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#TEAMEUROPE

**Team Europe Democracy
(TED) Initiative**

Democracy

Under Pressure:

**Supporting Civic Space and
Local Democratic Governance**

Policy Brief

December 2025, Belgium

United for Democracy

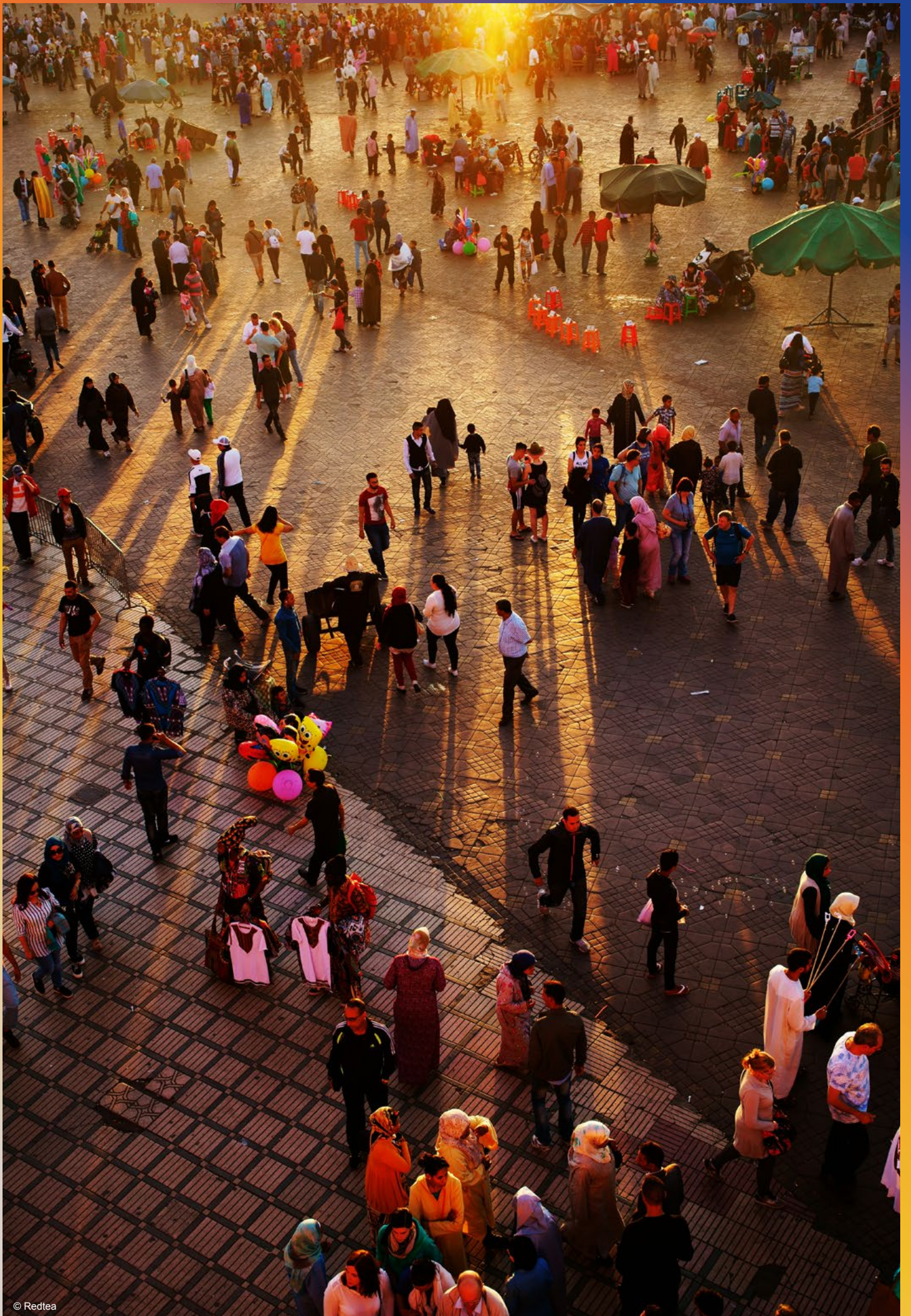


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Acronyms

AFD	Agence Française de Développement/French Development Agency
ALDA	European Association for Local Democracy
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung / German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CLGF	Commonwealth Local Government Forum
CSF	Common Strategic Frameworks
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSO-LA	Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DDI	Digital Democracy Initiative
DIHR	Danish Institute for Human Rights
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
EEAS	European External Action Service
EED	European Endowment for Democracy
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
Enabel	Belgian Agency for International Cooperation
(DG) ENEST	Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood
ERICs-EaP	Enhancing the Resilience of Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union Delegation
EU EEA	European Union External Action, Instruments Evaluation, European Union's External Financing
EU SEE	EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society
FPI	Foreign Policy Instruments
FSTP	Financial Support to Third Parties
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit / German Agency for International Cooperation
GSP+	Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus
HRD	Human Rights Defender
HRIA	Human Rights Impact Assessment
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IcSP	(EU) Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace
(DG) INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
MS	Member State(s)
NDICI-GE	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PFD	Policy Forum on Development
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDLG	Sustainable Development through Improved Local Governance
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
TALD	Territorial Approach for Local Development
TED	Team Europe Democracy
TED MS	Team Europe Democracy Member States
TEI	Team Europe Initiative(s)
UN	United Nations
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
US	United States
VNG	Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten/Association of Netherlands Municipalities

Executive Summary

This **policy brief**¹ looks at current challenges to European democracy support. It focuses on three interconnected global trends: shrinking civic space, weakening local democratic governance and overall democratic backsliding. These trends unfold against a backdrop of reduced official development assistance (ODA), European budget constraints, and fundamental United States (US) funding cuts. This requires more efficient coordination of European support, including through Team Europe and the Global Gateway Initiative with a systematic integration of democratic values. The brief identifies how EU institutions, TED Member States, and other actors can better coordinate their interventions and financial support to respond to growing challenges facing civic space and local democratic governance. It presents challenges for the support of civic space and local democratic governance, offers responses and select actionable recommendations.

Findings show that despite growing recognition of civil society's role, **civic space support** remains fragmented and insufficiently strategic. It is still often limited to assisting formal CSOs rather than using integrated multi-level approaches engaging public, civic and private sectors. Key challenges include the difficulty of reaching less institutionalised actors such as unregistered groups and grassroots movements. Rapid-reaction mechanisms remain inadequate to respond to sudden civic space openings or closures. There is also a need for a strengthened risk management that protects both donors and civic actors without excluding informal groups. Addressing the interdependence of online and offline civic freedoms, enhancing personal safety and organisational resilience, and leveraging international human rights mechanisms are essential to effective civic space protection. **Local democratic governance support** has been significantly weakened by a sharp decline in resources. This stems from the absorption in 2021 of the dedicated EU CSO-LA instrument into the NDICI-Global Europe, reduced support from several TED Member States, and growing difficulty engaging formal local authorities amid democratic backsliding. Traditional government-to-government cooperation faces increasing constraints. However, municipal partnerships have proven highly resilient. They offer peer-to-peer governance expertise and long-term collaboration that can withstand political shifts. In increasingly authoritarian contexts, adaptive strategies working through local institutions that retain legitimacy and operational space offer pathways for sustaining democratic engagement and civic space. This policy brief has also examined **cross-cutting issues**. It finds that while civic space and local democratic governance are well recognised in policy, they require greater support in practice. Shrinking civic space, reduced funding and thematic shifts by donors undermine the ability of civil society and local authorities to fully play their role. Experience demonstrates that integrated approaches offer a strong potential for multi-actor collaboration and leveraging sectoral interventions to achieve democratic resilience. Yet, effective action is hindered by the absence of clear definitions and adapted strategies for fragility.

This leaves international actors without the guidance needed to respond coherently in complex environments. Several risks hinder effective intervention: insufficient institutional knowledge, fragmented learning systems, and loss of expertise due to staff turnover. These highlight the need for stronger knowledge management, peer-learning mechanisms, and coordinated EU–Team Europe platforms that reinforce capacity and coherence. Given its central role in EU external action, the **Global Gateway** is treated as a mandatory reference framework. The Global Gateway's core principles - democratic values, high standards, good governance, transparency, and equal partnerships - create strong opportunities to strengthen civic space and local democratic governance. However, implementation remains constrained by unclear guidance and limited experience.

¹ The policy brief builds on a confidential mapping analysis of European support to civic space and local democratic governance dated December 2025, commissioned by the TED Secretariat and prepared by Elbarlament and Democracy Reporting International for the 15 Team Europe Democracy (TED) Member States (MS) and relevant EU institutions, including EU Delegations (EUD).

Global Gateway operations should be embedded within existing EU tools - Team Europe coordination, civil society-structured dialogue mechanisms and the 360° approach. to ensure coherent, sustainable and rights-based development interventions.

Team Europe Initiatives and approaches remain underutilised for democracy support, with the notable exception of the Team Europe Democracy initiative. This underutilisation persists despite the urgent need for strengthened coordination amid geopolitical competition and budget constraints. It stems from several factors: high TEI coordination costs, fragmented communication, siloed working methods, a tendency to rebrand existing coordination rather than innovate, and sectoral imbalances concentrating TEIs in infrastructure rather than democracy and human rights. Overcoming these barriers requires clearer processes, stronger political leadership, genuine joint approaches and funding modalities aligned with Member States' realities. This requires a shift from coordination dialogue to operational integration with shared risk and responsibility for all Team Europe members involved.

The brief provides a **practical foundation for advocacy** by identifying concrete entry points for joint action, presenting illustrative case studies, and providing targeted recommendations. These elements can be leveraged to foster coherent policy positions, encourage political and financial commitment, and support the translation of shared principles into operational practice.

The brief also serves as a **tool for implementation and mutual learning** to support civic space and local democratic governance effectively. The comparative insights and examples should enable stakeholders to reflect on what works, adapt approaches across contexts, and strengthen collaboration between EU-level, national, and local actors. In this way, this brief not only informs advocacy efforts but also contributes to building a common evidence base that supports sustained engagement, accountability, and impact over time.

Summary of Recommendations on Civic Space Support:

- ▶ Move beyond support to civic space that focus primarily on supporting civil society organisations (CSO) and instead **adopt integrated strategies** that engage a broad range of public, civic, and private actors across global, regional, bilateral, and local levels.
- ▶ Systematically put in place mechanisms that **empower civil society as an actor in its own right**, capable of co-constructing public policies and driving joint initiatives with public institutions and the private sector.
- ▶ Commit to **engaging “unusual civic actors”** such as less institutionalised, agile actors closely connected to fast-changing grassroots dynamics, often associated with “Gen Z” civic groups that played key roles in mass mobilisations, as seen during autumn 2025 in Nepal, Madagascar and Morocco.
- ▶ Expand **funding opportunities for unregistered CSOs** which are key actors in defending civic space and whose status may be dictated by necessity: restrictive registration frameworks, digital mobilisation, and horizontal organising models encourage informality for flexibility and/or safety.
- ▶ Funding partners should **strengthen risk management** rather than risk avoidance, with due diligence systems that protect both donors and civic actors without excluding informal groups.
- ▶ Complement existing global and regional monitoring tools by scaling up **rapid-reaction mechanisms** to meet the scale of civic space restrictions worldwide. **Develop mechanisms that strengthen personal safety and organisational resilience**, including through support for digital, physical, and psychosocial protection as well as institutional risk-management systems.
- ▶ **Integrate approaches across both online/offline spaces**, recognising their interdependence. Case studies illustrate promising work on inclusive digital governance, ensuring that no one is left behind and that digital technologies do not undermine fundamental rights.
- ▶ Scale up the use of **international human rights conventions and mechanisms** to strengthen civic space and ensure partner governments uphold their human rights obligations.

Summary of recommendations for local democratic governance support:

- ▶ **Commit to large-scale cooperation by EU and MS with local authorities**, amplified by a Team Europe approach, and acknowledge local democratic governance as a prerequisite for proper Global Gateway implementation.
- ▶ **Leverage platforms** such as the Territorial Approach for Local Development (TALD)² and the Policy Forum on Development (PFD)³ for integrated support.
- ▶ **Support city-to-city partnerships** emerging from direct dialogue between partners, with coordination and technical assistance provided through umbrella organisations and Team Europe mechanisms.
- ▶ **In environments where political red lines prevent support to central authoritarian governments, operate through local authorities and institutions**, build on multi-actor integrated approaches at the local level, and continue meaningful engagement of local democratic actors through adaptive strategies.

Summary of recommendations on cross-cutting issues:

- ▶ **Increase practical support for civic space and local democratic governance** to ensure that civil society and local authorities can effectively fulfil their role, despite shrinking civic space, reduced funding, and shifting priorities.
- ▶ **Integrate civic space and local democratic governance** systematically and sustainably across all cooperation strategies and programmes through mandatory governance components and holistic multi-sector, multi-actor approaches to establish long-term partnerships with partner countries and bridge sectoral interventions with democratic resilience.
- ▶ **Develop clear definitions of fragility** to guide interventions in complex environments, ideally leading to a shared Team Europe definition that clarifies how the Global Gateway applies in fragile or politically estranged contexts.
- ▶ In increasingly authoritarian or crisis-affected contexts, **use alternative access mechanisms such as** multilateral channels, local-level entry points, as well as coordinated Team Europe efforts to maintain support to civic actors and local institutions.
- ▶ **Share knowledge exchange tools and products** more systematically between the EU and TED Member States, establish peer learning networks within and among institutions, and develop guidance on civic space, local democratic governance and funding in crisis situations.

² TALD is a policy framework that emphasises endogenous, integrated, multi-scalar, and incremental local development. It fosters a broad spectrum of decentralised cooperation among cities, civil society organisations, private actors, and other key stakeholders. See: <http://www.taldfacility.eu>

³ The Global Gateway Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform (GG CSO/LA Platform) working group is part of the Policy Forum on Development. Its mission is to assist the European Commission ensuring that Global Gateway as a values-based strategy contributes to sustainable investments, delivering on its goals in line with its principles. See: https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/governance/global-gateway-civil-society-and-local-authorities-advisory-platform_en

Summary of recommendations on Global Gateway:

- ▶ **Embed Global Gateway operations within existing EU tools** such as Team Europe coordination, civil society-structured dialogue mechanisms and the 360° approach to ensure coherent, sustainable and rights-based development interventions.
- ▶ **Ensure systematic integration of civic space and local democratic governance** considerations into Global Gateway planning and implementation, in line with its core principles of democratic values, good governance and equal partnerships.
- ▶ **Leverage structured dialogue** with multiple stakeholders, including civil society, local authorities and the private sector, to ensure that investments in digital connectivity and infrastructure include democracy dimensions.
- ▶ Place **co-creation and long-term consultation at the centre of implementation**, with civil society leading actor mapping and role definition across flagship sectors.

Summary of recommendations on Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs):

- ▶ **Prioritise rapid-response democracy support mechanisms in TEIs**, using flexible grant funding pools to act quickly against democratic and civic space closures or when democratic openings occur, pooling efforts to coordinate optimal responses.
- ▶ Address funding and administrative barriers by developing **alternative mechanisms offered by Team Europe for reaching local CSOs**, including smaller, more flexible grant mechanisms for grassroots organisations and ‘democracy innovation funds’ operating outside traditional procurement processes.
- ▶ Develop specific protocols to support local authorities, including **direct funding mechanisms and increased city-to-city partnerships** with European cities and municipal associations collaborating in a Team Europe approach.
- ▶ Shift from existing EU-MS coordination formats at country level to formal **Team Europe operational integration** around specific joint strategies and programmes with shared risk and responsibility, establishing Team Europe as the framework of choice for EU and MS cooperation and co-funding in conflict-prone and fragile environments.

1

Observations on Support to Civic Space and Local Democratic Governance

This section summarises the assignment's findings and recommendations for European support to civic space and local democratic governance. It also offers cross-cutting analytical insights to capture synergies between the two themes. The brief recognises global imperatives - including climate change, digitalisation, migration and conflict - that simultaneously impact both areas, creating daily intersecting challenges for practitioners and policymakers.

The research used baseline definitions and corresponding policy documents by the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Definitions helped focus the scope of the research, while recognising that some TED members have their own specific definitions.

- ▶ The **mapping defines civic space** as the fundamental conditions and rights enabling civil society and individuals to organise, participate, and communicate freely - both offline and online - to influence political and social structures. This definition draws on the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 and the EU Roadmaps for Engagement with Civil Society (CSO Roadmaps).
- ▶ The definition of Civic Space adopted by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 2014⁴ brings some additional elements: *“It is 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”*. It is notable that both definitions include the notions of online and offline civic space. This assignment ensured that the online sphere was properly covered in the research as a key topic.
- ▶ The **mapping defines local democratic governance** as *“democratic processes and institutions at sub-national levels that enable effective citizen participation in local affairs”* (OECD, 2004). It encompasses *“responsive, transparent and accountable local authorities working in inclusive partnership with civil society”* (EU approach to decentralisation, 2008) and *“multi-level governance systems that enable citizens to exercise their rights and responsibilities in policy processes”* (European Consensus on Development, 2017). This governance framework supports meaningful civic and political participation through inclusive decision-making mechanisms, political pluralism, and citizen engagement platforms at the local level.⁵

The following three sections present main conclusions on *Civic Space*, then on *Local Democratic Governance*. Recognising aspects of transversality, the third section addresses *Civic Space and Local Democratic Governance: Cross-Cutting Analytical Insights*.

⁴ In: DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance adopted on 6 July 2021

⁵ Accordingly, the EU and TED MS programme areas of the mapping included decentralisation reforms, local electoral processes, participatory budgeting initiatives, local accountability mechanisms, management by and capacity building for local authorities, citizen assemblies, municipal partnerships, inclusive local planning, e-governance at local level, and programmes supporting vulnerable groups' participation in local governance. In terms of stakeholders, this involved local authorities, municipal councils, locally elected officials, organisation, CSOs with a local governance focus, citizen assemblies, community-based organisations, and local media outlets with a role in governance accountability. Special attention was given to organisations representing women, youth, and marginalised groups in local democratic processes. The mapping included programmes and 'conceptual' approaches.

11.

Civic space

Work with Civil Society as an Actor in its own Right and on more Equal Terms



Challenge

Despite EU and MS policy frameworks recognising CSOs as independent actors rather than service providers, power imbalances due *inter alia* to donor-driven priorities, as well as administrative burdens, affect smaller or emerging civic actors both online and offline. As a result, in fast changing civic space situations, civil society's ability to counter shrinking civic space (or on the contrary support openings) and act autonomously remains constrained.



Responses

More participatory updates from the EU Civil Society Roadmaps⁶ foster strategic, long-term partnerships, supported by structured EU–civil society dialogue and targeted programmes⁷ that empower civil society as equal and independent actors. TED MS such as France and Germany, promote local organisations through direct funding, while strengthening their capacities, and supporting legal and regulatory frameworks in line with international human rights obligations. Some of these approaches encourage co-construction of public policies and joint initiatives between civil society, government, and the private sector.



Key takeaway

Advancing civil society's role as an independent actor aligns with EU and TED MS commitments to aid localisation, which demands rethinking decision-making structures and resource distribution. Working with local CSOs within the framework of the Global Gateway and its 360° approach to civic participation offers an opportunity to co-construct strategies to strengthen civic space.



Select recommendations

1. Broaden donors' use of structured dialogue to foster co-construction with CSOs in setting agendas, priorities, and implementation strategies;
2. Promote flexible and accessible funding;
3. Advance the localisation of aid by increasing direct funding to local CSOs.

⁶ See: https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/groups/public-governance-civilsociety/info/eu-country-roadmaps-engagement-civil-society-introduction_en

⁷ Such as the NDICI–Global Europe CSO Thematic Programme. TED Member States such as France and Germany address power imbalances by expanding direct funding to local organisations, strengthening capacities, legitimacy, and promoting regulatory environments that enable cross-border funding. The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) advances its commitment to civil society by supporting it as an actor in its own right by investing in a pluralistic, independent and rights-based civil society as a development goal, alongside direct support in full autonomy.

Upholding Civic Space is not only about Support to CSOs



Challenge

EU and TED MS programmes supporting civic space often remain centred on financing formal CSOs as primary actors, rather than adopting broader, ecosystem-wide approaches. This runs counter to the recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Assistance (2021) which offers two distinct and widely recognised definitions of civic space (i.e. the enabling environment for civil society participation⁸) and CSOs⁹ as the actors themselves.



Responses

Several TED MS, including Denmark¹⁰, Germany and Switzerland, adopt integrated, multi-level approaches combining global advocacy, policy dialogue, and involvement of a broad spectrum of governmental and non-governmental actors. At the EU level, this commitment is visible through joint initiatives such as the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy¹¹ (HRD), the country-level HRD strategies, and EU Civil Society Roadmaps.



Key takeaway

By upholding civic space across policy areas and engaging both state and non-state actors (beyond CSOs), the EU and TED MS strengthen the entire civic ecosystem. It enables citizens, media, movements and informal groups to exercise their rights to associate, assemble, and express themselves freely.



Select recommendations

1. Adopt broader, integrated approaches to civic space support beyond funding CSOs by engaging governments, regional and global bodies, independent institutions ;
2. Strengthen coordination within Team Europe to ensure consistent messaging, joint monitoring, and collective diplomatic action to defend civic space;
3. Scale up multi-level responses by combining global advocacy, policy dialogue, and local partnerships;
4. Embed civic space priorities across all relevant EU and TED MS instruments, including country strategies, democracy and human rights action plans.

⁸ Denmark's multi-level response demonstrates a coherent model combining global advocacy, bilateral diplomacy, and local partnership to promote civic space while empowering civil society as independent, legitimate actors in their own right. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) work address civic space broadly combining advocacy, monitoring, dialogue and risk-taking, always implemented through active engagement with both duty bearers and rights holders.

⁹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_action_plan_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2020-2024.pdf

¹⁰ Denmark's multi-level response demonstrates a coherent model combining global advocacy, bilateral diplomacy, and local partnership to promote civic space while empowering civil society as independent, legitimate actors in their own right. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) work address civic space broadly combining advocacy, monitoring, dialogue and risk-taking, always implemented through active engagement with both duty bearers and rights holders.

¹¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_action_plan_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2020-2024.pdf

Integrate Online and Offline Support



Challenge

As online and offline civic space are increasingly interconnected, restrictions in the digital realm such as surveillance, cybercrime laws, censorship, and disinformation often mirror, reinforce, or precede repression offline. This convergence requires an integrated protection approach. Yet institutional fragmentation persists: digital policy and cybersecurity teams typically oversee technology regulation, while human rights and governance units address offline civic space.



Responses

EU and TED MS efforts increasingly aim to ensure that digital transformation supports civic space, though practice confirms institutional silos between cyber policy and civic space support. Innovative initiatives such as TechDiplomacy initiatives¹², Austria's inclusive digital governance programmes, the Digital Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA)¹³ Toolkit funded by Denmark, and the EU–Denmark Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI)¹⁴, work to promote legal accountability, digital security, and rights-based governance, helping civil society resist online repression, navigate digital threats, and operate safely across both online and offline environments.



Key takeaway

Strengthening civic space demands bridging online and offline civic space policy considerations for civil society to operate safely and effectively throughout the entire online and offline ecosystem.



Select recommendations

1. Adopt an integrated approach to online and offline civic space protection;
2. Break institutional silos between cyber policy, human rights and development cooperation;
3. Increase investment in digital capacity-building for civil society;
4. Continue promoting international cooperation and norm-setting through the United Nations (UN), OECD, and other mechanisms to advance inclusive, rights-based digital governance.

¹² <https://www.austria.org/news/tech-diplomacy-network-launches-in-san-francisco>

¹³ <https://www.gp-digital.org>

¹⁴ <https://www.gp-digital.org>

Treat Civic Space as an Integral Component of Development Cooperation



Challenge

Civic space support is often treated as a separate, politically sensitive niche rather than a cross-cutting element of sustainable development. Institutional and budgetary silos can relegate civic space to human rights or governance units, leaving sectoral programmes such as health, education, climate or poverty reduction disconnected from participation, accountability and rights-based approaches. This fragmentation limits opportunities to embed citizen engagement in core development work, despite its recognised importance for legitimacy, ownership and effective adaptation.



Responses

Several TED MS, including [Ireland](#)¹⁵, [Switzerland](#)¹⁶ and [Sweden](#)¹⁷, explicitly position civic space and civil society as foundational to sustainable development.



Key takeaway

Embedding participation, rights and accountability across development sectors reinforces civic actors, strengthens civic space and improves development outcomes for democratic benefit.



Select recommendations

1. Avoid institutional silos within donor agencies by promoting joint planning and coordination between governance, human rights, sectoral, and digital departments;
2. Include civic space indicators in sectoral programmes (e.g. health, climate, education, peacebuilding);
3. Ensure institutionalising dialogue with civil society at sector level to ensure policies informed by local realities. This is particularly relevant in the context of the Global Gateway and will strengthen ownership, transparency and long-term impact across the entire development cooperation portfolio.

¹⁵ Ireland's flexible and predictable funding allows partners to respond to evolving crises and strengthens their long-term impact. As highlighted in OECD evaluations, Ireland's model shows that mainstreaming civic space across portfolios enhances both its development effectiveness and its leadership in defending civic freedoms.

¹⁶ Switzerland integrates human rights, democracy and civil society into its poverty-reduction and peace objectives.

¹⁷ The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) has positioned civic space at the centre of its development cooperation strategy. The 2024-2028 strategy for Sweden's global development cooperation activities in human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law recognises that democratic participation, freedom of expression and civil society engagement - core elements of an open civic space - are prerequisites for effective development. See: Ministry for Foreign Affairs: "Strategy for Sweden's global development cooperation activities in the areas of human

Support National Civil Society in Leveraging Regional and International Support based on International Human Rights Obligations



Challenge

National efforts via civil society to resist shrinking civic space are often dismissed by governments as politically motivated or aligned with “foreign interests”, a narrative used to delegitimise civic actors and justify repression. In such environments, international human rights obligations become essential tools: once ratified, treaties such as the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),¹⁸ The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)¹⁹ or the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ECHPR)²⁰ legally bind states to protect freedoms of association, assembly and expression.



Responses

EU and TED MS draw on these binding international norms in political and human rights dialogues to challenge violations and push back against restrictive legislation. Guided by rights-based principles such as accountability and non-discrimination, they support CSOs, National Human Rights Institutions and international monitoring processes to document abuses and hold governments accountable. Through participation in UN and regional mechanisms, and through initiatives such as the Netherlands’ “Strengthening Civil Society” framework, they reinforce civil society’s capacity for international advocacy and help ensure that attacks on civic space are met with coordinated, norm-based responses.



Key takeaway

Universal Human Rights Conventions provide stakeholders, including international partners, local governmental and non-governmental actors, with a powerful and fundamental basis to assess and challenge restrictive civic space laws and practices, counter accusations of political bias, and engage regional as well as global accountability mechanisms.



Select recommendations

1. Strengthen the systematic use of international human rights mechanisms (e.g. Universal Periodic Review (UPR), treaty bodies, and Special Rapporteurs) within political and human rights dialogues to ensure partner governments uphold their civic space related obligations;
2. Increase resourcing and capacities of CSOs and independent institutions to engage effectively with national tribunals and with international and regional human rights mechanisms;
3. Promote more coordinated Team Europe action that leverages governments’ international human rights obligations to address civic space restrictions, linking diplomatic engagement with national and international advocacy efforts.

¹⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

¹⁹ https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

²⁰ <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights>

Working with “Unusual Civic Actors” and Unregistered Civil Society Actors



Challenge

Protecting civic space increasingly requires engaging a wider spectrum of civil society actors beyond formal CSOs such as youth movements, informal collectives, online campaigners, and other “unusual civic actors”. They often are more agile, locally rooted, and responsive to fast-evolving grassroots dynamics. During the autumn 2025 upheavals in Nepal, Madagascar, Morocco, ‘Generation/Gen Z’ civic groups played key roles in mass mobilisations. Yet donors frequently overlook them in favour of established CSOs with recognised legitimacy, administrative capacity, and diplomatic acceptability. This focus limits outreach to communities and risks concentrating influence among a fewer, better-resourced CSOs.

At the same time, unregistered civic actors are increasing, often by necessity: restrictive registration frameworks, digital mobilisation, and horizontal organising models encourage informality for flexibility and/or safety. Furthermore, supporting such actors carries diplomatic and political risks for donors, particularly where local governments treat unregistered groups as illegitimate or unlawful.



Responses

Despite these challenges, many EUDs and TED MS are expanding engagement beyond traditional CSOs, recognising the value of inclusive, multi-actor approaches. Some examples include the EU collaboration with youth movements, trade unions, chambers of commerce and informal groups in the [Philippines](#),²¹ [Myanmar](#) and [Colombia](#),²² as well as initiatives on local democracy programmes across the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and the Sahel that work directly with grassroots actors lacking legal personality. Within the TED network, [European Association for Local Democracy \(ALDA\)](#), a TED Network Member) promotes participatory democracy and local governance by engaging citizens’ groups, informal associations, neighbourhood committees and community organisers. EU and TED MS funding tools for unregistered actors,²³ though uneven, point to growing acknowledgment in defending civic space, especially in restrictive environments.



Key takeaway

Emerging approaches by EU and MS to support unregistered groups as well as “unusual civic actors” illustrate a shift toward more inclusive and resilient civic ecosystems, though broader institutional uptake is still needed to match the evolving nature of civic activism.



Select recommendations

1. Strengthen risk management rather than risk avoidance, ensuring that due diligence processes protect both donors and civil society actors and avoid exclusion of informal actors;
2. Provide necessary resources to enhance EU and TED MS capacity to identify, map, and engage new as well as emerging actors;
3. Expand and adapt funding modalities to enable direct support for unregistered groups;
4. Invest in protection and resilience mechanisms for certain important unregistered actors (e.g. digital and physical security training, emergency relocation, legal defence, solidarity with registered CSOs and international allies),
5. Encourage inclusive multi-stakeholder and cross-sector alliances linking informal groups, registered CSOs, private sector, and independent institutions, fostering trust, resource-sharing, and collective responses to civic space restrictions.

²¹ In the Philippines, the EU collaborates with civil society movements, chambers of commerce, and trade unions alongside representatives from the private sector.

²² In Colombia, within the framework of the Global Gateway, the EU engages with a variety of stakeholders such as chambers of commerce, business foundations, trade unions, community media, and indigenous organisations.

²³ EU mechanisms to support unregistered civil society actors include Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP) which can support unregistered entities; Service contracts where the unregistered group acts as a service provider; Direct awards / negotiated procedures; Confidential contracts; The EU’s Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) which also allows registered partners to fund unregistered CSOs.

Support Organisations' Resilience and Sustainability, as well as Security of Civil Society Actors



Challenge

In restrictive environments, governments deploy a wide array of repressive tools ranging from legal restrictions, smear campaigns, harassment, arbitrary detention, threats to physical safety, and intrusive digital surveillance to weaken civil society. These pressures disproportionately affect both formal and informal actors, undermining their ability to engage in national and international advocacy and resisting democratic backsliding. Enhancing the resilience and sustainability of civil society, through stronger organisational structures, long-term planning, diversified funding, and cross-sector alliances as well as individual safety is vital to withstand repression, seize new opportunities for participation, and remain effective defenders of rights and democratic norms.



Responses

The EU and TED MS have increasingly adapted their democracy and human rights support to respond to intensified repression, prioritising protection, resilience, and continuity of civic action. Rapid response mechanisms including the [EU Human Rights Defenders Mechanism](#)²⁴ and national initiatives such as the [Netherlands Shelter City](#),²⁵ [Germany's Civil Peace Service](#),²⁶ [France's Initiative Marianne](#),²⁷ [Belgium's Civic Space Initiative](#)²⁸ provide immediate protection through relocation, legal aid, psychosocial support, and digital security assistance. Complementing these efforts, programmes such as the '[Enhancing the Resilience of Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership](#)'²⁹ (ERICS-EaP) in six eastern European countries and resilience-focused approaches in [Switzerland](#)³⁰ and [Finland](#)³¹ strengthen civil society's organisational capacity, financial sustainability, security practices, and regional networks. Together, these initiatives help civic actors shift from reactive survival to proactive, long-term engagement, reinforcing democratic resilience even in the face of sustained repression.



Key takeaway

The EU and TED MS increasingly prioritise protection and resilience by supporting secure, adaptable civil society structures, using rapid-response mechanisms and long-term capacity-building programmes to ensure civic actors can continue defending rights and democratic space even under severe repression.



Select recommendations

1. Embed resilience as a core objective of civil society support ;
2. Promote long-term, flexible, and predictable funding ;
3. Systematically support diversification of funding sources in a context of reducing ODA ;
4. Promote the safety of civil society actors through programmes and funding instruments as well as embed these measures in project design to ensure preparedness and appropriate responses to changes in civic space (on and offline).

²⁴ <https://protectdefenders.eu/what-is-the-eu-hrd-mechanism-and-why-it-matters-more-than-ever/>

²⁵ <https://sheltercity.org>

²⁶ <https://www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org/en>

²⁷ <https://www.initiativemarianne.fr/en/>

²⁸ <https://www.belqanewsagency.eu/un-human-rights-council-belgium-launches-initiative-to-support-human-rights-organisations-in-partner-countries>

²⁹ <https://euneighbourseast.eu/projects/eu-project-page/?id=2348>

³⁰ Switzerland supports civil society partners in organisational development to strengthen governance and meet international management and accounting standards, aimed at advancing aid localisation, strengthens accountability, partnerships and innovation and helps partners define their strategic trajectory for the long term.

³¹ Finland's development cooperation is grounded in a partnership-based approach that supports Finnish CSOs while ensuring meaningful participation and leadership from their local partners: Finnish grantees are required to demonstrate how local organisations are involved in decision-making and project implementation on the basis of equitable collaboration.

Support Mechanisms for Effective Rapid Reaction to Civic Space Changes



Challenge

Although several effective tools to monitor the state of civic space exist, rapid response capacities remain insufficient compared to the scale of restrictions. Protecting civic space requires fast, targeted interventions such as emergency funding, legal aid, high-level advocacy and diplomatic pressure supported by strong early-warning systems in which civil society, closest to emerging risks, plays a crucial role.



Responses

The EU and TED MS operate several rapid reaction mechanisms for individuals at risk, and these should be expanded to support organisations facing sudden restrictions, drawing on agile models such as CIVICUS's Crisis Response Fund,³² the European Endowment for Democracy's³³ flexible grant making or the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) enabling the triggering of rapid reactions based on constant monitoring and early warning.³⁴



Key takeaway

Better integrating early detection, rapid support and long-term civic actors' resilience-building will ensure that EU and TED MS move from reactive crisis management toward a proactive, strategic defence of civic space.



Select recommendations

1. Strengthen and expand rapid response mechanisms to support CSOs during sudden civic space restrictions or openings, through emergency funding, legal aid, relocation, and advocacy support;
2. Increase flexibility in funding regulations to allow reallocation of project priorities, funds and timelines when civic space suddenly changes;
3. Scale up crisis and opportunity funding models;
4. Complement rapid interventions with long-term resilience-building.

³² CIVICUS's Crisis Response Fund includes "advocacy/sudden opportunity grants" which "support responses to unexpected restrictions on civic space or seize opportunities to expand and strengthen the environment" or "resiliency/emergency grants" to "support organisations and groups facing immediate and ongoing threats". See: <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/engage-and-act/explore-resourcing-opportunities/crisis-response-fund>

³³ The European Endowment for Democracy (EED, a TED Network member) which operates an open-ended application process without deadlines or closely defined priorities, and with simplified application requirements depending on grant size to enable rapid support for CSOs subject to government restrictions. See: <https://democracyendowment.eu>

³⁴ <https://eusee.hivos.org>

1.2.

Local Democratic Governance

Redirect Resources to Local Democratic Governance



Challenge

EU and TED MS funding for local democratic governance has sharply declined over the past decade, reflecting the phasing out of the CSO-LA programme, shifting priorities under NDICI-Global Europe, and the difficulty of supporting local authorities in increasingly authoritarian contexts. Local authorities struggle to find a place within EU geographic instruments, resulting in reduced attention and overall diminishing resources. This limits the EU's ability to strengthen local democratic systems, despite their key roles in accountability, service delivery and local citizen participation.



Responses

Concrete EU and TED MS responses to reverse this decline remain limited, though some avenues offer potential for renewed engagement. Opportunities include integrating local authorities into Global Gateway projects, leveraging tools such as the Territorial Approach for Local Development (TALD) facility,³⁵ the Global Gateway CSO-LA Advisory Platform³⁶ to rebuild support frameworks. A few TED MS, such as the Netherlands³⁷ (through Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten/ Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG)) and Germany³⁸ (through GIZ), continue to invest in local democratic governance, demonstrating viable models even in restrictive environments. Drawing on accumulated experience, decentralised cooperation approaches emphasising local autonomy, capacity building, civil society engagement, transparency and needs-driven dialogue provide a model for the EU and TED MS re-engagement to strengthen democratic resilience at the local level.



Key takeaway

Funding for local democratic governance has declined over the past decade across the EU and TED MS, leaving local authorities with limited support, therefore impacting their role in democratic resilience despite their importance for participation, accountability and service delivery. Emerging avenues offer potential to re-strengthen local governance through decentralised cooperation, capacity building and renewed support models.



Select recommendations

1. Commit to large-scale cooperation with local authorities, amplified by a Team Europe approach;
2. Acknowledge local democratic governance as prerequisite for proper Global Gateway implementation, involving civil society and private sector to ensure values-based programming ;
3. Leverage the instrument of Global Gateway CSO-LA Advisory Platform and more widely the Policy Forum for Development (PFD) as a structured space for civil society and local authorities to strengthen their role.

³⁵ The (TALD) facility is sometimes cited as an EU tool for local government support. At the moment, it primarily provides technical assistance and trainings to EUDs rather than direct funding for local democratic governance.

³⁶ The Global Gateway CSO-LA Advisory Platform, established in 2023, is an avenue to discuss and refine engagement by opening a more structured access to civil society and local authorities within the 360° approach. See: https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/governance/global-gateway-civil-society-and-local-authorities-advisory-platform_en

³⁷ The Netherlands' support to local democratic governance continues to build on large-scale cooperation with VNG International, part of the VNG which can ensure a wide global spread of support. Current collaboration centres on the programme *Sustainable Development through Improved Local Governance* (SDLG, 2022-2026, around €50 million) for the promotion of local governance across 14 countries. See: <https://www.vng-international.nl/sdlg-sustainable-development-through-improved-local-governance/>

³⁸ See: <https://www.giz.de/en/commissioning/federal-states-municipalities>

Leverage Municipal Partnerships for Local Democratic Governance Support



Challenge

In a global context of democratic backsliding, traditional government-to-government cooperation faces increasing constraints, while local authorities often lack direct channels for democratic capacity building. Alternative and less high-level approaches are required.



Responses

TED MS such as Germany,³⁹ Sweden⁴⁰ or the Netherlands⁴¹ have systematically leveraged city-to-city partnerships and municipal twinning for peer-to-peer learning and sustainable cooperation. Municipal partnerships have proven exceptionally resilient amid political changes, offering authentic, practice-based local governance expertise based on principles of solidarity, voluntariness and cooperation.



Key takeaway

Strengthening municipal partnerships has enabled the creation of sustainable networks for democratic governance support that endure beyond project cycles and are exceptionally resilient and stable amid political changes.



Select recommendations

1. Support city-to-city partnerships that emerge from direct dialogue between partners rather than top-down approaches;
2. Provide coordination and technical support through umbrella or technical organisations;
3. Leverage Team Europe coordination for municipal partnerships.

³⁹ For Germany's approach on its leading role to decentralisation support, see: <https://www.DDI.de/en/issues/decentralisation>

⁴⁰ SIDA develops twinning modalities between sister local authorities, with Swedish municipalities providing high-level technical expertise on statistics, tax systems and regional development, bringing service mindedness and administrative experience.

⁴¹ See for example "Building municipal capacity for cooperation with the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG): <https://www.vng-international.nl/project/netherlands-policy-advice-to-dutch-municipalities-on-international-cooperation-2021/>

Work with Local Democratic Governance as an Alternative to Central Governments



Challenge

The global trend towards increasing authoritarianism at central governments restricts democratic space and makes direct engagement with national authorities politically unviable, severely limiting traditional democracy-support programming.



Response

In such contexts, EU and TED MS have adapted by working through local entry points, deconcentrated/decentralised services, municipal associations and civil society where some operational space and legitimacy often remain. EU work in many countries (e.g. Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Myanmar, Mali, Uganda) has required careful engagement within political red lines when strategic local engagement can help preserve democratic spaces while assisting grassroots stakeholders in building resilience.



Key takeaway

In environment with political red lines preventing support to central authoritarian governments, leveraging sub-national local structures can be an avenue to continue fostering democratic practices and resilience.



Select recommendations

1. Consider operating through local authorities when contacts with authoritarian central regimes become impossible;
2. Build on multi actors (CSOs, private sector, local authorities) integrated approaches at local level to ensure the most efficient cooperation in restricted environments;
3. Continue meaningful engagement of local democratic actors through a 'neutral' service delivery focus as an adaptive strategy in challenging contexts.

1.3.

Civic Space and Local Democratic Governance

Knowledge Management and Exchange for Complex Topics



Challenge

Limited expertise, institutional silos, understaffing, staff turnover within EU and TED MS institutions weaken the ability to respond effectively to complex civic space and local democratic governance challenges, leading to missed opportunities and underuse of available tools.



Response

Addressing these gaps requires sustained capacity building, structured knowledge management, and accessible learning platforms. Examples such as Switzerland's governance knowledge hub,⁴² DG INTPA's International Partnerships Academy,⁴³ and TED's role as a shared learning space illustrate good practices to strengthen staff expertise and improve institutional coherence.



Key takeaway

Strengthening staff capacity, continuous learning platforms and shared expertise improve coherence and effectiveness of civic space and local democratic governance across institutions.



Select recommendations

1. Exchange knowledge tools and products more systematically between EU and TED MS, possibly through the TED Secretariat and the TED online platform ([Team Europe Democracy Initiative - TED | Capacity4dev](#)) or more widely through international networks such as OECD DAC Net;
2. Establish systematic peer learning networks within and among EU and TED MS institutions (including among EUDs);
3. Develop EU guidance and EU International Partnerships/ INTPA Academy training offers on civic space, local democratic governance, funding in crisis situations and Global Gateway implementation as systematic tools for building staff capacity, complementing MS knowledge platforms, and bridging different staff domains including trade, infrastructure and governance staff at EU headquarters and EUDs.

⁴² <https://www.sdc-pge.ch/en/governance>

⁴³ <https://international-partnerships.learning.europa.eu>

Policy Recognition and Systematic Support for Sustainable Partnerships



Challenge

Despite being prioritised in EU and TED MS policy frameworks, funding for civic space and local democratic governance remains limited. Shrinking civic space, stringent grant requirements, and the loss of dedicated local authority' EU instrument combined with reduced TED MS support create a gap between policy ambitions and operational realities, weakening the effectiveness of democracy support and failing to leverage the legitimacy and citizen proximity of local actors.



Response

Sustained and systematic integration of civic space and local democratic governance is key to democratic resilience, effective development cooperation and long-term partnerships. While EU-level dedicated funding has diminished, several TED MS including the Netherlands,⁴⁴ Switzerland,⁴⁵ Ireland⁴⁶ and Belgium⁴⁷ continue to embed these priorities in long-term programming frameworks, offering models for renewed and more coherent support.



Key takeaway

Effectiveness of democracy support often relies on continued integration of civic space and local governance into long-term programming.



Select recommendations

1. Establish long-term country programming frameworks with institutional anchoring to maintain sustained and long-term engagement. As much as possible, this ought to be done beyond political changes;
2. Integrate civic space and local democratic governance systematically across all cooperation programmes through mandatory governance components;
3. Plan programming with holistic approaches allowing transformative multi-sector, multi-actor collaboration including with the private sector and other actors.

⁴⁴ See example: <https://www.vng-international.nl/sdlg-sustainable-development-through-improved-local-governance/>

⁴⁵ The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) demonstrates systematic implementation through Parliament-defined priority countries, maintaining sustained engagement even during socio-political-economic challenges.

⁴⁶ Ireland demonstrates systematic implementation through sustained, long-term partnerships with partner countries, guided by historic relations rather than realpolitik.

⁴⁷ Belgium uses as much as possible a multi-level governance approach across its programming ensuring collaboration of stakeholders in an integrated and bottom-up approach, including CSOs and local authorities. It recognises that no single actor (local, national or international) has sufficient resources, levers, expertise or legitimacy to ensure change alone.

Integrated Approaches for Mutual Benefits



Challenge

Civic space and local democratic governance are often treated as separate themes, leading to missed opportunities for synergy and more efficient use of increasingly limited international resources. This separation has also created a significant imbalance in funding and programming, with civic space support outweighing investments in local democratic governance.



Responses

Some TED MS and EU programmes are integrating both areas, demonstrating how linking local authorities with citizen engagement strengthens accountability and democratic resilience. Examples from [Belgium](#),⁴⁸ [Sweden](#),⁴⁹ the EU in [Madagascar](#)⁵⁰ and TED Network⁵¹ demonstrate that combining supply- and demand-side governance creates more coherent interventions, bridges formal and informal actors, and enhances impact even in fragile or democratically restrictive contexts.



Key takeaway

Treating civic space and local democratic governance as separate themes leads to missed synergies and reinforces an imbalance in funding and programming, with civic space overshadowing local governance support. Linking local authorities with citizen engagement enhances accountability, democratic resilience and programme impact, particularly in fragile or restrictive contexts.



Select recommendations

1. Recognise mutual dependencies in concrete programming where operating civic space benefits functioning local democratic structures, and sustainable local governance from active civic participation;
2. Adopt multi-level governance approaches ensuring collaboration of stakeholders (local duty bearers/rights holders; national and international; public, civic and private sector);
3. Integrate civic space and local democratic governance programming comprehensively into existing EU frameworks such as structured dialogue, HRBA and the 360° approach when Global Gateway is concerned.

⁴⁸ Belgium uses as much as possible a multi-level governance approach across its programming ensuring collaboration of stakeholders in an integrated and bottom-up approach. It recognises that no single actor (local, national or international) has sufficient resources, levers, expertise or legitimacy to ensure change alone.

⁴⁹ The development approach of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) works with broad governance support umbrellas, leveraging appropriate tools to defend civic space while supporting local governance.

⁵⁰ Rather than treating civil society support and institutional strengthening as separate interventions, “Tou.te.s redevables” (Everyone Accountable, 2023-29) deliberately creates systematic linkages between supply-side (institutional) and demand-side (citizen engagement) governance reforms and tackles obstacles for young people and women to be recognised and participate, a grievance highlighted in the 2025 protests involving the Generation/Gen Z movement. See: <https://ue-madagascar.org/strat/>

⁵¹ TED Webinar in 2024 on “Strengthening Local Democratic Resilience: Entry Points for Supporting and Engaging with Local Communities and Actors in Fragile Contexts” TED Network Members concluded that integration also enabled bridging formal governance structures with citizen-led initiatives, particularly valuable in contexts where direct government-civil society cooperation faced constraints of crisis or repression. See: PLATFORMA, “Engagement with Local and Regional Authorities in Development Cooperation”, TED Webinar presentation, 10/2024, p. 8

Strategies for Operating under Political 'Red Lines'



Challenge

Rising authoritarianism, political restrictions and donor-imposed “red lines” severely limit geographic coverage, prohibit direct government engagement, leading to endangering civil society.



Response

EU and TED MS have increasingly adapted their programmes to operate within these constraints, using alternative channels and crisis-sensitive mechanisms as seen in [Mali](#), [Uganda](#) and [Burkina Faso](#) and innovating through multilateral initiatives such as [Germany's](#) civic space and local democratic governance project ‘Support to Sahel Alliance’s Dialogue and Engagement with Sahelian Civil Society and Local Governments’⁵² which strengthens structured engagement between civil society, local governments and donors even in highly repressive contexts.



Key takeaway

Authoritarian contexts and donor “red lines” restricting geographic coverage can be countered by leveraging local-level institutions that often retain operational space even under authoritarian rule, or bundle initiatives in a Team Europe approach, bringing together various programmes and actors (international and local organisations, foundations) to maintain leverage and bring government ministries and agencies to the table for CSO engagement.



Select recommendations

1. Leverage local-level institutions that often retain operational space even under authoritarian rule;
2. Establish coordination mechanisms among remaining donors through Team Europe, groups of like-minded countries or sectoral coordination platforms for information sharing and joint advocacy;
3. Use multilateral channels or intermediary partners (e.g. UN agencies) to strengthen civic space and local democratic governance when bilateral channels face constraints.

⁵² GIZ, Terms of reference (ToR) for the procurement of services below the EU threshold, Form 41-14-5-en 1, Support to Sahel Alliance’s Dialogue and Engagement with Sahelian Civil Society and Local Governments, Project number 22.2204.0-002.00, 2025

Clear Definitions, Strategies and Coordination for Fragile Contexts



Challenge

Fragile contexts require tailored approaches, yet rigid classifications and weak coordination between international and national actors limit effective democracy support. Insufficient guidance such as the lack of clear frameworks for Global Gateway engagement in fragile settings, further constrains coherent and adaptable action.



Response

Recognising the central role of fragility, the EU and several TED MS are incorporating it into development strategies via humanitarian–development–peace approaches, with promising examples like Belgium's⁵³ efforts to comprehensively define and assess fragility. These emerging models aim to address root causes and enable coordinated, context-sensitive interventions in fragile environments. The need to comprehensive definitions and approaches is also underlined by the ALDA and its members.⁵⁴



Key takeaway

Clear and flexible definitions of fragility, drawing on OECD guidance and TED Network experience, will enable coherent interventions and ideally move toward a shared Team Europe definition. This would clarify how Global Gateway applies in fragile contexts to ensure strategic decision-making. Ideally, this would position Team Europe as the preferred framework for agile, coordinated EU–TED MS action in fragile environments, including in conflict settings.



Select recommendations

1. Develop clear definitions of fragility guiding interventions in complex environments, using tools tried and tested by TED Network Members and/or provided by the OECD, and ideally leading to a shared Team Europe definition;
2. Clarify Global Gateway fragility definitions for fragile or politically 'estranged' countries to allow clear decisions on their eligibility for interventions under the initiative;
3. Establish Team Europe as the framework of choice for flexible EU and TED MS joint action in conflict-prone and fragile environments, providing coordinated responses that maximise limited resources and leverage joint narratives and coordinated political dialogue channels.

⁵³ Belgium has paid particular attention to developing definitions, strategies and coordination mechanisms for appropriately working in fragile contexts. Context analysis tools have emphasised translating assessments into an understanding of root causes, conflict dynamics and endogenous resilience mechanisms that contribute to stability rather than exacerbate tensions.

⁵⁴ ALDA work draws from insights of 50+ organisations working at local level, reflecting how fragility is experienced in practice. In their view, fragility should be understood as a spectrum capturing varying degrees and dimensions of vulnerability, rather than rigid classifications, complementing the OECD's definitions to enhance approaches for examining complex situations.

2

Global Gateway: Integration of Civic Space - Local Democratic Governance



Since its launch in 2021, the Global Gateway initiative has represented the EU's main strategic approach to infrastructure and development cooperation. It is guided by five key principles aimed at ensuring that investments are sustainable, beneficial to partner countries and uphold democratic values:



Global Gateway planning and implementation has faced challenges due to limited guidance and track record. There is a lack of systematic integration of civic space and local democratic governance considerations, despite these being central to Global Gateway principles and the 360° approach.⁵⁵

Research findings reveal implementation gaps between strategic policy frameworks and operational realities. To date, few joint EU and TED MS actions under Global Gateway frameworks have been documented. There are concerns that large headquarters-led programmes such as the Global Gateway tend to prioritise economic interests over local perspectives and human rights considerations.

A recent study by Oxfam stated that *“the EU’s actions to implement the Global Gateway risk contradicting its own commitments to upholding high standards of human, social and workers’ rights, transparency, creating equal partnerships instead of dependencies, and offering a democratic investment agenda.”*⁵⁶

On the other hand, some TED MS and EUDs interviewed see the Global Gateway as a key opportunity to advance human rights, democracy and civic space, recognising its potential despite implementation challenges. Others argue that Global Gateway is welcome, as development cooperation cannot continue as before, but that it requires fundamental changes to ensure it becomes part of governance processes in partner countries rather than replicating infrastructure-focused models.

Emerging patterns of successful implementation address some shortcomings, particularly regarding the integration of civic space and local democratic governance. These patterns also highlight areas for enhanced coordination and potential joint actions between EU entities and Member States.

Several EUDs interviewed have developed innovative approaches to Global Gateway implementation that successfully integrate civic space and local democratic governance. Each country context presents unique opportunities and constraints for Global Gateway implementation, requiring adaptive strategies that leverage local political economies whilst maintaining EU principles.

The following three case studies in the Philippines, Senegal and Colombia demonstrate how different country income levels, political contexts and institutional relationships can be navigated to strengthen, rather than marginalise, civil society and local authority participation in Global Gateway programming.

⁵⁵ The “360° approach” under Global Gateway refers to combining multiple dimensions of support and embedding projects in a broader ecosystem beyond just investments in ‘hard’ infrastructure. In the framework of upholding civic space and supporting local democratic support, key aspects include inclusive partnerships (bring together state actors, private sector, civil society, local authorities and communities), and sustainable and contextual development integrating governance, social policies, environmental standards, and institutional capacity building.

⁵⁶ In Oxfam, ‘Who profits from the Global Gateway? The EU’s new strategy for development cooperation’, 8 October 2024, p. 4.



EU/MS in Philippines: Leveraging trade relations for democratic engagement

In the Philippines, the EU leverages strong trade relations, including the human-rights-linked GSP+ scheme to integrate civic space and democratic governance into Global Gateway programming while advancing European value-added sectors such as 5G, digital access and Copernicus satellite services. The EUD operates in a strategic context where 40% of EU trade passes through the West Philippines Sea (part of the South China Sea), providing significant leverage for democratic engagement through economic partnerships while competing with US and Japanese influence in the region. The country's implementation of the EU's GSP+ mechanism - preferential trading arrangements with the EU conditional on human rights compliance⁵⁷ - has created a platform and track record for multi-stakeholder dialogue on trade issues.

The EUD utilises structured dialogue with multiple stakeholders, including the European Chamber of Commerce along with other civil society actors, to ensure that digital and connectivity investments include democracy dimensions. Chambers of commerce serve dual purposes: covering civic space and local governance aspects while encouraging competition and checks and balances. European companies, in turn, demonstrate sensitivity to inclusive third-country operations as a foundation for public-private partnerships. This sensitivity represents a competitive advantage over other international partners less concerned with these governance implications. A distinctive feature of the Philippine context is that companies maintain a dialogue with mayors and local authorities, as a common practice, offering greater opportunities for local democratic governance integration than in contexts where such relationships are less developed.

⁵⁷ On GSP+, see https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/development-and-sustainability/generalised-scheme-preferences_en



**EU/MS in
Senegal:
Ensuring civil
society centrality
through systematic
integration**

In Senegal, the EUD has ensured that Global Gateway's investment focus does not sideline civil society by placing co-creation and long-term consultation at the centre of implementation. Through the Feuille de Route Société Civile 2025–2027, civil society leads actor mapping, Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis and role definition across flagship sectors. Structured dialogue mechanisms, coordinated MS engagement, capacity building and sustained multi-stakeholder collaboration including with the European Chamber of Commerce embed civic actors as strategic partners throughout the Global Gateway rollout.



**EU/MS in
Colombia:
Transforming
partnership
paradigms
through strategic
integration**

The EUD in Colombia uses Global Gateway to drive a fundamental shift in EU–partner relations, moving from traditional grant-based cooperation toward a partnership model that combines economic influence with values-based engagement. By integrating private-sector actors, expanding civic space participation beyond traditional NGOs, and embedding inclusiveness and democratic governance into major investment sectors, especially digital connectivity, the EUD illustrates how Global Gateway can redefine development cooperation while requiring deep organisational change, stronger capacity building, and sustained co-creation in a complex and politically sensitive context.

Analysis of successful implementation cases brings several **recommendations** to strengthen Global Gateway's integration with civic space and local democratic governance:

For EU Headquarters:

- ▶ Accelerate the **systematic development of sector-specific operational guidance**, while recognising that successful implementation also requires EUD initiative and innovation.
- ▶ Develop **frameworks for systematic actor mapping and intersectionality studies** in Global Gateway sectors, recognising that even EUDs with strong civil society engagement traditions require support in identifying able civic actors in sectors such as transport, pharmaceuticals and digital infrastructure.
- ▶ **Clarify the definition of fragility** and the related eligibility or exclusion of countries in situations of fragility of political estrangement for Global Gateway projects, following the OECD's multidimensional framework and fragility analysis tools of MS (section 2.1.4. on approaches to fragility).
- ▶ **Expand EU International Partnerships/INTPA Academy training programmes** to include both technical and change management support, addressing individual resistance to Global Gateway transformation.
- ▶ **Develop the Global Gateway CSO-LA Advisory Platform** as a hub for EU/MS staff expertise in working on civic space and local democratic governance, including in a Global Gateway context.
- ▶ **Establish peer learning networks**, including between EUDs, to share innovative and successful practices, particularly multi-stakeholder engagement models that bridge private sector, civil society, central and local authority interests.
- ▶ **Set up mechanisms that bridge trade, infrastructure and governance staff** at EU headquarters and EUDs to gain a common understanding of Global Gateway goals and strategy.

For EUDs

- ▶ **Utilise existing institutional tools** - CSO Roadmaps, structured dialogue mechanisms, Youth Sounding Boards, Team Europe coordination, do-no-harm assessments - **to create systematic and inclusive participatory processes** from project design through implementation, which can also involve MS in a TEI-friendly way.
- ▶ **Implement systematic actor mapping and capacity building programmes** that enable civil society (online and offline) to engage with (new) partners including private sector actors, impact investment and guarantee mechanisms.
- ▶ **Establish or strengthen multi-stakeholder platforms** that leverage existing private sector engagement patterns while ensuring these platforms strengthen rather than marginalise civil society participation.
- ▶ **Address complex political contexts such as democratic backsliding proactively through “decidedly Team Europe” approaches** that coordinate diplomatic engagement but also involve local counterparts (e.g. through CSO monitoring) to manage political risks associated with civic space support.

For TED MS

- ▶ **Advocate for inclusive approaches** that maintain civic space and local governance centrality, drawing lessons from successful multi-level engagement models.
- ▶ **Support long-term technical assistance programmes** that systematically build the capacity of civil society, social movements and local authorities for meaningful Global Gateway engagement, recognising that sustained investment in actor knowledge and role definition is more effective than ad hoc consultation processes.
- ▶ **Actively participate in Global Gateway and TEI initiatives in countries**, provide diplomatic backing for EUD innovation while ensuring the Global Gateway represents a ‘partnership of values’ rather than purely transactional arrangements.

3

Team Europe – Entry Points for Joint Action

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EU experience shows that TEIs have successfully promoted closer collaboration, pooled expertise and resources between the Commission, EEAS, EUDs, EU MS and have even included Switzerland and the UK in creating TEI+ opportunities.⁵⁸ Yet, with the notable exception of TED, TEIs and Team Europe approaches remain underutilised for democracy support. This contradicts the need for strengthened coordination amid geopolitical competition, budget cuts and the imperative to ‘stay engaged’ in fragile situations.

This confirms analysis by the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM, a TED Network Member) indicating a lack of overall strategy for coordination at partner country level on civic space, manifesting at both operational and political/diplomatic levels.⁵⁹

This challenge is due to several interconnected elements:

- ▶ The **complexity and high coordination costs** of Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) due to fragmented communication and siloed working methods; an **underestimation of the change management** required for TEIs to shift institutional cultures
- ▶ The tendency toward **rebranding rather than genuine innovation**, with routine coordination labelled as TEIs
- ▶ The **underuse of Team Europe for political leverage**, despite its potential to strengthen joint diplomacy
- ▶ The **sectoral imbalances**, with TEIs concentrated in infrastructure rather than democracy and human rights
- ▶ The growing **resource constraints** that heighten the need for streamlined, strategic coordination: systematic coordination becomes essential rather than optional when resources are constrained.

Overcoming these barriers requires clearer processes, stronger political leadership, genuine joint approaches, and funding modalities aligned with Member States’ realities so that TEIs can fulfil their transformative promise.

Recommendations:

Team Europe should be seen in the context of wider change management issues in EU cooperation. The EU EEA Evaluation confirms that *“managing the transition implied by the new EFIs requires more time, energy and creativity than expected”*. It also found that *“the scope and depth of the transformation process, as well as the inertia of old ways of working, were underestimated.”*⁶⁰

While Team Europe has successfully established the ‘hardware’ of coordination - networks, meetings and frameworks - it has not yet developed the ‘software’ of systematic operational integration that would make Team Europe approaches the default mode, ideally for democracy support programming, rather than an exceptional coordination exercise. This should be done in coordination with the mainstreaming of the Global Gateway, to which Team Europe serves as a strategic institutional tool alongside the EU Civil Society Roadmaps and structured dialogue mechanisms. It can also provide the framework for more flexible joint action particularly in conflict-prone, fragility environments or with marginalised sectors where larger and traditional funding mechanisms are scarce.⁶¹

⁵⁸ The EU EEA Evaluation is clear in its general recommendation that *“despite the increased need for coordination that it imposes (which can be addressed via further simplification of processes, better ways of working, and adequate human resources), the EU should further encourage Team Europe as the default approach of EU foreign and development policy”*, EU EEA Evaluation, p. 69.

⁵⁹ https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/projects/team-europe-democracy-ted_en

⁶⁰ EU EEA Evaluation, p. vii, p. 58

⁶¹ The EU EEA Evaluation is clear in its general recommendation that *“despite the increased need for coordination that it imposes (which can be addressed via further simplification of processes, better ways of working, and adequate human resources), the EU should further encourage Team Europe as the default approach of EU foreign and development policy”*, EU EEA Evaluation, p. 69.

Below are the assignment's **recommendations on how Team Europe can leverage civic space and local democratic governance**:

1. Focus on fragile contexts and flexible grant-based programming:

Team Europe should prioritise rapid-response democracy support mechanisms using flexible grant funding pools to act quickly against democratic and civic space closing or when democratic openings occur. Several TED MS, EUDs and EU procedures, have demonstrated capacity for flexible funding and quick reaction. These efforts should be pooled as much as possible to coordinate optimal responses and ensure that Team Europe or coordinated programming can reflect the joint diplomatic, strategic and programmatic stance of the EU and TED MS, especially in authoritarian contexts.

2. Address local authority partnership challenges:

With funding for local authorities and local democratic governance declining and remaining marginal in EU financing mechanisms, Team Europe should develop specific protocols to support local authorities. This includes creating direct (decentralised) funding mechanisms to overcome the absence of larger instruments. It could also be done through the increase of city-to-city partnerships, including technical assistance components, and with European cities and municipal associations collaborating in a Team Europe approach.

3. Innovate civil society access mechanisms:

Address the funding and administrative barriers identified by developing alternative mechanisms for reaching local CSOs, including the unregistered ones. This could include creating smaller, more flexible grant mechanisms specifically for grassroots organisations; establishing regional intermediary organisations from the pool of MS (e.g. GIZ, Agence Française de Développement/ French Development Agency (AFD), Enabel) that can handle administrative burdens while maintaining direct relationships with local CSOs; developing 'democracy innovation funds' or 'rapid reaction funds' that operate outside traditional procurement processes; and piloting direct-transfer mechanisms that reduce bureaucratic overhead for small-scale civic space protection.

4. Leverage Global Gateway opportunities:

Align democracy support programming with the Global Gateway and broader EU investment strategies, developing integrated approaches that embed democratic governance and MS thematic envelopes within Global Gateway flagship projects, while consolidating values-based cooperation.

5. Strengthen evidence-based programming and institutional memory:

To address knowledge gaps, Team Europe coordination mechanisms should establish more systematic learning from successful country-level experiences and strengthen EUD capacities in context and political economy analysis to support context-specific understanding and programming. The findings from this assignment, together with the TED online knowledge platform⁶² and the planned TED training series represent significant steps in this direction.

6. Simplification of Team Europe coordination and communication:

Address the complexity of coordination and communication gaps by mapping initiatives and thematic focus of EU and TED MS in countries. Recognise the ecosystem of actors involved in Team Europe at all levels, including headquarters (different ministries, units/DGs), EUDs and embassies/diplomatic representations. Develop partnership models to structure and formalise Team Europe cooperation more systematically, including with like-minded partners. Identify ways to enhance communication and information sharing throughout the entire cycle of Team Europe consultations, coordination and implementation at country level. Make Team Europe more effective by merging parallel workstreams, developing communication flows, cut bureaucratic red tape, and have the EUD take the lead in a certain country. Establish a more effective and systematic reporting mechanism and feedback loops to track coordination and potential TEIs.

7. Operational integration over coordination expansion:

Efforts should move beyond coordination/dialogue to joint implementation with shared risk and responsibility. The TED Network Annual Meetings in June 2024 and September 2025 emphasised the need for pragmatism and operationalisation, with democracy practitioners calling for concrete actions that break silos, enhance collaboration and link global actions to local implementation and ownership. There is an urgent need to be “deliverable and concrete in approaches” rather than expanding coordination or network structures without demonstrable added value at country level.⁶³ Advance planning mechanisms should enable MS with multi-year budget allocations to factor in Team Europe/TEI opportunities into funding cycles. A clearer definition is needed to distinguish between traditional in-country coordination among EUDs and MS and unlabelled co-funding arrangements on the one hand, and formal and clearly branded and communicated TEIs on the other.

⁶² https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/projects/team-europe-democracy-ted_en

⁶³ Team Europe Democracy (TED) Network, “Summary Booklet: Team Europe Democracy (TED) Network Annual Meeting, 13/14 June, Brussels”, 13-14 June 2024, pages 1 and 13.

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Comments are welcome and can be sent to
Geoffrey Weichselbaum (gweichselbaum@gmail.com) and
Tim Bittiger (t.bittiger@democracy-reporting.org)



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