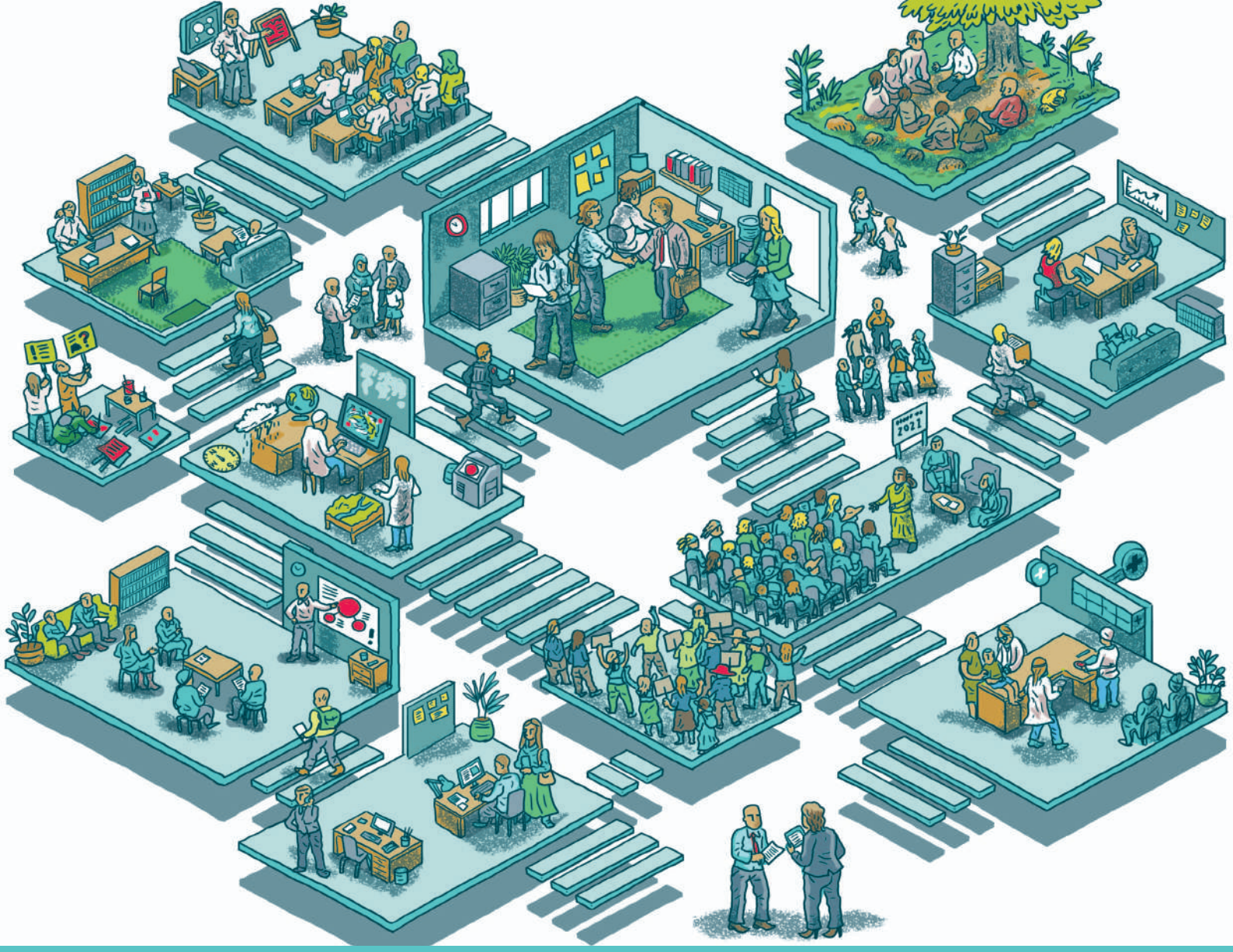


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strengthening the enabling environment *for civil society* EVIDENCE AND PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

A Forus perspective on the next stage of implementation for the OECD-DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society

September 2026

forus CONNECT SUPPORT INFLUENCE



Executive summary

1. Context: a rapidly changing civic space environment

CIVIL SOCIETY is operating in an increasingly constrained and complex global environment. Across regions, organisations face a combination of restrictive laws, administrative burdens, shrinking and more conditional funding, digital surveillance and harassment, as well as increasing public narratives that question civil society's legitimacy. At the same time, the development cooperation landscape is undergoing significant change. Aid budgets are under pressure, geopolitical priorities are shifting, and development finance is increasingly shaped by security agendas, private sector engagement, and multilateral restructuring. These dynamics are directly affecting the space in which civil society operates.

In this context, the OECD-DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society (2021) is more relevant now than ever. The five-year review provides an important basis for the next phase of implementation: moving from broad commitments to more practical action that strengthens civil society's ability to operate safely, independently and effectively.

This report offers a Forus perspective grounded in the network's own experience, gathered through eight Thinking Rooms with members across Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America, the MENA region and Europe; a multilingual member survey; and a final workshop. It also draws on existing monitoring data, including from the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) from across 86 countries and wider civil society evidence assembled for the OECD-DAC five-year review.

It explores how civil society has experienced the implementation of the three pillars of the Recommendation and situates this in the broader civic space context they face. The evidence is organised according to the six interrelated enabling-environment dimensions: fundamental freedoms; legal and regulatory frameworks; resources and funding; an open and responsive state; public discourse and narratives; and a secure digital environment.

2. Key findings from the research



CIVIL SOCIETY RESTRICTIONS ARE CUMULATIVE, MULTI-DIMENSIONAL AND INTERCONNECTED.
Legal and administrative constraints, funding pressures, digital repression, and delegitimising narratives increasingly reinforce each other, producing a cumulative shrinking of civic space even where formal rights remain in place.



ENABLING ENVIRONMENT RISKS ARE OFTEN INDIRECT AND UNDER-RECOGNISED.
A significant proportion of restrictions arise through "grey-zone" measures such as registration requirements, foreign funding controls, counter-terrorism and anti-money laundering rules, tax and reporting obligations, and digital governance regulations. These are often treated as technical issues despite their cumulative impact on civic space.



FUNDING SHOCKS ARE NOW A STRUCTURAL CIVIC SPACE RISK.
Recent abrupt funding reductions, including the 2025 freeze of US assistance, have had severe consequences. 67% of surveyed CSOs reported direct impact, and 40% lost between a quarter and half of their budgets[1]. Human rights and democracy organisations were most affected. These shocks transfer risk to local actors and weaken institutional capacity.



EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS MAKE A DIFFERENCE.
The evidence gathered through early warning systems that have been created in several countries has already had a concrete impact by enabling CSOs to prepare for and mitigate oncoming restrictions by anticipating impact of legislation and preparing for it, by accessing information to mitigate or secure adjustments to laws and policies, before they are implemented.

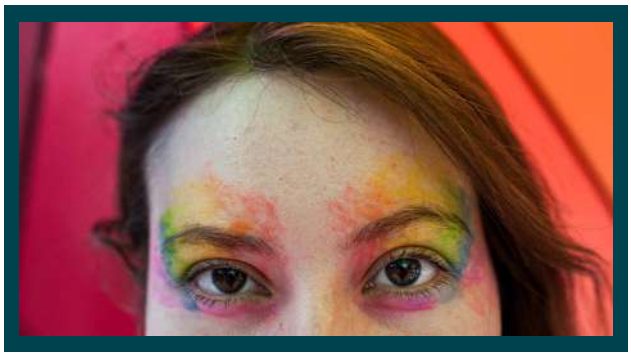
1 **Source:** https://eusee.hivos.org/document/the-impact-of-the-us-funding-freeze-on-civil-society/

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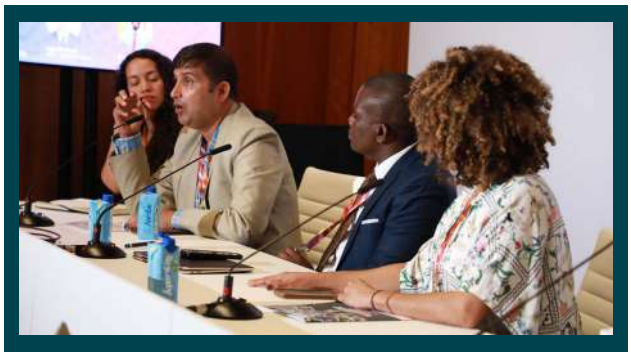
2. Key findings from the research



THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT IS A FRONTLINE CIVIC SPACE ARENA.
Surveillance, internet shutdowns, platform restrictions, and misuse of cyber and online safety laws are increasingly deployed to constrain civic space, while policy responses remain fragmented and slow.



DELEGITIMISING NARRATIVES ARE A GROWING STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT.
Public attacks and misinformation campaigns are frequently used to undermine civil society legitimacy and prepare the ground for formal restrictions.



THE CENTRAL GAP IS BETWEEN COMMITMENT TO AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE OECD DAC RECOMMENDATION.
Across all three pillars, civil society recognises policy commitments but reports uneven and often insufficient implementation. Monitoring systems, early action mechanisms, and policy coherence remain underdeveloped.



IMPACTS ARE UNEVEN ACROSS ACTORS.
Women-led, youth-led, Indigenous, disability-led, LGBTQIA+ and grassroots organisations, as well as human rights defenders, environmental actors, and independent media, face disproportionate risk and reduced access to support.

3. Implications of the findings for the DAC Recommendation

For the DAC Recommendation to fulfil its potential to enable civil society it must **move from policy commitment to implementation capability.** The key challenge is no longer the absence of policy frameworks, but the lack of operational mechanisms to translate commitments into coordinated action. This means **using early warning systems that are linked to coordinated early action**, response protocols, and systematic monitoring of civic space risks. It also includes **resourcing civil society adequately**, despite the funding shocks of the recent period. **Digital repression needs to be recognised as a core civic space issue** as technology has been shown to be an accelerator of restrictions on civil society.

Civic space cannot be assessed solely through the existence of formal rights or assessments of a single theme. DAC members need to systematically assess the combined impact of legal, financial, digital, and narrative factors on civil society's ability to operate. The full **enabling environment lens** provides an effective framework to use.

It is critical that DAC members do not withdraw support for enabling civil society at a time of significant geopolitical shifts, weakening of the multilateral system and challenges to civic space. DAC members must continue to engage in this agenda or they risk impacting their existing commitments and values to pluralistic society.

"DAC members need to systematically assess the combined impact of legal, financial, digital, and narrative factors on civil society's ability to operate."



4. Priority areas for DAC action

Based on the evidence, seven priority areas emerge for strengthening the implementation of the Recommendation:

1. ADOPT AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT LENS TO ASSESS IMPACT.

Implementation should be assessed based on whether civil society can operate safely, independently, and effectively, not on whether policies exist. The six-dimensional framework should be embedded in monitoring and decision-making systems.

2. ACT EARLIER AND IN A COORDINATED FASHION.

DAC members should establish early-warning-to-early-action mechanisms with clear triggers and coordinated responses within defined timelines, supported by embassy mandates, joint démarche, quiet diplomacy, emergency legal and protection support, and accelerated or flexible grants.

3. RESOURCE CIVIL SOCIETY TO SUSTAIN INDEPENDENT AND COLLECTIVE ACTION.

Resourcing is part of civic-space protection: protect core funding, make advocacy fundable, and do no harm in transitions**.** Funding systems should prioritise predictable, flexible, multi-year core support, reduce administrative burden, and ensure equitable access for local actors while avoiding risk transfer.

4. TREAT THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT AND DIGITAL REPRESSION AS A CORE CIVIC SPACE ISSUE.

Digital threats should be integrated across all pillars, with stronger responses to surveillance, shutdowns, platform restrictions, and misuse of cyber laws.

5. SUPPORT PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND NARRATIVES THAT PROTECT CIVIL SOCIETY.

DAC members should support positive narratives on civil society and respond to disinformation and smear campaigns that undermine civic space.

6. MEASURE PARTICIPATION BY INFLUENCE, NOT ATTENDANCE.

Participation should be assessed based on influence and feedback loops, not attendance. Civil society input should demonstrably inform policy and funding decisions.

7. STRENGTHEN WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT POLICY COHERENCE.

Civic space commitments must be integrated across development, foreign affairs, trade, security, migration, and digital policy to avoid contradictory impacts.

5. Conclusion

THE OECD-DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society is more relevant now than ever. However, the evidence clearly shows a gap between policy commitments and implementation in practice.

The five-year review provides an important basis for the next phase: ensuring that DAC members are not only committed to enabling civil society in principle, but are equipped to do so in practice in an increasingly complex global environment.

STRENGTHENING THE RECOMMENDATION REQUIRES A SHIFT TOWARD:

- **GREATER OPERATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION CAPACITY**
- **EARLIER AND MORE COORDINATED RESPONSES TO CIVIC SPACE DETERIORATION**
- **ADOPTING THE 6 DIMENSIONS OF THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND IMPACT AND RECOGNISE THE INDIRECT AND SYSTEMIC RESTRICTIONS**
- **STRONGER COHERENCE ACROSS DEVELOPMENT, DIPLOMATIC, AND FINANCIAL SYSTEMS**









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Ce rapport est également disponible en français.
Este informe también está disponible en español.

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