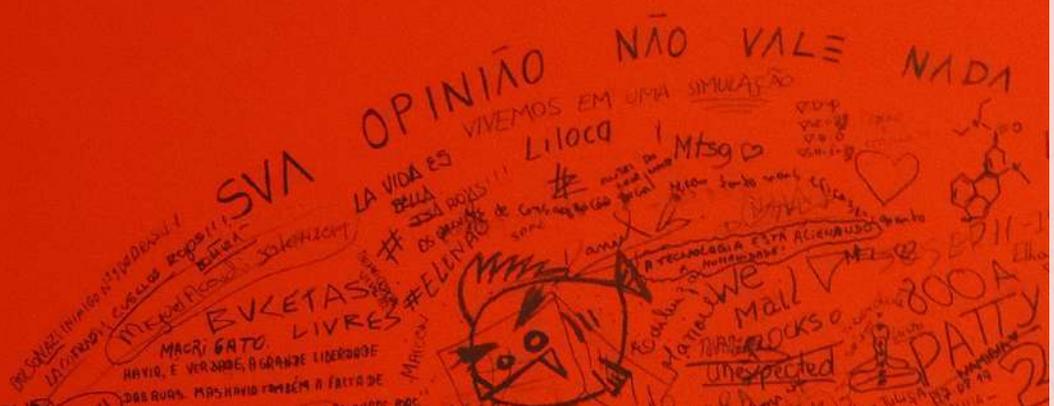


A Scoping Study of CSO Platforms' Experiences In Promoting an Enabling Environment

HOW CAN WE BEST PROMOTE AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AROUND THE WORLD?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are crucial actors in promoting peaceful inclusive societies through sustainable people-centred development. They amplify peoples' voices in policy dialogue, pioneer innovation, and directly engage local communities and constituencies in seeking transformative change. Yet over the past decade, their work and its impact have been deeply affected by increasing restrictions on CSO operations and the targeting of human rights defenders and environmentalists. CSOs have been subject to systematic harassment, legal and regulatory restrictions and stigmatization and personal attacks, all in a climate of growing authoritarianism, fear and intimidation. Alongside the growth of restrictive measures, civil society has been campaigning to defend its legitimate space in society in various ways. Yet the crisis in governance, reflected in challenges to democratic norms and closing civic space, continues to unfold, further impacted by emergency responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

National CSO development platforms everywhere around the world have become prominent and important development actors at country, regional and global levels. In some countries they have played active roles in addressing civic space issues and their impacts. In other countries there is growing need for more attention, analysis and action by CSOs (and others) on conditions affecting their enabling environment.



FORUS SCOPING STUDY

Forus, a global network of 68 national CSO platforms and 7 regional coalitions, supports efforts to improve the enabling conditions for CSOs in partnership with its members and allies. **Forus commissioned a scoping study on international and national experiences to identify recommendations on how national and regional coalitions, and Forus itself, can best promote a CSO enabling environment in countries around the world.**

Based on a systematic literature review, online survey and 27 interviews with Forus members and allies, this paper examines the current status of CSO experiences and strategies, in particular of CSO national platforms, to promote an enabling environment. The report reviews three key aspects of the CSO enabling environment:

- 1 Legal and regulatory issues, including the digital environment
- 2 Space for effective and inclusive policy dialogue, including CSO diversity, roles and effectiveness; and
- 3 Resources, capacities and partnerships, including narratives to address the stigmatization and marginalization of CSOs despite being legitimate development actors in their own right.



FINDINGS

This report presents a wide range of evidence from the literature, interviews and the survey of Forus members. **The study confirms much of what is already known about civic space and the enabling environment:**

- Civil society continues to face increasing restrictions with Southern stakeholders encountering levels of restriction that are more pronounced, involving extra-legal action and affecting a varied range of CSOs, particularly human rights defenders, environmentalists and women's rights organizations.
- Current Institutional mechanisms are insufficient to ensure an enabling environment for civil society, whether in terms of addressing impunity and redress for attacks on civil society, ensuring implementation of laws and regulations supportive of civil society, or facilitating effective and inclusive policy dialogue.
- Formal and informal collaboration between coalitions, NGOs, social movements and groups that represent marginalized communities still requires strengthening to develop shared agendas and approaches to challenging disabling conditions and attacks on different types of organizations.

NEW INSIGHTS

The study also offers several new insights.

While more is needed from donors to improve support for CSO promotion of an enabling environment, the study points to a shift that may be emerging in terms of official donor and foundation support with more donors keen to understand trends related to **closing civic space, willing to examine enabling environment issues in their regular relationships with CSO partners, and with more philanthropic donors providing direct support to organizations that specifically tackle enabling environment issues.** Nevertheless, there is a need for CSOs to continue to make the case for direct support related to civic space.

Research findings also highlight a call to reconsider the needs of CSOs and their coalitions, and for a shift away from a dominant focus on the provision of capacity development towards more nuanced kinds of support. **Although national platforms may need to develop further capacity (e.g. requiring training, developing skills), what they often seek is rapid financial and diplomatic support to deal with dire situations, access to spaces of influence for more effective policy engagement, and support to build informal and formal relationships with allies both inside and outside of government at local, national and global levels.** There is opportunity for Forus to harness connections from national to global levels and support peer learning and partnerships between its membership and external allies, including donors. Opportunities for engagement between global, regional and national platforms and coalitions should be premised on mutual partnerships and solidarity, although the unbalanced relationships between organizations in terms of capacities and means is still an important factor to be considered. **Supporting CSOs and platforms to access North-South, South-South and peer learning opportunities as well as local expertise is critical given the context-specific nature of work in this area.** External experts and resources can be helpful, but **most countries benefit most from local lawyers and advocates that have been working on civic space and enabling environment issues over the long term.**

While this report's findings validate existing research on the enabling environment, they also offer important nuance throughout. The report's orientation towards the roles of national and regional coalitions offers a fresh perspective on enabling environment issues, though it should be noted that recommendations for CSOs (more generally), donors and allies are presented throughout. These recommendations can inform the work of CSOs willing to develop specific programming, while some recommendations are more central to the mandate of national platforms, taking advantage of their unique place within local and national CSO politics. As organizations that are knowledgeable about in-country priorities and able to liaise with a broad range of players (e.g. members, state and non-state actors), Forus members are pivotal CSO coalitions. They should build on their strengths and the spaces they already occupy. Forus can play a role in supporting its members' efforts and in identifying trends to assist its members to engage on current issues and upcoming ones. While no progress can be achieved without close collaboration among diverse stakeholders and CSOs, here we highlight key recommendations to inform the work of Forus' members and Forus going forward.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CSO NATIONAL PLATFORMS

To create an enabling environment for civil society, it is essential that the roles of CSOs and their initiatives is strengthened. This includes broadening networks and coalitions so that those most affected by disabling conditions can find support in their efforts to address the most pressing enabling environment issues. This will include drawing on experience and technical knowledge from legal experts, deepening long term advocacy campaigns, strengthening positive narratives to counter stigmatization of specific CSOs and defending space for women's rights organizations, human rights defenders, environmentalists and others subject to targeted attacks by governments and others.

Going forward, actions to promote a more open civic space and a more enabling environment for civil society should consider a number of key areas, where national and regional platforms may have comparative advantages. Such advantages include a diverse membership, significant in-country knowledge and expertise, and understanding of priority issues at the local and regional levels. Moreover, platforms are well positioned to establish relationships with the governments and to liaise with non-state actors that are part of broader local networks.

REVIEW AND ADDRESS LEGAL AND REGULATORY RESTRICTIONS

There is a need for regular review and redress related to legal and regulatory restrictions and practices affecting civil society to ensure compliance with international human rights standards and respect for the rights of marginalized populations. These efforts require dedicated medium- and long-term strategies for alliance building, awareness raising (e.g. digital rights, laws and regulations), and consistent leadership from dedicated CSOs. CSO coalitions can draw on the experience of well-established good practice law and regulations as well as local expertise in assessing their local enabling conditions and ways to address constraints on CSO formation and operations.



ADVOCATE FOR INSTITUTIONALIZED AND INCLUSIVE POLICY DIALOGUE

Inclusive approaches to development are essential to progress the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which sets out a transformative plan to promote shared prosperity, environmental sustainability and progress that leaves no one behind. CSOs should continue to advocate for institutionalized mechanisms for dialogue, and less reliance on ad hoc opportunities designed by government alone. Institutionalized spaces must involve the direct participation of diverse civil society from the local to the national level, including marginalized and affected groups in society, based on well-established good practices. These include ensuring dialogue is timely, open and inclusive, transparent, informed, structured for the exchange of views on important and contested issues and iterative. Forus' members are national development platforms with strong representativity, which places them in a good position to lead many of these processes. Where feasible, policy dialogue should include issues relating to CSO enabling environment, recognizing that an enabling environment underpins opportunities for collective impact on the realization of the 2030 Agenda and the ability of civil society to contribute effectively.

CALL ON DONORS TO LOCALIZE AND STRENGTHEN OFFICIAL AND INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION DONOR PARTNERSHIPS

National, regional and global CSO platforms should encourage all donors to dedicate political leadership to the issues of civic space and enabling environment at the highest level. Donors should take all necessary measures to safeguard and promote open civic space. This should be an overarching aspect of foreign policy and of donors' efforts towards development cooperation to realize the 2030 Agenda. Inter alia, CSOs should encourage donors to follow the lead of local civil society to support enabling conditions in different country contexts, implement appropriate, substantial and responsive funding mechanisms for local CSOs and work with local CSOs and their networks, allies and like-minded donors to promote enabling laws and regulations and inclusive policy dialogue.



PROMOTE COALITION BUILDING IN CHALLENGING AND CLOSING CIVIC SPACE

In tackling CSO enabling environments and closing civic space, CSOs and their representative platforms should build capacities and mechanisms for collaborating across different sectors and with civil society grass roots movements, including women's rights organizations and other human rights defenders. CSO platforms should always resist and counter government strategies to divide "good" from "bad" CSOs. In doing so, they should deliberately focus on sustained collaboration among all civil society actors, particularly between those working in development (both service providers and development actors) and CSOs working on human rights and highly contested social justice issues. CSOs platforms should harness connections with donors and allies, including champions in the government, mandated human rights bodies and other relevant justice departments. Moreover, opportunities exist for CSOs to better harness linkages to relevant United Nations bodies and specialized CSOs and research institutions. Such organizations can help to champion local and national challenges as well as provide technical support and expertise. Linkages to United Nations bodies can support CSOs to raise awareness of violations to human rights and closing civic space.

ADDRESS RISK AND CSO SECURITY ISSUES

CSOs and their representative platforms should seek donor support to strengthen long-term security and resilience for CSOs and human rights defenders by investing in CSO measures for legal protection, data protection, accounting and auditing skills and good governance practices. CSO platforms and donors should support local capacities to analyze organizational and individual risk, while prioritizing the security of civil society actors most at risk. Moreover, CSOs should work with allies to improve knowledge and capacities in legal, juridical and security areas in ways that strengthen citizens' understanding and access to their digital rights.



ENHANCE CSO LEGITIMACY BY INVESTING IN NEW NARRATIVES FOR AND ABOUT CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMONSTRATE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

CSOs, through their representative platforms, should put in place initiatives and adopt quality assurance standards that demonstrate accountability to immediate (country-level) stakeholders and robust transparency in their activities. As development actors in their own right, such standards are an integral part of a CSO counter-narrative. In strengthening their accountability with local constituencies, CSOs build stronger links with citizens reinforcing narratives that resonate with the concerns of ordinary people, not just professional CSOs. These values are expressed through the [Istanbul Principles for CSO Development Effectiveness](#) and are reflected in CSO actions to engage citizens in their own development, and most particularly in their responses to unique challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, CSOs and their networks should develop media engagement skills to project positive CSO stories and ensure media access to promote the protection of vulnerable organizations, individuals or communities. CSOs can collaborate through networks to sustain contacts with credible national and international media outlets on an ongoing basis. CSOs, platforms and allies should experiment with new narratives for and about civil society that strengthen respect for, and an understanding of, the value of civil society.

SUPPORT NATIONAL EFFORTS THROUGH INTERNATIONAL CSO PLATFORMS

International platforms can support peer learning processes among CSOs affected by enabling environment challenges across relevant countries, including developing appropriate research skills, capacities to design legal, political and publicity strategies. They can facilitate linkages with regional platforms, international CSO allies, technical support and linkages with specialized CSOs, capacity-building opportunities, relations with sympathetic allies within bilateral donors, and engagement with relevant multilateral processes. The work with international allies can lift up the voices of those within countries (including and beyond national platforms) to expose and put pressure on situations where civic space/enabling environment is at risk, and where local CSOs have less space to do so. They should give particular attention to South-South learning experiences, solidarity actions and the sharing of skilled human resources, in addressing the growing challenges in the most severely affected countries. For their part, CSO platforms should invest in building relationships with other organizations at the national, regional and global levels to promote coalition building, create synergies and avoid duplication.

UNDERPIN EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT WITH LONG-TERM INVESTMENTS IN CSO CAPACITIES AND RESILIENCE

As shown above, CSO platforms can adopt a diverse range of strategies and approaches to promoting an enabling environment, depending on highly contextual needs. Nevertheless, this work requires dedicated investment in soliciting the right kinds of support, developing appropriate capacities in a range of areas related to legal and regulatory reform, CSO security issues, digital rights and laws, policy dialogue, advocacy and communications, fundraising and network building. The current global context and increasing forces driving the closure of civic space suggest that such CSO platforms and their supporters should be ready and enabled to make the necessary long-term investments that strengthen their resilience and that of their members to pursue their missions in hostile operating environments. Resilience is multifaceted and specific areas where efforts are needed are outlined in the report across all three areas of analysis (legal and regulatory issues, space for effective and inclusive policy dialogue, and resources, capacities and partnerships).

Finally, CSOs should take measures to strengthen their resilience with capacities not only to survive but also to pursue their missions in hostile operating environments over the long term. Resilience is multifaceted and specific areas where efforts are needed are outlined in the report.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FORUS

While the recommendations outlined above are relevant for national, regional and global CSO networks, among others, the scoping study included a specific focus on the roles of Forus and the contributions it can make to supporting an enabling environment.

Forus should develop an overarching strategy and action plan to support its members, driven by its members' interests in promoting an enabling environment.

The action plan should be informed by inputs from external partners and allies. Linkages exist between the views of external specialists and Forus' members in terms of how Forus can leverage its position as a champion of civic space and enabling environment. For example, stakeholders engaged in the scoping study agree on the importance of taking direction from local stakeholders knowledgeable of the reality on the ground and doing so in synergy with allies.

As detailed further in the conclusion of this report, these efforts should be guided by four pillars, to be developed further in consultation with allies and the Forus membership, including 1) advocacy leadership, 2) facilitated access to demand-driven learning exchanges and resources, 3) peer learning and 4) fundraising support. Key elements that could be included in each pillar are outlined below.





ADVOCACY LEADERSHIP

Building on core principles guiding CSO actions (e.g. equality, justice, women’s empowerment, democracy), work with members to improve CSO mobilization to advocate together for areas of common interest, and contribute to global advocacy efforts on behalf of members, collaborating with other global allies in civil society.

- Build bottom-up consensus among membership on framing key issues, such as equality, inclusion, justice, gender, democracy to serve as the basis for advocacy, and on the role of CSOs in a COVID-19 environment
- Raise awareness through exchanges on key issues for members • Contribute to global advocacy proposals to improve the enabling environment at the country level
- Liaise closely at all stages with global allies to ensure constructive synergies for Forus civic space program initiatives with global civil society allies
- Provide advocacy for resource mobilization, and provide workshops/events related to resource mobilization advocacy
- Support members to engage with United Nations bodies, and establish forums at the regional level
- Support the emergence of women’s leadership for advocacy work within membership



LEARNING EXCHANGES AND RESOURCES

Enhance CSOs’ skills and strategies in different areas (e.g. legal and regulatory tools, advocacy and communications, fundraising, engagement on the 2030 Agenda, organizational resilience) through demand-led support for Forus members, considering the use of “train-the-trainer” models and the accessing of local capacities and skills for learning exchanges. Share existing resources with members that support their efforts to monitor their own enabling environment and carry out research and comparative studies.



TOPICS FOR LEARNING EXCHANGES INCLUDE:

- General learning exchanges on the enabling environment
- Legal and regulatory tools for members to be able to fight back disabling environments
- Helping members identify synergies in reporting between different agendas related to the enabling environment such as the SDGs, enabling environment principles, international standards and best practices
- Capacity to engage in Voluntary National Review / 2030 Agenda implementation, supporting membership to be able to train their own members, and build up national coalitions
- Building dialogue and efforts with others, such as social movements and other NGOs
- Communication skills and capacities including for advocacy and strategies against stigmatization
- Issues of power, gender equality and women's leadership (withing CSOs and in politics) in promoting a civil society enabling environment at the country, regional and global level • Fundraising and proposal writing
- Management and organizational sustainability, and advocacy capacity
- Digitization for democracy
- Training efforts should also use the "train the trainer" model, with a focus on Forus members. Training should be channelled to members' members to assist them in advocating for civic space in the countries where they work
- Forus, in dialogue with global and regional allies, could facilitate identification of skilled resource people at the country/regional level and support their engagement in addressing identifiable needs in the membership

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT:

- Access to tools (many of which already exist) to help national coalitions assess the situation of CSOs in their countries
- Support platforms' research projects and research in areas such as comparative studies and the impacts of COVID-19 on women and resources to support women's leadership among Forus members
- Send / facilitate exchanges of resource people



PEER LEARNING

Deepen partnerships between Forus member platforms in different countries, facilitate the exchange of knowledge (e.g. case studies, good practices, strategies), enhance connections among peers of same regions/in similar situations and create networks of international solidarity.

- Create and deepen relationships between peers who can learn from each other by enhancing networking, providing South-South and North-South learning opportunities and establishing peer learning possibilities at the regional level and other mechanisms for peer-to-peer exchange
- Provide opportunities for peer learning and exchange to support women's leadership in member and their membership
- Share case studies, information, good practices and studies on specific subjects, such as the SDGs
- Have country-specific web pages for international solidarity on Forus' website



FUNDRAISING

Support members in identifying fundraising opportunities, advocate for funds for CSOs for this area of work and mobilize resources accessible to members.

- Organize and contribute to advocacy for fundraising and resource mobilization to support members to implement lessons learned
- Direct members to fundraising opportunities and donors likely to fund projects focused on enabling environment issues
- Establish related programs with a global vision for the enabling environment



forus CONNECT
SUPPORT
INFLUENCE

Forus, previously known as the International Forum of National NGO Platforms (IFP/FIP), is a member-led network of 69 National NGO Platforms and 7 Regional Coalitions from all continents representing over 22,000 NGOs active locally and internationally on development, human rights and environmental issues.



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