODA and accountability towards taxpayers)?

Tips to fight cyber attacks and disinformation?

How can EU best tap the potential of philanthropic organisations in supporting civic space and democracy?

How to duly include CSO in GG while the MFFA draft doesn't include targets?



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we want to engage our politician for effective participation. How to make it real and not only intentions?

How to feel the gap left by USAI?

Do we have to adapt our narrative in civic space support, as it comes under pressure from all sides (foreign agents vs. Postcolonial critique) or double down on the existing (value based) narrative?

HRBA is under attack by politicians, donors and international institutions. Are those principle still relevant? how to (re)create discussion on this with donors, communities, governments in the "South"

how to get out of our "entre soi"? so pleased to have this conversation among us, like-minded european level. We need to extend the conversation with the "not like minded"

thanks to the reaction of Jean from INTPA. But how do you explain the negative perception that we mostly have regarding GG?

In couple of words, what is **the key takeaway** from today's discussion?

