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**Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms**

## **Rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association**

### **Note by the Secretary-General**

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 59/4.

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\* [A/80/150](#).



## **Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero**

### **Freedom of assembly and association rights, collective action and human solidarity facing an existential threat**

#### *Summary*

In the present report, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, sounds the alarm about the compounding existential threats to these rights, exacerbated by the dismantling of global aid and securitization. Urgent concerted action is required, given the importance of these freedoms for human nature and dignity, for rights protection and for the fulfilment of pressing global commitments. The report provides key principles for ensuring a sustainable and just aid architecture that sustains and empowers a vibrant civil society and civic engagement.

## I. Introduction

1. By the end of June 2025, thousands of civil society organizations had been forced to shut down worldwide. Many others are now vanishing, shrinking dramatically or facing profound challenges that are pushing them into transformation, often without the capacity to stay true to the paths envisioned by their members or to fulfil their missions.
2. The important work of civil society is at stake. That work is necessary for responding to the urgent needs of communities and entire population groups and is deeply aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and other global commitments. Its erosion is especially harmful where public institutions fail to act, and where communities already suffer the compounded effects of structural neglect, inequality and violence.
3. The attacks on and dismantling of international aid systems, combined with the intensifying securitization of global agendas, pose a radical and urgent existential threat to fundamental freedoms. This affects not only the survival of civil society organizations, but also the future of international solidarity and collective action. What is unfolding is not merely a funding issue; it is a structural crisis in the international solidarity ecosystem. Civic space is shrinking, not only because of repression, but because the lifelines that kept it alive are deeply challenged. This crisis demands the immediate attention of all stakeholders.
4. The present report is informed by interviews and discussions with various stakeholders and 65 submissions from civil society, regional human rights bodies and States. Submissions from civil society organizations are cited anonymously in order to protect them, considering the hostile civic space climate.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Conceptual framework

### A. Freedom of peaceful assembly and of association: inherent to human nature and dignity

5. The exercise of freedom of peaceful assembly and of association is deeply intertwined with human dignity and deeply rooted in our shared humanity and human nature, grounded on the recognition that all persons are born free and equal in dignity and rights, as reaffirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 1).
6. The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association empower individuals to exercise their autonomy, to preserve and express their identity, to engage and collaborate with others in voicing and pursuing their interests and solving collective problems, to meaningfully participate in society, to hold Governments to account and to empower human agency, all of which are crucial for both the realization and the protection of human dignity. The fundamental principle of human dignity is that everyone has inherent worth and value, regardless of class, race, gender, religion, abilities or any other factor other than their being human.
7. These rights do not originate from or belong to a particular society, culture, region or type of governance. As underscored by a previous mandate holder, “these rights are born from our common human heritage, rooted in the simple fact that every civilization is built upon cooperation and collaboration, from many and not one. It is

<sup>1</sup> See a summary of the submissions at <https://freeassemblyandassociation.net/summary-of-submissions-report-unga-2025/>.

human nature – and human necessity – that people come together to collectively pursue their interests.”<sup>2</sup>

8. When individuals and communities face problems, they come together, organize, mobilize, manage resources and act collectively to seek solutions or defend their interests, and act in solidarity for the common good. Throughout human history, people have joined movements and collective struggles to advance and protect rights, equality, civic and political freedoms and justice, and to resist oppression. Through collective solidarity, the voices of those who are most vulnerable and marginalized have been defended and amplified. Such actions can be cross-border actions and can connect struggles and foster collaboration across different communities and societies. These movements also draw on a shared understanding of human dignity and the value of life, liberty and equality inherent to everyone.

9. The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are also a vehicle for the realization of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights (enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), are essential components of democracy, and enable people to “express their political opinions, engage in ... artistic pursuits ..., engage in religious observances ..., form and join trade unions ..., and elect leaders to represent their interests and hold them accountable.”<sup>3</sup>

10. In recognition of the value and importance of these human necessities, they have been enshrined as rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in core international treaties and conventions.

11. Reconnecting with the roots and purpose of these freedoms allows for a better understanding that, when people are prevented from enjoying those freedoms, they, their communities and society are deeply affected. The essential value of those freedoms underlines the necessity for everyone to protect them.

## **B. Essential role of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in achieving global commitments**

12. The principles of collaboration, inclusion and equity, and the principle “leave no one behind”, are the cornerstones of international commitments and agendas, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Pact for the Future, along with the Global Digital Compact and the Declaration on Future Generations.<sup>4</sup>

13. Adopted by the General Assembly in September 2024, the Pact for the Future is aimed at advancing existing commitments and responding to current and future challenges in areas such as sustainable development, peace and security, technology and global governance. At the same time, in the Pact, the Assembly recognizes the need for cooperation across the whole of society, and identifies civil society as a key partner for delivering on existing commitments and addressing new and emerging challenges. In the Pact, the Assembly commits to protecting civic space and ensuring that individuals and groups engaged in the promotion and protection of human rights and freedoms are protected.

14. Similarly, within the 2030 Agenda itself, civil society is acknowledged as essential to the implementation of the Agenda, with an emphasis on the need to build

<sup>2</sup> See <https://freeassembly.net/about/freedoms/>.

<sup>3</sup> See Human Rights Council resolution 15/21 and A/HRC/20/27.

<sup>4</sup> General Assembly resolution 79/1.

peaceful, just and inclusive societies, and a specific commitment to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in target 16.10.

15. The mandate holders have emphasized that the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are interdependent and indivisible from other human rights, and are essential to effectively implementing the 2030 Agenda, including advancing gender equality (Sustainable Development Goal 5) and climate action (Goal 13). These rights foster broad participation and the inclusion of historically marginalized groups, and empower people and communities to ensure that the 2030 Agenda goals are realized in a just and equitable manner, with inclusion, transparency and accountability.

16. The global peace and security agenda – particularly the commitments relating to the youth and peace and security agenda and the women and peace and security agenda – emphasizes the inclusion of marginalized groups at all levels of peace and security processes, including peace negotiations, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are also crucial for upholding the purposes and principles of human rights, democracy and international peace set out in the Charter of the United Nations.

### **III. Existential threats to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association**

#### **A. Context: a global aid architecture in urgent need of reform**

17. The international development agenda is ambitious, and the challenges are growing. Adequate funding is urgently needed in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals; “only 17 per cent of the [Sustainable Development Goals] targets are on track, nearly half are showing minimal or moderate progress, and progress on over one third has stalled or even regressed”.<sup>5</sup> In 2024, the United Nations identified key actions required to accelerate efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals on time. These actions relate to: (a) peace (the need to resolve ongoing armed conflicts through dialogue and diplomacy and prevent future conflicts by upholding the Charter); (b) solidarity (the need for more financial resources and fiscal space for developing countries, and reform of the outdated, dysfunctional and unfair international financial architecture); and (c) a surge in implementation (the need for massive investment and more effective partnerships).<sup>6</sup>

18. Today, the limited progress made is threatening to unravel: violent armed conflicts and genocides are increasing in scope and intensity, and financing for development is plummeting, while key actors, such as civil society and multilateral institutions, are heavily endangered; States are backsliding on their obligations; and key opportunities to ensure pressing reforms and reaffirm commitments, such as the once-in-a-decade Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, have fallen short.<sup>7</sup>

19. Development finance institutions continue to pour billions into infrastructure and economic projects in countries with closed civic space, turning a blind eye to the shrinking ability of civil society to participate or provide oversight. From 2019 to 2023, 13 development banks financed 1,058 projects in 18 such countries, with total

<sup>5</sup> See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.reuters.com/business/finance/civil-society-leaves-un-development-summit-feeling-unheard-2025-07-04/](http://www.reuters.com/business/finance/civil-society-leaves-un-development-summit-feeling-unheard-2025-07-04/).

funding of at least \$88 billion.<sup>8</sup> Without civic participation, these investments risk being lost in authoritarianism, corruption and worsening inequality, thus increasing needs for international foreign aid.

20. Access to local development budgets for civil society work is increasingly limited and deliberately restricted. Rising debt levels and high interest rates, which have a significant impact on developing countries, are forcing Governments to prioritize debt repayments over vital development projects. Corruption remains widespread, is detrimental to the fair distribution of resources and development opportunities, undermines the rule of law and inclusive governance reforms, and is exacerbated by the co-option of States by political and economic power-holders that prioritize private interest over the public good.

21. The role of civil society in supporting the advancement of the 2030 Agenda, and often even in covering for Governments that are failing in their responsibilities (including the responsibilities to provide vital services and protect freedoms and rights) is well documented.<sup>9</sup> Access to financial resources has empowered civil society to effectively contribute to realizing the 2030 Agenda,<sup>10</sup> but the current attack on the global aid ecosystem is preventing civil society from playing its essential role.

22. The global aid ecosystem and architecture have been far from perfect; their failures, coupled with the entrenched structural fragility of civil society, have created overdependence on certain types of donors and grants, which is now taking its toll, seriously affecting the very existence of civil society and the possibility of achieving the 2030 Agenda.

23. International funding has increasingly become the only option and lifeline for independent civil society work on democracy, social and environmental justice, human rights and anti-corruption, as States have instrumentalized local funding to co-opt and control civil society, providing funding to those actors aligned with government agendas. In the past decade, the mandate holders have documented and warned about the systematic and increased steps taken by States to unduly restrict and control the ability of associations to seek, receive or utilize funding, including by imposing undue legal restrictions, which have led to increasing overregulation and the financial exclusion of critical civil society organizations.

24. There have been long-standing calls to reform the global aid architecture so as to ensure a sustainable, equitable and just aid regime that truly leaves no one behind and empowers civil society. The key areas set out below have been identified.

25. The fact that funding to local associations is predominantly short-term and tied to specific projects has undermined the sustainability, growth and resilience of those associations and their ability to respond to evolving needs. This has often forced associations to respond to donor priorities rather than to community needs and has made them vulnerable to aid cuts and changing priorities.

26. Pushed by donor requirements and excessive national registration and reporting regulations, established civil society organizations have become overprofessionalized. This creates, in some cases, a growing disconnect with the local communities that such organizations aim to serve, and makes it difficult to gain the understanding, trust and support of the public, all of which is further fuelled by growing populism and anti-civil society or anti-rights rhetoric.

<sup>8</sup> See [https://accountabilityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Financing-Repression-ENG\\_compressed.pdf](https://accountabilityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Financing-Repression-ENG_compressed.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> See A/HRC/35/28 and A/HRC/41/41/Add.2.

<sup>10</sup> See A/73/279.

27. Decision-making in aid design and agenda-setting remains concentrated in international organizations and donors; this is indicative of an entrenched power imbalance. People from the global South and marginalized communities remain widely excluded from decision-making, and inclusion initiatives have often been tokenistic.

28. The increased complexity of distribution of aid through intermediaries, in many cases for-profit institutions, increases the burden of local organizations, which have to comply with the priorities and requirements of both the donor and the intermediary, hence limiting their agency to make decisions about their own work and how they can best serve the needs of their communities.

29. The United Nations, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other intermediaries, as the largest implementers of international aid, have become competitors to local civil society organizations, including for resources, and at times have disregarded the voices of local civil society for the purpose of prioritizing the retention of access to the country concerned, which in effect has undermined the rights and efforts of local associations.

30. Current aid practices are perceived as reinforcing the global power imbalance, prompting a global call to address entrenched colonial and patriarchal dynamics in decision-making and distribution, ensure aid is restorative and shift towards a more inclusive and participatory system. Grassroots activists have highlighted that the internationally dominated humanitarian aid system and its “colonial mindset” ignore local cultural and contextual knowledge and experience, and greater legitimacy with communities. It is emphasized that local civil society sets the agenda, as it has a better understanding of the problems and the appropriate solutions.

31. Commitments to “localizing” aid remain, as funding is largely inaccessible for local associations and affected communities, particularly for marginalized organizations. Commitments to provide 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local actors as directly as possible (such as commitments by the now extinct United States Agency for International Development) have not been fulfilled. United Nations agencies, funds and programmes remain the biggest aid recipients in 2025, accounting for 54 per cent of aid received, followed by international NGOs at 23 per cent.<sup>11</sup> In the first quarter of 2025, national and local civil society organizations received less than 1 per cent of global humanitarian funding; in 2024, it was less than 2 per cent (with national NGOs and civil society organizations receiving most of the funding). This applies across all sectors; for example, “less than 10 per cent of international climate finance reaches the local level and smallholder farmers, who are the most vulnerable to climate disruptions, receive a meagre 1.7 per cent of climate finance, covering only a small fraction of their losses”.<sup>12</sup>

32. Often, private donors and philanthropists support only primary welfare-based actions, including actions relating to education or health, as they are considered “safe” and avoid involvement in causes perceived as politically contentious, including human rights and diversity agendas.

33. States are required to dedicate sufficient funding and facilitate access to resources to ensure an enabling environment for the exercise of the right to freedom of association. The right to freely seek, receive and use financial and other resources – from domestic, foreign and international sources – is an integral part of, and is protected under, the right to freedom of association, and is “essential to the existence

<sup>11</sup> See [https://fts.unocha.org/sites/default/files/reports/FTS%20Monthly%20Report\\_April%202025.pdf](https://fts.unocha.org/sites/default/files/reports/FTS%20Monthly%20Report_April%202025.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> A/HRC/59/51, para. 3.

and effective operations of any association”.<sup>13</sup> The right of access to resources is also protected with regard to the right to peaceful assembly and includes “participants’ or organizers’ mobilization of resources”, which constitutes an activity “integral to making the exercise meaningful”.<sup>14</sup>

## **B. Ongoing and evolving fundamental threats**

34. The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association have been subjected to intensified and expanding global attacks – legal, physical, financial and digital repression, including stigmatization and criminalization – which undermine and erode their essence and threaten to reverse established legal protections. Across all regions, Governments are resorting to more intrusive and aggressive tactics to deliberately prevent and deter people from exercising their freedoms, especially when they are challenging or voicing disagreement with government policies, demanding accountability, revealing corruption and defending rights and freedoms. These tactics have included raids and unlawful dissolutions of associations, increased police violence to curtail non-violent protests, arbitrary detentions, and expansive unlawful surveillance. The endemic impunity for violations has generated an ongoing cycle of repression, legitimizing States’ abusive tactics. A previous mandate holder stressed the urgency of preserving the gains made and ensuring the protection of these rights.<sup>15</sup>

35. States are expanding the adoption and misuse of repressive laws to silence civil society and to prevent collective activism and solidarity. Measures to counter terrorism and violent extremism are widely used, triggering intrusive police powers, surveillance, arbitrary detention, transnational repression, dissolutions, criminalization of associations and entire movements, and the freezing of bank accounts and assets.<sup>16</sup> States continue to misuse the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force, which relate to money-laundering and the financing of terrorism, disregarding the required risk-based approach.<sup>17</sup>

36. Weaponizing “foreign agent”/“foreign influence”-type laws, States have broadened restrictions and tightened control over civil society’s participation and access to resources. This remains a great concern, as such laws are detrimental to the survival of independent civil society and civic activism.<sup>18</sup> As has been documented, these laws, even if not passed, adopted or enforced, have posed a fundamental threat to civil society, silencing and dismantling it, due to the stigmatizing label of “foreign agent” linked to the foreign origin of funding or other benefits received or used, and because of the heavy sanctions, criminalization and dissolution imposed for non-compliance. States have started disguising “foreign agent”-type restrictions as “lobbying” laws (Slovakia)<sup>19</sup> to evade international scrutiny; although they have thereby avoided using the “foreign agent” label, the objective and effect remain to reduce the space and ability of civil society organizations to engage in public participation. “Foreign agent”-type laws are also conflated with money-laundering and counter-terrorism financing frameworks, enabling more intrusive restrictions; foreign funded activities that contribute to democratic debate are portrayed as threats

<sup>13</sup> See [A/HRC/23/39](#) and [A/HRC/50/23](#).

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 37 (2020).

<sup>15</sup> See [A/HRC/56/50](#).

<sup>16</sup> Communications TUR 5/2024, DEU 7/2024, GBR 15/2024, GBR 7/2025, ITA 7/2024, CIV 1/2025 and PHL 3/2024.

<sup>17</sup> Communication ZWE 2/2024.

<sup>18</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/association/statements/2024-09-13-statement-sr-foaa.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/association/statements/2024-09-13-statement-sr-foaa.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Urgent Opinion No. NGO/SVK/540/2025, 25 April 2025.



to national sovereignty (Hungary).<sup>20</sup> Under the Criminal Code of Cuba, activists can be punished as “mercenaries” for receiving foreign aid, while a warning alone can be used to justify incarceration.

37. Activism in support of gender equality and of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) persons is facing, in particular, growing intolerance, arbitrary and discriminatory bans, criminalization, and harassment and attacks by police and anti-rights groups, enabled by increased rhetoric against LGBTQI rights and political rhetoric.

38. The Special Rapporteur reiterates the harmful impact of stigmatization, whereby legitimate civic activism is mischaracterized as criminal, and the link between stigmatization and repression, including the adoption of repressive laws, the criminalization of activism, repressive police tactics and the undermining of accountability. She also reiterates the deep chilling impact of stigmatization, which stifles civic activism and participation.<sup>21</sup>

### C. Emerging existential threats

39. The unprecedented cuts in international aid have left the global human rights and development architecture in deep uncertainty, posing an existential threat to the entire civic space ecosystem and threatening to unravel decades of achievements and jeopardize human rights<sup>22</sup> and humanitarian efforts, thereby leaving millions who are dependent on humanitarian needs at risk and leading to millions of preventable deaths.

40. The global aid crisis was aggravated after the United States of America arbitrarily and abruptly froze or terminated foreign aid assistance and dismantled the United States Agency for International Development<sup>23</sup> (and, more recently, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor), following the issuance of several executive orders by President Donald Trump since January 2025.

41. Other major donors have also significantly reduced national and international aid contributions, as global budgets and agendas are shifting due to austerity measures or in favour of defence spending. In some cases, the shifts have occurred after the electoral success of far-right political parties. The Group of Seven (G7) countries, which contribute in total three quarters of all official development assistance, are cutting their contributions by 28 per cent for 2026 compared with 2024, the biggest cut in aid since records began in 1960.<sup>24</sup> The Kingdom of the Netherlands has reduced its development aid budget – used for cooperation with civil society organizations – for the period 2026–2030 to €390 million – €565 million from a previous budget of €1.4 billion;<sup>25</sup> Belgium plans to cut foreign aid by 25 per cent over five years;<sup>26</sup> France has cut official development assistance by 37 per cent in 2025 compared with 2024;<sup>27</sup> the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will reduce foreign

<sup>20</sup> See <https://rm.coe.int/letter-to-the-speaker-of-parliament-of-hungary-by-michael-o-flaherty-c/1680b60abf>.

<sup>21</sup> See A/79/263.

<sup>22</sup> Submission from Government of Spain.

<sup>23</sup> Communication USA 5/2025.

<sup>24</sup> See [www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/biggest-ever-aid-cut-g7-members-death-sentence-millions-people-says-oxfam](https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/biggest-ever-aid-cut-g7-members-death-sentence-millions-people-says-oxfam).

<sup>25</sup> See [www.government.nl/latest/news/2024/11/11/first-development-budget-cuts-announced-overhaul-of-grants-for-ngos](https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2024/11/11/first-development-budget-cuts-announced-overhaul-of-grants-for-ngos).

<sup>26</sup> See [www.devex.com/news/belgium-just-cut-its-foreign-aid-by-25-does-anybody-care-109320](https://www.devex.com/news/belgium-just-cut-its-foreign-aid-by-25-does-anybody-care-109320).

<sup>27</sup> See <https://focus2030.org/France-reneges-on-its-Official-Development-Assistance-commitments>.

aid by 40 per cent in 2027;<sup>28</sup> and Germany has reduced development aid by nearly €1 billion in 2025 compared with 2024, a reduction that it has justified with the need to raise the defence budget.<sup>29</sup> The European Union has reportedly proposed the closure of 80 development offices, reducing around 100 delegations to just 18 regional hubs,<sup>30</sup> which will potentially harm essential ties with local actors. This follows the systematic failure of States to meet their aid commitments: in 2024, official development assistance declined by 7.1 per cent compared with 2023.<sup>31</sup>

42. With the securitization of the global agenda, amid geopolitical shifts and heightened threats to global peace and security, States are rapidly shifting funds towards strengthening defence and military capabilities<sup>32</sup> while reducing aid for development, democratization and civil society. In 2024, world military expenditure reportedly increased by 9.4 per cent.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, multilateral institutions are shifting attention from human rights debates towards securitization: the main theme of the 2025 Summit of the Americas is “Building a Secure and Sustainable Hemisphere with Shared Prosperity”, while the European Union’s ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030,<sup>34</sup> aimed at strengthening European defence and autonomy in response to evolving security threats, gives rise to concerns about its impact on democratic values and the need for democratic oversight. Importantly, in 2024, when the General Assembly adopted the Pact for the Future, it committed to ensuring “that military spending does not compromise investment in sustainable development and building sustainable peace”.<sup>35</sup>

43. The dramatic erosion of international development aid is concerning, as the emphasis shifts from global solidarity and leaving no one behind to States prioritizing narrow “national interests” and treating aid provision as transactional, for the purpose of advancing their political and trade agendas. This is translating into a sharp decrease in funding for efforts to promote democracy, the rule of law and human rights and for peacebuilding and justice efforts, and is seriously weakening rights movements, leading to the shrinking of civic space and the rollback of rights. The Kingdom of the Netherlands announced that it would be redirecting funding to “themes in which the Netherlands stands out internationally” and increasing to 50 per cent the proportion of organizations’ income that they will be required to raise themselves, thus pushing many grassroots groups out of eligibility entirely.<sup>36</sup>

44. The Special Rapporteur, together with more than 30 other United Nations experts, raised the alarm that the dismantling by the Government of the United States of the United States Agency for International Development, the freezing of foreign aid and the imposition of stop-work orders were having a grave impact on civil society worldwide, causing many civil society organizations, media outlets and faith-based communities and organizations, among others, to close down or to significantly scale down or immediately halt vital operations.<sup>37</sup> The scale and speed with which the

<sup>28</sup> See <https://data.une.org/analysis/uk-aid-cuts>.

<sup>29</sup> See [www.dw.com/en/germany-development-aid-cuts-defense-spending-donald-trump/a-73093270](https://www.dw.com/en/germany-development-aid-cuts-defense-spending-donald-trump/a-73093270).

<sup>30</sup> See [www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/17/exclusive-eu-plans-to-slash-80-worldwide-development-offices-in-refocus](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/17/exclusive-eu-plans-to-slash-80-worldwide-development-offices-in-refocus).

<sup>31</sup> See [www.eurodad.org/no\\_more\\_business\\_as\\_usual\\_this\\_is\\_the\\_moment\\_to\\_transform\\_the\\_aid\\_system\\_preliminary\\_aid\\_figures\\_for\\_2024\\_are\\_a\\_wake\\_up\\_call\\_for\\_rich\\_countries](https://www.eurodad.org/no_more_business_as_usual_this_is_the_moment_to_transform_the_aid_system_preliminary_aid_figures_for_2024_are_a_wake_up_call_for_rich_countries).

<sup>32</sup> See [www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_236705.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm).

<sup>33</sup> See [www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges](https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges).

<sup>34</sup> See [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_25\\_793](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_793).

<sup>35</sup> See resolution 79/1.

<sup>36</sup> See [www.government.nl/latest/news/2024/11/11/first-development-budget-cuts-announced-overhaul-of-grants-for-ngos](https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2024/11/11/first-development-budget-cuts-announced-overhaul-of-grants-for-ngos).

<sup>37</sup> Communication USA 5/2025.

measures have been implemented, without warning, transparency or consultations, have left no time for organizations to secure alternative resources, and have made it impossible for a vast number of associations, both domestic and international, to continue to fulfil their mission-related activities or to sustain themselves. This action deeply interferes with the right to freedom of association, as it is arbitrary, not tailored to specific risks and not targeted at any legitimate aim under international human rights law. It is also unnecessary and disproportionate, given the large impact on civil society worldwide, and is leading to the violation of other rights, including the right to life.

45. The stigmatization of aid by the Government of the United States to justify terminating aid has triggered a rise in smear campaigns discrediting aid in general, aid workers and agencies, and aid recipients, including civil society around the world. It has also empowered and emboldened actors that threaten civil society. Civil society organizations have subsequently been targeted with legal restrictions, criminalization and intrusive investigations, and are facing an erosion of public trust, often enabled by State and media narratives portraying NGOs and rights activists as “foreign agents”, “criminal” or a “security threat” and the like. The stigmatization of foreign aid has fuelled the advancement of repressive or overly restrictive laws and bills (in Hungary,<sup>38</sup> El Salvador,<sup>39</sup> Peru,<sup>40</sup> Nigeria<sup>41</sup> and Sri Lanka<sup>42</sup>), including the revival of “foreign agent”-type laws (in the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>43</sup>).

46. Unsubstantiated allegations by the Government of the United States and high-level politicians, linking foreign aid to money-laundering and terrorism financing, have triggered the intimidation, investigation and surveillance of civil society actors. In Cameroon, organizations have reported facing excessive retroactive audits, linked to past foreign funding.<sup>44</sup> In Nigeria, an investigation of civil society organizations was reported in relation to claims by a United States senator that funds from the United States Agency for International Development were being used to support Boko Haram.<sup>45</sup> In Paraguay, as a “foreign agent”-type law was adopted in 2024,<sup>46</sup> excessive and undue control has been placed on not-for-profit organizations. In Serbia, civil society has faced undue surveillance, investigation and aggressive police raids, while the President stated: “Those who directly received money from abroad to carry out a colour revolution – there will be surprises in the coming days, you’ll see.”<sup>47</sup>

47. These measures are adding to concerted efforts by States to defund independent civil society by imposing broad legal restrictions on its access to resources, and are damaging the remaining civil society’s resilience. Georgia has moved to prevent any possibility of independent funding by imposing additional legal restrictions on

<sup>38</sup> See <https://rm.coe.int/letter-to-the-speaker-of-parliament-of-hungary-by-michael-o-flaherty-c/1680b60abf>.

<sup>39</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/05/el-salvador-concerns-over-foreign-agents-law](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/05/el-salvador-concerns-over-foreign-agents-law).

<sup>40</sup> Communication PER 4/2024 and <https://eusee.hivos.org/the-global-funding-squeeze-on-civil-society-challenges-and-responses/>.

<sup>41</sup> Civil society submissions.

<sup>42</sup> See <https://eusee.hivos.org/the-global-funding-squeeze-on-civil-society-challenges-and-responses/>.

<sup>43</sup> See <https://bosniaherzegovina.un.org/en/289037-bosnia-and-herzegovina-bill-registering-ngos-will-increase-government-control-over-civil>.

<sup>44</sup> Civil society submission.

<sup>45</sup> See <https://eusee.hivos.org/alert/investigation-into-csos-following-allegations-of-funding-for-terrorist-organisations-made-by-u-s-senator/>.

<sup>46</sup> Communication PRY 1/2024.

<sup>47</sup> Communication SRB 1/2025.

donors, resorting to expedited consideration of such matters due to the “special importance of ensuring State sovereignty”.<sup>48</sup>

48. In some cases, international donors have also contributed to defunding civil society and endangering its survival by stopping funding for independent associations and instead prioritizing enhanced “government cooperation”, or by prioritizing funding to those associations that engage with the Government in their country, disregarding human rights concerns.<sup>49</sup> International sanctions, security restrictions and counter-terrorism measures continue to pose a serious barrier for civil society organizations located in affected areas, preventing them from gaining access to lifeline funding. Efforts in the European Union to audit the transparency of the Union’s funding to NGOs alone, rather than the full spectrum of beneficiaries of Union funds, is stigmatizing and threatens the future allocation of funds.<sup>50</sup>

49. States are expanding security frameworks and discourse to suppress civic freedoms, while substantially lowering the threshold for legitimate restrictions of those freedoms. National security narratives, coupled with “protection of State sovereignty”, are increasingly used to pass restrictive laws,<sup>51</sup> trigger expedited procedures to circumvent oversight, and justify repressive law enforcement measures. States exploit exceptions based on national security grounds to justify criminalization and surveillance, arbitrarily ban activism and deport activists. Indonesia has adopted a law expanding the military’s role in civic spaces.<sup>52</sup>

50. The use of immigration enforcement powers by Germany and the United States<sup>53</sup> to arrest activists and deport them or threaten them with deportation in retaliation for exercising their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of expression, and for their activism in defence of the rights of Palestinian people, represents another aggravated development. It sets a dangerous precedent, whereby political expression that is viewed as sensitive in relation to a State’s foreign policy is treated as a security threat and thus creates an additional ground for restrictions outside the legitimate grounds allowed under article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.<sup>54</sup>

51. There is an alarming trend among States of growing intolerance and repression of peaceful protests, deployment of aggressive force and militarization of law enforcement, in violation of international human rights, including with regard to facilitation of assemblies, and in violation of prohibitions on unnecessary and excessive force. These actions are aimed at suppressing non-violent civic resistance movements that are demanding the protection of international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law, and seeking to defend fundamental freedoms from existential threat. Israel allegedly used a drone to target peaceful Freedom Flotilla activists who were seeking to bring global attention to the illegal Gaza blockade;<sup>55</sup> the United States used heavy militarized and armed combat

<sup>48</sup> See [www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/ICNL\\_Brief\\_on\\_Georgia\\_Draft\\_Amendments\\_to\\_the\\_Law\\_on\\_Grants\\_SF.pdf](http://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/ICNL_Brief_on_Georgia_Draft_Amendments_to_the_Law_on_Grants_SF.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> Submissions from Libya and Egypt.

<sup>50</sup> See <https://eeb.org/mask-off-persecuting-ngos-over-eu-funding-has-nothing-to-do-with-transparency/>.

<sup>51</sup> Communication ITA 7/2024; see also <https://rm.coe.int/letter-to-the-speaker-of-parliament-of-hungary-by-michael-o-flaherty-c/1680b60abf> and [www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/ICNL\\_Brief\\_on\\_Georgia\\_Draft\\_Amendments\\_to\\_the\\_Law\\_on\\_Grants\\_SF.pdf](http://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/ICNL_Brief_on_Georgia_Draft_Amendments_to_the_Law_on_Grants_SF.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Communication IDN 3/2025.

<sup>53</sup> Civil society submission and communication USA 10/2025.

<sup>54</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/deporting-international-students-involved-pro-palestinian-protests-will](http://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/deporting-international-students-involved-pro-palestinian-protests-will).

<sup>55</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/gaza-un-experts-demand-safe-passage-freedom-flotilla-coalition](http://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/gaza-un-experts-demand-safe-passage-freedom-flotilla-coalition).

units to suppress protests against the Government's anti-immigration policy in California; and less lethal weapons, including those developed for military purposes, are excessively used, often with the intention to intimidate, punish and spread fear, for instance the alleged use of a sonic weapon against student-led protests in Serbia.<sup>56</sup>

52. The Special Rapporteur emphasizes the standards on the facilitation of peaceful protests, outlined in the Model Protocol for Law Enforcement Officials to Promote and Protect Human Rights in the Context of Peaceful Protests<sup>57</sup> and echoed by the Human Rights Council.<sup>58</sup>

53. It is also concerning that the securitization narrative has been used to address threats against democracy, including misinformation and disinformation, which risks undermining the very principles that such efforts are aimed at defending.

54. Democracy, civic freedoms and security are interdependent. As the General Assembly has emphasized, "effective counter-terrorism measures and the protection of human rights are not conflicting goals, but complementary and mutually reinforcing".<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the mandate holders have stressed that civil society, social movements and peaceful protests should not be viewed as a threat; instead, States should adjust their political mindset and approach them as providing opportunities to achieve sustainable peace, while treating those involved as essential partners in promoting sustainable and inclusive development.<sup>60</sup> Shifting from control and military security to a human security approach<sup>61</sup> centred on enabling and protecting human rights and freedoms is paramount. The Council of Europe has emphasized that also security requires "democratic security" to be ensured, stating: "The resilience of our democratic institutions, freedoms, and values ... is also security."<sup>62</sup>

55. The "super election" year furthered restrictions on fundamental freedoms and the decline of democratic governance.<sup>63</sup> Champions of rights and freedoms are being lost, as the United States withdraws from and defunds multilateral mechanisms and abandons or even attacks global commitments. Despite the fact that some Governments have stepped in, the aid void is still too big, and it seems hard to fill it. As a result, there is a risk that authoritarian States and actors promoting an anti-democratic rights agenda will fill the gap, further jeopardizing civic freedoms.

## **IV. Impacts on civic space and global agendas**

### **A. Fundamental impacts on freedom of association**

56. The collapse of the global aid system is having a devastating, immediate, widespread and long-term impact on the whole civic space ecosystem and the ability to enjoy fundamental freedoms. It has deepened the already gravely shrinking civic space, undermining democracy and creating a vacuum for rights protection and promotion and for participation.

57. The direct implications for civil society are existential: as funding dramatically decreases and becomes less accessible and more politicized, many organizations are

<sup>56</sup> Communication SRB 2/2025.

<sup>57</sup> [A/HRC/55/60](#).

<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Council resolution [56/10](#), para 16.

<sup>59</sup> See General Assembly resolution [60/288](#).

<sup>60</sup> See [A/HRC/50/42](#), [A/77/171](#) and [A/78/246](#).

<sup>61</sup> Submission from Government of Colombia.

<sup>62</sup> See <https://rm.coe.int/pdf/0900001680b57511>.

<sup>63</sup> See [A/HRC/59/44](#).

already struggling to survive, much less continue to advocate for human rights and freedoms. According to surveys,<sup>64</sup> the impact is deeply felt by associations and movements that are working on the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, transparency and anti-corruption, human rights, equality and gender issues, peace and security, and climate justice. These associations and movements, which previously relied on international funding for their operations and existence, have already been placed under pressure locally and have been facing severe restrictions on access to resources. This has an impact in particular on the most disadvantaged groups in vulnerable situations and those in conflict-affected areas.

58. The scale and gravity of the abrupt cuts by the United States, imposed without warning or a transition period, have undermined the global enabling environment for the exercise of the rights of freedom of association and of peaceful assembly.

59. Global surveys of the worldwide impact of the suspension by the United States of foreign development assistance have consistently revealed that organizations previously funded directly and/or indirectly by the United States Agency for International Development are struggling for survival, and there is a widespread disruption of programmes. Organizations overall have reported that they have very limited resources available to sustain themselves and are at risk of permanent shutdown; many have had to shut down immediately, lay off personnel (in some cases, 80 per cent or more of NGO employees have been affected) and significantly cut back operations, leaving communities without life-saving and critical services. National and community-based NGOs are heavily affected, especially those operating in restricted civic spaces and in conflict environments.

60. According to the Global Aid Freeze Tracker survey,<sup>65</sup> run from February 2025, the majority of the 816 respondents, including various organizations, have seen their budgets significantly affected, with only 8.8 per cent stating that they had found alternative resources (as at 6 March 2025). Nearly 90 per cent of respondents had laid off staff or were considering doing so; many respondents, mostly from the African region, also stated that they had not received payments for work completed prior to the freezing of aid by the United States Agency for International Development.<sup>66</sup> In Brazil, nearly half of organizations reportedly have financial reserves for a maximum of three months.<sup>67</sup>

61. According to a survey of 18 February 2025, the Government of the United States owed NGOs millions in reimbursement, which has had an impact on their liquidity; 55 per cent of NGOs reported a negative impact on their human resources, while 67 per cent reported the downsizing or complete cessation of essential services, affecting millions of vulnerable people and communities. One of the survey findings was that “accountability, coordination and efficiency gains made over a decade are being lost”.<sup>68</sup>

62. Organizations that have survived have had to scale down or suspend programmes, drastically reduce staff and close local offices, and are seeking to diversify funding. As a result, many organizations are being forced to compete for shrinking resources and to readjust their agendas and projects to satisfy the strategic interests of donors. Although some staff are moving to part-time work or

<sup>64</sup> See [www.globalaidfreeze.com/previous-survey](http://www.globalaidfreeze.com/previous-survey); and [https://eusee.hivos.org/assets/2025/03/Report-The-Impact-of-the-US-Funding-Freeze-on-Civil-Society\\_def-170325.pdf](https://eusee.hivos.org/assets/2025/03/Report-The-Impact-of-the-US-Funding-Freeze-on-Civil-Society_def-170325.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> See [www.globalaidfreeze.com/previous-survey](http://www.globalaidfreeze.com/previous-survey).

<sup>66</sup> See [www.globalaidfreeze.com](http://www.globalaidfreeze.com).

<sup>67</sup> See [www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/facing-crisis-what-road-should-brazilian-and-latin-american-philanthropy-take/#cite\\_note-3](http://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/facing-crisis-what-road-should-brazilian-and-latin-american-philanthropy-take/#cite_note-3).

<sup>68</sup> See [www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2025/02/Impact-of-US-Funding-Suspension-Survey-Results-ICVA.pdf](http://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2025/02/Impact-of-US-Funding-Suspension-Survey-Results-ICVA.pdf).



volunteering, this is not sustainable. Rebuilding civil society capacity will be difficult if and when funding is again available. Even if organizations have not immediately been directly affected, their partners have been significantly impacted, thereby obstructing their ability to implement projects on the ground.

63. The funding cuts expose civil society to increased insecurity and immediate threats, due to the inability to maintain existing support or provide new urgent support and protection for activists at risk and in exile; the inability to provide legal aid to unlawfully arrested and detained activists and protesters; and the inability to provide protection against rising digital threats and unlawful surveillance,<sup>69</sup> among other life-saving actions. The termination of contracts and the inability to pay staff and service providers are exposing organizations to potential legal actions that would drain their limited remaining reserves and damage their reputation.

64. Given that civil society often provides the link between communities and Governments, when organizations close, or restrict or reduce their presence, this widens the public participation gap and hampers the ability of authorities to gain first-hand understanding of community concerns. It also hampers access to justice for victims of human rights violations, due to the inability of civil society to provide vital intermediary and expert support to victims (as in the case of the amendment enacted in Peru to the law on the Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation).<sup>70</sup> Those facing barriers, such as victims of sexual and gender-based violence, are especially affected by the absence of support.

65. The widespread defunding and disruption of global civil society has far-reaching consequences for civic space, particularly at a time when rights and freedoms are under attack. As funding declines and restrictions increase, organizations are prevented from fulfilling essential roles in monitoring, advocacy and watchdog activities – functions vital to preventing and responding to human rights violations, strengthening democratic institutions and resisting repressive laws and policies. Without effective civil society participation, Governments face less scrutiny, thereby creating conditions for the adoption of restrictive laws and decisions that curtail fundamental freedoms and rights. Several States have already used this context to advance such measures.

66. This erosion of civic space intensifies existing threats, particularly amid democratic backsliding, rising anti-rights narratives and authoritarianism. The vacuum left by weakened civil society is being filled by well-resourced anti-rights actors and disinformation campaigns, which are accelerating the criminalization of protests, undermining public trust and further restricting civic freedoms.

67. The situation is aggravated as multilateral mechanisms face deliberate defunding and systematic weakening. The United Nations is suffering unprecedented cuts, as States have failed to pay their contributions for 2025, and have repeatedly failed to pay on time, with the United States the largest debtor withholding funds. The United Nations faces a gap of approximately \$2.4 billion, as at 30 April, in its regular budget of \$3.7 billion for 2025,<sup>71</sup> which has prompted mass layoffs and sweeping reforms that are jeopardizing life-saving humanitarian assistance and human rights protection work. The Human Rights Council is being obstructed from delivering its mandated activities, human rights scrutiny and investigations; and United Nations

<sup>69</sup> See [www.accessnow.org/u-s-funding-cuts/](http://www.accessnow.org/u-s-funding-cuts/).

<sup>70</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/04/approval-amendments-apci-law-seriously-affects-freedom-association-peru-un](http://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/04/approval-amendments-apci-law-seriously-affects-freedom-association-peru-un) and communication PER 4/2024.

<sup>71</sup> See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/05/1163901>.

mechanisms lack the capacity to intervene and protect individuals, while civil society access to United Nations protection is hindered.<sup>72</sup>

## **B. Detrimental impact on global agendas**

68. A safe and enabling environment for the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association is a prerequisite for the full realization of the 2030 Agenda and other global commitments.<sup>73</sup> The severe restrictions on these freedoms highlighted in the present report hinder and jeopardize the fulfilment of commitments on sustainable and equitable development, peace and security, inclusion and equality, and climate justice.

69. The shrinking of funding has had a grave impact on marginalized communities and their associations, particularly those working in rural, Indigenous and environmentally sensitive areas. The Indigenous Council of Roraima, based in the Amazon in Brazil, which represents about 60,000 people, is among the entities affected by the cuts of funding from the United States Agency for International Development, which have put at risk programmes dedicated to protecting Indigenous territories, combating illegal mining and strengthening community governance.<sup>74</sup> In Peru, the closure of a legal empowerment NGO meant that hundreds of Indigenous communities lost support for reporting environmental violations and gaining access to justice for such violations. In Europe, environmental organizations have reported that they are unable to monitor attacks on human rights defenders. Youth groups that are at the forefront of climate justice activism have faced underfunding and have thus been heavily affected. One NGO in Uganda has had to limit the geographical scale of its campaign to secure justice and land rights for widows. If the ability of communities to protect their lands and environment is limited, the climate crisis will accelerate.

70. Safeguarding the rights of the workers and communities most affected by environmental degradation is essential to achieving sustainable development that allows inequality to be tackled and enables a just transition. However, recent aid cuts threaten to roll back the progress made. Organizations that expose corporate abuses, provide training and support for workers so that they can advocate for themselves, and facilitate access to legal assistance are having their resources cut off.<sup>75</sup> A long-standing Hong Kong-based labour rights organization, China Labour Bulletin, closed down in June 2025, citing financial difficulties, while the authorities sought to bring union regulations into line with the draconian 2020 National Security Law.<sup>76</sup>

### **1. Gender inclusion and equality**

71. The funding cuts have had a heavy impact on gender justice and the protection of and activism for women's rights around the world, as these rights are facing unprecedented global attacks.<sup>77</sup> International aid cuts have taken place in an environment of heightened xenophobic political rhetoric and attacks on the rights of women, LGBTQI people and other racialized and minority communities, as the

<sup>72</sup> See A/HRC/59/L.37; and <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/urgent-support-needed-for-the-un-treaty-bodies/>.

<sup>73</sup> See <https://freeassemblyandassociation.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Booklet-Practical-Recommendations-CSO-SDGs.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> See [www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/usaid-cuts-push-latin-americas-indigenous-and-marginalised-to-the-brink/](http://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/usaid-cuts-push-latin-americas-indigenous-and-marginalised-to-the-brink/).

<sup>75</sup> See [www.thecircle.ngo/news/the-devastating-impacts-of-aid-cuts-on-garment-workers-by-evie-gilbert/](http://www.thecircle.ngo/news/the-devastating-impacts-of-aid-cuts-on-garment-workers-by-evie-gilbert/).

<sup>76</sup> Civil society submission and [www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202506/25/P2025062500741.htm](http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202506/25/P2025062500741.htm).

<sup>77</sup> See [www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/03/one-in-four-countries-report-backlash-on-womens-rights-in-2024](http://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/03/one-in-four-countries-report-backlash-on-womens-rights-in-2024).



Government of the United States has issued discriminatory executive orders<sup>78</sup> as part of its agenda to restrict activities potentially related to “diversity, equity and inclusion” in various contexts. These measures are creating an environment in which women and girls are silenced and their agency is undermined, and which will limit the ability to defend, protect and advance women’s rights and expose activists to violence and stigmatization.<sup>79</sup>

72. As a result of the sweeping aid cuts, women-led and women’s rights organizations, especially in humanitarian settings, are at risk of disappearing, leaving vulnerable communities without life-saving services, support and a voice, amid intensified needs due to conflict, the climate crisis and displacement.<sup>80</sup>

73. The global loss of funding is having a catastrophic impact on global LGBTQI organizing and rights. A total of 120 grants to grassroots, national and regional LGBTQI organizations in 42 countries have been suspended, halting vital services such as violence prevention, healthcare and legal assistance.<sup>81</sup> Due to widespread stigmatization and legal criminalization, LGBTQI activists often cannot rely on their Governments or communities for support, unlike other groups. The funding crisis severely restricts their ability to operate, organize events and participate in international forums, leading to greater isolation and vulnerability. This vacuum allows anti-LGBTQI narratives to dominate civic and multilateral spaces, empowering conservative and anti-rights actors and escalating discrimination, arrests and violence. In Hungary, LGBTQI public events were recently banned under the pretext of “child protection”, while biometric surveillance technologies have been expanded to target, identify and punish participants in “prohibited assemblies”.<sup>82</sup> Defunding LGBTQI activism is life-threatening. These attacks are not isolated; they reflect a broader pattern in which assaults on gender and LGBTQI rights are exploited to undermine democratic norms and civic space.

## 2. Anti-corruption efforts and the rule of law

74. The defunding, coupled with deepening restrictive and repressive tactics targeted at civil society and independent media, further erodes government accountability and transparency, thereby enabling unchecked government power, while surveillance and criminalization discourage whistle-blowers and activists from reporting corruption.

75. A survey of civil society organizations working on anti-corruption initiatives, carried out by the Coalition of the Civil Society Friends of the United Nations Convention against Corruption in the first quarter of 2025, found that the United States funding freeze was already having significant and immediate impacts on NGOs working to combat corruption. Civil society organizations face a growing challenge in securing sustainable funding, as many Governments backslide on anti-corruption commitments, and donors shift resources away from governance efforts. At the same time, the erosion of democratic institutions is narrowing transparency and access to information, making it increasingly difficult for civil society organizations to obtain data on public spending, procurement and political financing. This hinders their ability to monitor corruption effectively.

<sup>78</sup> Communication USA 16/2025.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> See [www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/05/new-survey-shows-half-of-womens-organizations-aiding-women-in-crises-may-shut-down-in-six-months-due-to-global-aid-cuts](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/05/new-survey-shows-half-of-womens-organizations-aiding-women-in-crises-may-shut-down-in-six-months-due-to-global-aid-cuts).

<sup>81</sup> See <https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/human-rights-research/defunding-freedom-impacts-us-foreign-aid-cuts-lgbtqi-people>.

<sup>82</sup> Communication HUN 1/2025.

76. In Ukraine, the suspension of funding from the United States Agency for International Development is reportedly threatening the country's democratic reforms and the fragile anti-corruption progress made in recent years despite the ongoing full-scale conflict.<sup>83</sup> Many civil society organizations in Ukraine working on reforms and democratization previously received funding under multiple Agency projects and have lost 75 to 90 per cent of their funding,<sup>84</sup> a loss that jeopardizes their survival and their critical work.

77. Civil society in the Africa region has raised concerns that the erosion of international political and financial support for anti-corruption initiatives risks weakening legal frameworks and democratic institutions and emboldening corrupt officials and networks.<sup>85</sup>

### 3. Peace and security

78. With the securitization, militarization and tightening of civic spaces and the defunding of civil society, in a context of growing conflicts, there is a real risk of increased insecurity. Many grassroots, women-led and peacebuilding associations have been forced to downsize or suspend their crucial work on conflict prevention and peacebuilding and their work on addressing ongoing and past grievances to prevent the recurrence of conflict, on strengthening social cohesion and on addressing hatred and misinformation. Discontinuation of the work of civil society on advancing human rights and addressing inequality, climate injustice and corruption is leading to a deepening of the root causes of conflicts and creating an environment conducive to the resurgence of terrorism.

79. There have already been indications of deepening crises and the undermining of counter-terrorism and peace efforts because of humanitarian aid cuts that are preventing the provision of food and services to refugees. As a result, there have been violent demonstrations by increasingly desperate populations in fragile contexts.<sup>86</sup> This is increasing the risk of violent repression and spiralling insecurity.

80. Women-led and women's rights initiatives and groups and youth-led civic engagement projects promoting political participation have had to suspend activities. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) reported that 90 per cent of surveyed women-led and women's rights groups operating on the frontlines of humanitarian crises in 44 countries were affected, with almost half expecting to shut down within six months if the lack of funding persists,<sup>87</sup> thereby decreasing vital services and safe spaces and putting the lives of women in crisis at risk. This is also detrimental to women's participation in peace processes, which is vital for ensuring that women's rights are protected. At the same time, national action plans on women and peace and security remain underfunded and military funding is being increased, to the detriment of public services critical to achieving gender equality.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup> See <https://cpi.ti-ukraine.org/en/>.

<sup>84</sup> See [www.du-bureau.org/post/policy-brief-from-support-to-survival-ukraine-s-civil-society-after-the-usaid-withdrawal](http://www.du-bureau.org/post/policy-brief-from-support-to-survival-ukraine-s-civil-society-after-the-usaid-withdrawal).

<sup>85</sup> See [www.spotlightcorruption.org/joint-statement-us-rollback/](http://www.spotlightcorruption.org/joint-statement-us-rollback/).

<sup>86</sup> See <https://theconversation.com/us-funding-cuts-may-affect-nigerias-fight-against-terrorism-heres-how-250871> and [www.propublica.org/article/trump-usaid-malawi-state-department-crime-sexual-violence-trafficking](http://www.propublica.org/article/trump-usaid-malawi-state-department-crime-sexual-violence-trafficking).

<sup>87</sup> See [www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/at-a-breaking-point-the-impact-of-foreign-aid-cuts-on-womens-organizations-in-humanitarian-crises-worldwide-en.pdf](http://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/at-a-breaking-point-the-impact-of-foreign-aid-cuts-on-womens-organizations-in-humanitarian-crises-worldwide-en.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> See [www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/womens-rights-in-review-30-years-after-beijing-en.pdf](http://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/womens-rights-in-review-30-years-after-beijing-en.pdf).

81. In a context where Governments are slashing aid, civil society is facing heavy restrictions on its ability to provide vital support and the international community is failing to respond, more people will be taking to the streets demanding solutions. Hence the protection of the right to peaceful assembly is ever more urgent, particularly against the backdrop of the securitization and militarization of public spaces, approaches and equipment. The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association play a critical role in ensuring an inclusive and just peace and democratic transition processes.<sup>89</sup> Facilitating peaceful protest, especially in crises, is essential in order to facilitate inclusive dialogue, ensure rights-based crisis responses and prevent further destructive conflict.<sup>90</sup>

### C. Impact on participation in multilateral spaces

82. Internationally, civil society is similarly facing growing restrictions, including on access to decision-makers and decision-making spaces. It faces increased legal barriers, delegitimization campaigns, intimidation, reprisal and transnational repression, as States seek to suppress participation in multilateral spaces, including the Human Rights Council. The lack of resources further prevents civil society from attending regional and international discussions. The financial crisis has also limited the spaces for interaction within United Nations and regional mechanisms, to the detriment of civil society. Engagement opportunities for civil society during the fifty-ninth session of the Human Rights Council decreased due to liquidity and efficiency initiatives, while the costs associated with side events at Council sessions have been shifted to organizations, thereby further limiting the possibility of virtual participation. In addition, new applications from NGOs for consultative status with the Economic and Social Council have been delayed, and transparency has been compromised.<sup>91</sup> Organizations, activists and movements are thus prevented from raising their voices in international forums, which are increasingly the only option available for seeking protection from and accountability for violations.

83. Regional organizations are also deeply affected. In the case of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, if the announced cuts had been fully implemented, the funding gap would have exceeded \$6 million, affecting the hiring of staff, institutional prioritization and planning, and the holding of hearings.

84. Civil society actors have reported restrictions on participation in the critical Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, from problems with obtaining accreditations to exclusion and sidelining from key negotiations.<sup>92</sup> Civil society exclusion is a persistent concern<sup>93</sup> that requires urgent attention if international commitments are to lead to real impact.

### D. Chilling effect

85. The developments described above, taken cumulatively, have caused widespread self-censorship. To mitigate existential threats and avoid surveillance, repercussions and stigmatization, many are hesitating to exercise their rights, scaling back activities, decreasing public visibility and mobilization, and softening or

<sup>89</sup> See A/78/246.

<sup>90</sup> See A/HRC/50/42.

<sup>91</sup> See <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/ngo-committee-2025-session-concludes-leaving-open-crucial-questions-on-civil-society-engagement-at-the-un/>.

<sup>92</sup> See [www.datocms-assets.com/120585/1751273611-forum-declaration.pdf](http://www.datocms-assets.com/120585/1751273611-forum-declaration.pdf).

<sup>93</sup> See A/78/246.

deleting language, such as that related to gender equality. Volunteers and supporters have withdrawn.

86. The vilification and stigmatization of international aid and of aid agencies and recipients have a deep and long-lasting chilling effect. They erode and diminish trust in and social support for civil society as a whole. The interruption of projects and the abandonment of vulnerable communities, due to the funding cuts, feed into the loss of trust in civil society and damage its reputation. As a result, people become hesitant to provide donations, volunteer or provide other support, thereby threatening the survival of independent civil society. Regardless of its crucial role, civil society is left isolated and undefended when unjustly attacked and defunded, and is unable to counteract harmful narratives.

87. The reduced capacity of civil society also means that it is unable to effectively contribute to ensuring that the design and use of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies are human rights-compliant, or to mitigate the harm that such technologies may cause to human rights and their chilling effects on fundamental freedoms, in particular the freedoms of peaceful assembly and of association.

## **V. The path ahead**

88. Despite a challenging outlook, civil society organizations are leveraging their resilience and their legacy of collective action to innovate and imagine new paths for survival and transformation. Many are actively using their knowledge and experience to propose changes in funding models, relationships and operating processes. Hope for the sustainability of fundamental freedoms – including the right to seek, gain access to and manage resources – rests in feminist and youth-led movements, community-based initiatives (including citizen assemblies), robust local ownership, sustainable financial innovations, resilient networks, and regional or global platforms that facilitate solidarity, knowledge-sharing, peer protection and joint advocacy.

89. Civil society actors now face a dual challenge: preserving hard-won institutional and democratic gains while developing new, locally rooted models of sustainability. As the crisis is still evolving, the present section reflects the current reality and is aimed at contributing to the ongoing discussions. It highlights broad trends and promising examples, but does not provide an exhaustive list. Some innovations that predate the crisis have since gained momentum and scale.

90. A range of emergency support mechanisms have emerged from within the sector. For example, in 2024 the International Trade Union Confederation established a fund supporting 500 at-risk unions. Feminist networks and youth movements have mobilized legal defence for detained protesters.

91. Local governments (e.g. in Switzerland), development agencies (such as the German Agency for International Cooperation), multilateral actors and philanthropic institutions in Europe and the United States have promoted strategies to mitigate the impacts of the funding crisis, including agile emergency funding to sustain critical human rights work and the protection of key players. Although these actions have been critical, they are still insufficient. With fewer sources of funding available, the current funding landscape is intensifying competition for already limited resources, to the detriment of strategic collaboration. This accentuates existing inequalities: smaller organizations or those with less reach are at a disadvantage compared with those that have greater international visibility or proximity to decision-makers. Stratification and hierarchy within the civil society ecosystem have deepened.

92. New funding models are being tested, including “reverse calls”, whereby grassroots organizations establish priorities and invite aligned international NGOs or

donors to respond. Pilot initiatives, such as those of the Reimagining International NGOs (RINGO) project in Zambia, which include the Affinity Group of National Associations, show promise in shifting traditional power dynamics in the field of development.

93. Civil society organizations are also testing innovations in operating methods, organizational logic and governance strategies. These include the establishment of co-leadership models to foster equity and inclusion, as well as effectiveness and the flexibility to adjust to changes, to de-risk management and to ensure leadership sustainability.<sup>94</sup>

94. With significant staff reductions, some organizations are exploring more decentralized, movement-style leadership models and the possibility of merging. While less resource-intensive, such models can compromise operational capacity, including with regard to fundraising and legal response. The absence of qualified personnel risks weakening both impact and responsiveness.

95. As the crisis challenges the financial sustainability and the survival of civil society, the need to explore new and alternative funding strategies has become increasingly urgent. Some of the innovations set out below were already in use – particularly by organizations in restrictive environments subject to “foreign agent”-type laws – and are now gaining broader relevance.

96. Community and cooperative financial models are being promoted to enhance long-term independence and foster cross-sector collaboration and efficiency, while attracting private funding and fostering multi-stakeholder and multilevel collaboration and spending efficiency, which is essential to maximize the return on investment in development.<sup>95</sup> Community philanthropy has recently grown. New approaches include catalytic capital, blended finance, programme-related investments, impact funds and venture philanthropy. These models leverage seed funding (recoverable or not), bonds (green, social and gender bonds) and equity investment to support service delivery, primarily in Africa and Latin America. These tools, while useful in areas such as education, health, climate and connectivity, are typically market-driven and prioritize scale and return. Hence, they are less suitable for human rights and democracy advocacy, accountability, capacity-building, sensitization and narrative shift, or inclusion and rights-based work. Traditional civil society organizations, especially grassroots organizations, often lack the financial literacy, liquidity and administrative capacity required to gain access to these funds, especially when competing with start-ups, universities or for-profit entities.<sup>96</sup>

97. Microdonations and online fundraising (such as crowdfunding) have enabled resource mobilization for specific projects but rarely provide sustainable institutional support. They can impose high administrative burdens, which is especially problematic for underresourced teams. Platform algorithms may also reinforce bias, disadvantaging less visible agendas or marginalized communities.<sup>97</sup>

98. In closed or repressive contexts, some organizations have explored cryptocurrency<sup>98</sup> as an alternative means to gain access to funding. Although

<sup>94</sup> See <https://accountabilitylab.org/why-accountability-lab-is-moving-to-a-co-leadership-model/>.

<sup>95</sup> See [www.apccolombia.gov.co/sites/default/files/2024-12/VF\\_Innovative%20development%20finance.pdf](http://www.apccolombia.gov.co/sites/default/files/2024-12/VF_Innovative%20development%20finance.pdf).

<sup>96</sup> According to preliminary mapping in Colombia (2022), only 22 per cent of actors using innovative financing mechanisms were NGOs. See [www.apccolombia.gov.co/sites/default/files/2024-12/VF\\_Innovative%20development%20finance.pdf](http://www.apccolombia.gov.co/sites/default/files/2024-12/VF_Innovative%20development%20finance.pdf).

<sup>97</sup> See [https://ecn1.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/ECNL%20Future%20of%20Civil%20Societies%202025%20June%202025\\_0.pdf](https://ecn1.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/ECNL%20Future%20of%20Civil%20Societies%202025%20June%202025_0.pdf).

<sup>98</sup> The Financial Action Task Force website includes a wider review of virtual assets (cryptoassets). See [www.fatf-gafi.org/en/topics/virtual-assets.html](http://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/topics/virtual-assets.html).

cryptocurrency raises concerns about volatility, speculation, regulatory gaps, privacy, inclusion and environmental impact, it remains a potential area for further exploration, particularly for groups cut off from formal financial systems.

99. An increasing number of organizations are offering services to generate core income, particularly to cover operational costs not typically funded through traditional aid. While this can be a useful stopgap, it often requires reallocation of staff from mission-driven work and risks diluting organizational focus. For smaller civil society organizations, the pressure to fund immediate needs is overly burdensome and can undermine long-term strategic planning and sustainability.

100. In response to urgent needs, some larger organizations have stepped in as fiscal sponsors or intermediaries, meaning that smaller organizations, rather than receiving funding directly, now receive it through larger organizations. While this approach has helped to sustain specific actors and agendas, it also alters inter-organizational dynamics, shifting social and political relationships and introducing new hierarchies and operational demands. For lead organizations, the administrative and political responsibilities of this role may stretch already limited capacity, adding to the burden on the remaining organizations.

101. To address funding and legal constraints, many civil society organizations are forging or strengthening cross-sector alliances, such as with the academic community, independent media, cultural groups and faith-based communities, and in some cases with the private sector. These partnerships have helped to defend civic freedoms, diversify funding sources, broaden message reach and sustain shared agendas in wider communities, enhancing legitimacy and advocacy capacity. Some organizations are also rethinking their engagement with private sector actors, particularly where such actors can support actions that civil society organizations can no longer perform, such as providing legal defence for human rights victims. Collaborations with pro bono law firms are emerging as a promising avenue,<sup>99</sup> provided that conflicts of interest are addressed transparently and early on.

102. New regional, thematic and international networks have emerged, and existing ones have expanded. These networks have played a vital role in monitoring the impact of funding cuts, offering support and protection to affected activists and groups, amplifying alerts, coordinating advocacy efforts, and bridging knowledge and financial literacy gaps within the civil society sector. Regional and global organizations have helped to facilitate peer learning, financial strategy-building, joint mobilization, and the leveraging of hope and resilience.

103. An integrated approach to care and safety has gained traction, not just as a technical need but as an institutional political commitment. This includes physical and digital security protocols, emotional well-being and support systems, internal team dynamics and the creation of safe, human-centred environments. These practices, championed by supporting organizations and networks, are particularly vital for deteriorating and emotionally strained contexts, especially for women, youth and LGBTIQI persons.<sup>100</sup>

104. Fleeing increasingly restrictive environments, many organizations have been relocating. This requires supportive host Governments, respectful host communities

<sup>99</sup> At the European Pro Bono Week launch event, held on 10 June 2025 and attended by the Special Rapporteur, proposals by the European Civic Forum and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights were discussed. See <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ToTYcOj6Qw9gyiX0ROhBUKXFW43rff-R/edit>.

<sup>100</sup> The network of cultural centres of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation could be a good practice to study. See submission from Government of Spain.

and solidarity from the broader civil society ecosystem, and highlights the urgency of strengthening protection from transnational repression.

105. While the actions that have been taken are promising, civil society cannot bear the weight of the current crisis alone. Addressing this challenge requires strong and committed leadership, rooted in human rights obligations, by Governments, donors, multilateral institutions, the business sector and other key actors. Only through the collective and participatory construction of an improved aid system can we scale up successful innovations, address existing gaps – not only in resources but also in political leadership – and safeguard the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association as a cornerstone of democratic and peaceful societies.

## **VI. Conclusions and recommendations: principles for a sustainable aid system for enabling civic freedoms**

106. To defend human rights values, advance the development agenda, ensure civil society sustainability and uphold the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, it is essential to increase resources, remove barriers to access to resources, and restore and strengthen the international aid architecture. Continuing business as usual would overlook critical lessons learned. A transparent, inclusive and democratic process is urgently needed to redefine the principles, goals and governance of international cooperation rooted in international solidarity and shared responsibility. The following principles are foundational for a more just and equitable aid system that enables civic freedoms and should be ensured by States, individually and in multilateral settings, and other relevant stakeholders:

(a) **Ensure equitable access to resources as an essential component of the right to freedom of association.** Legal frameworks and administrative procedures should fully uphold the right to receive domestic and international funding. Repressive laws (including “foreign agent”-type laws) should be repealed, and appropriate protection should be provided for individuals and organizations that are facing reprisals related to legitimate financial support;

(b) **Institutionalize meaningful participation.** Civil society and grassroots and social movements must be engaged at all stages of development cooperation and aid cycles, including design, implementation and monitoring. Participation must be inclusive and accessible, addressing territorial, linguistic and technological barriers, and reflect international human rights standards, with particular attention to the inclusion of women and girls, youth, LGBTQI persons and racial minorities, among others. Participation in multilateral forums should also be strengthened and safeguarded;

(c) **Make civic space protection a core priority.** Bilateral and multilateral development and security agreements should include enforceable civic space protection clauses, monitored by independent, inclusive mechanisms with civil society representation. Emergency protection instruments – legal, financial and digital – must be reinforced to support human rights defenders, activists and organizations operating under threat or in exile;

(d) **Align technology with human rights and equity.** The digital tools and platforms involved in aid delivery, including crowdfunding and cryptocurrency services, should be governed by rights-based safeguards. Reducing the digital divide and strengthening data protection and equity in access are key to upholding international human rights obligations in the digital sphere;



(e) Apply a human rights-based approach to security. Security policies and budgetary decisions must be firmly rooted in international human rights standards and designed to foster democratic resilience and inclusive governance. Civil society actors should be treated as partners in the design, oversight and implementation of security strategies, and inclusive civic spaces must be preserved, enabled and promoted;

(f) Ensure inclusive and accountable multilateral governance. States must fulfil their financial obligations to multilateral institutions, prioritizing support for low-capacity countries in line with international commitments. Aid processes, including within the United Nations, should be transparent, democratic and inclusive. Overreliance on conditional or extrabudgetary funding should be reduced so as to strengthen predictability and equity in resource distribution;

(g) Place human dignity and planetary sustainability at the centre of financing for development. Financing for development should be grounded in human rights, democratic governance and environmental sustainability; serve human dignity and the planet rather than private profit; and avoid harmful trade-offs, particularly those driven by the interests of extractive industries and undue lobbying influence;<sup>101</sup>

(h) Equalize power and decolonize cooperation. Development cooperation should enable local actors to lead in identifying priorities, shaping strategies and monitoring progress. At least 50 per cent of aid resources should be directed to national and local actors, including those without legal status. International NGOs can play a constructive role in supporting local efforts, connecting agendas and facilitating knowledge exchange. Partnerships must be grounded in trust, mutual respect and horizontal collaboration;

(i) Strengthen civil society resilience, sustainability and autonomy. Governments and donors should prioritize flexible, multi-year funding that supports institutional development and long-term social impact. Accountability mechanisms should reflect both tangible and intangible contributions. Emergency funding must be accessible to vulnerable and underfunded organizations and agendas (see above), especially those operating in repressive contexts;

(j) Democratize the funding architecture and increase the diversity of sources with decentralized coordination systems, ensuring: (i) strengthened fiscal policies; (ii) accessible public and multilateral funds for grassroots and non-traditional actors; (iii) South-South funding mechanisms for cross-sectoral, multi-country or multi-regional interventions; (iv) a reassessment of the role of intermediaries to enhance transparency, reduce bureaucracy and redirect value to communities; and (v) human rights-centred engagement with private capital;

(k) Enhance donor coordination and advocacy, which are essential for greater impact, efficiency and knowledge-sharing. Donors should actively<sup>102</sup> champion narrative shifts, amplifying success stories and countering harmful narratives, invest in building civil society capacities, provide political backing to support the legitimacy and relevance of civil society organizations, and oppose harassment, including through legal means;

<sup>101</sup> See <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/transition-minerals/revealed-trump-linked-firms-cash-in-on-mineral-lobbying-deals-as-us-cuts-aid/>.

<sup>102</sup> See <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Summary%20Note%20-%20GB%20All%20Signatories%20Meeting%20-%2012%20June%202025.pdf>.



(l) **Support financial innovation grounded in equity. Innovative financing approaches should prioritize community-led, participatory models. Strengthening financial literacy among civil society actors can foster more equitable and sustainable collaboration while mitigating the risks associated with market-based mechanisms and growing corporate influence.**

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