PROMOTING AND DEFENDING CIVIC SPACE
STRATEGIC LEARNINGS FROM THE FAIR FOR ALL PROGRAMME

Stephanie Milan, Annida Putri, Alice Kooij, Camille Dancoisne and Federica Cova

Oxfam Novib

OXFAM

This research report examines how civil society actors (CSAs) navigate shrinking civic space while defending fundamental rights and advancing inclusive and fair trade and value chains. Using document review, focus group discussions and key informant interviews across diverse contexts, the study identifies recurring challenges such as restrictions on protest and freedom of expression; a backlash against actors addressing sensitive topics; exclusion from decision-making; and undue corporate influence. In response to these challenges, this report highlights civic space strategies that CSOs use to adapt, resist and innovate. It also illustrates how civic actors continue to safeguard rights, promote accountability and strengthen more equitable economic systems.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH REPORT

Community activist Bettie Fortuin (Auntie Bettie, middle) leads a picket action outside Matroosberg Farm in De Doorns on 17 March 2023.
Photo Alexa Sedgwick/Oxfam

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU: African Union
CONTAR: National Confederation of Rural Workers and Family Farmers (Brazil)
CSAs: Civil Society Actors
CSOs: Civil Society Organizations
CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility
EU: European Union
F4A: FAIR for ALL
FCRA: Foreign Contribution Regulation Act
FGDs: Focus Group Discussions
FPIC: Free, Prior and Informed Consent
KIIs: Key Informant Interviews
LINK Learning, Innovation and Knowledge unit (Oxfam Novib)
OECD: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals
Sida: The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SOMO: The Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations
SMEs: Small and Medium-sized enterprises
UN: United Nations
XR: Extinction Rebellion

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The FAIR for ALL (F4A) programme aims to strengthen global civil society by enabling both cross-border and in-country collective action for more inclusive, just and sustainable trade and value chains. Civic space is central to this mission, and understanding its evolving dynamics is essential for the effective implementation of the programme.

This research examines the strategies that civil society actors (CSAs) employ to safeguard and contribute to the expansion of civic space. It particularly focuses on the protection of fundamental freedoms and rights, and the promotion of inclusive trade and value chains in 12 countries[1] participating in the F4A programme.

Civic space refers to the enabling environment in which individuals and communities can organize, express themselves and influence decision-making. It relies on three key preconditions: structure, institutions and enabling conditions (Oxfam, 2017).

When these elements are restricted – such as through laws, digital surveillance, the suppression of dissent, and violence against CSAs – civic space shrinks as is the case in many countries today. At the same time, civic space is also shifting with the emergence of new actors, tools and dynamics that influence how participation and advocacy take place.

The defence of fundamental rights related to civic space occurs under restrictive conditions society organizations (CSOs) and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs); government suspicion of foreign influence; and limits on discussing sensitive issues – undermine the ability of CSOs to operate effectively and defend fundamental rights. CSAs often work under extreme risks, yet they continue responding to attacks against civic space with strategies including coalition-building, digital advocacy, documenting human rights violations, engaging in international advocacy, and providing emergency support.

These efforts, however, come with high personal and organizational costs. CSAs are frequently exposed to heightened stress and personal risk, making mental health and wellbeing support indispensable. Simultaneously, financial instability – driven by donor budget cuts, reliance on short-term grants, and restrictive laws that limit the use of foreign funds – threatens access to funding, the sustainability of grassroots organizations, and limits their capacity over time. To address these funding challenges, CSOs across F4A countries have adopted a variety of strategies to strengthen their resilience and continuity.

These strategies include:

- **building networks and alliances;**
- **diversifying donors;**
- **integrating civic-space strategies into broader programmes;**
- **negotiating flexible funding lines;**
- **and developing income-generating initiatives.**

One of the key contributions of this report is bridging the information gap at the intersection

Above Volunteers carrying messages in Maryland, Lagos State, Nigeria. Photo: Taiwo Aina for Oxfam Novib

in of civic space with inclusive and just trade and value chains. In examining this nexus, it shows that the CSOs within the F4A project that work in value chains and trade are facing similar challenges despite differing national contexts. These issues include legal repression, excessive corporate influence, restricted civic participation, disputes over land governance, weak collective bargaining structures, and limited engagement with the private sector. In response, many organizations have developed innovative strategies to sustain and expand their civic role. Notable examples include supporting grassroots farmers with collective action, strengthening women's leadership in local unions, and building platforms that enable marginalized groups to influence trade and value chain policies.

In conclusion, CSAs involved in the F4A programme continue to adapt, resist and innovate in response to civic space restrictions. The programme plays a direct role in this process by supporting partners to develop, carry out and refine their strategies, for example through shared learning spaces, joint advocacy initiatives, and access to international networks. Evidence shows that CSOs make strategic use of public spaces, as well as media and digital platforms, carefully tailoring their messaging to suit political contexts. Coalition-building is a core strategy, whether through local alliances for Fair-Trade advocacy or discreet international networks in conflict settings. International advocacy continues to be an important way to gain support, although it must be used with caution regarding contexts of restricted or closed civic space. Growing attention to mental health and the integration of gender-sensitive approaches by CSOs is contributing to the strengthening of civic space efforts. However, addressing funding instability and persistent gender inequalities and discrimination remains essential for the long-term resilience of civil society.

CSAS INVOLVED IN THE F4A PROGRAMME CONTINUE TO ADAPT, RESIST AND INNOVATE IN RESPONSE TO CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS.

Oxfam Novib Women's March on the 5th of March in Amsterdam. Photo: Dingema Mol

INTRODUCTION

The FAIR for ALL (F4A) programme is a five-year initiative (2021–25) funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Power of Voices strategic partnership[2].

It is led by a consortium comprising Oxfam Novib, the Huairou Commission, the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO, from its acronym in Dutch), and Third World Network-Africa. The programme collaborates with CSOs, alliances and social movements in 14 countries across Africa, Asia and Europe[3]. The core objective of F4A is to strengthen global civil society to create space and mobilize collective action across borders with the aim of achieving more inclusive, just and sustainable trade and value chains.

As civic space continues to shift and shrink globally, civil society actors (CSAs) face growing restrictions and attacks that hinder their operations. The *Mid-Term Review* of the F4A programme confirmed this trend; it highlighted the strategic value of gaining a deeper understanding of civic space across diverse contexts. In response, this study aims to:

- Understand civic space and its relevance in different contexts, while bridging the information gap at its intersection with inclusive and just trade and value chains.
- Examine the challenges and dynamics of civic space, identifying key patterns, factors, strategies and lessons that influence its defence and expansion across different contexts, especially in the field of value chains and trade work.
- Explore strategies for supporting and enhancing civic space, considering the roles of CSOs/INGOs, government entities, donors and the private sector.

The value of this study lies in its ability to:

1. Document successful initiatives to build a track record that can guide future programming and advocacy;
2. Provide insights for replicating and adapting strategies in similar contexts; and
3. Foster collaboration and learning among F4A consortium members and partners, stakeholders such as the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other donors, the private sector and CSOs.

In doing so, **it offers timely and practical tools for advocating for the protection of fundamental rights and amplifying voices that are often silenced**.

This study is structured in five chapters. Each chapter is organized around sub-themes that highlight common challenges across different contexts, along with corresponding strategies to address them. Chapter 1 provides an overview of civic space in the countries included in this study. Chapter 2 outlines the research methodology applied. Chapter 3 explores the strategies used by CSOs to defend civic space. Chapter 4 presents key conclusions. Finally, Chapter 5 offers recommendations derived from the analysis and co-creation process with colleagues and partners in F4A countries.

Hilda Flavia Nakabuye, climate activist in Uganda.
Photo: Emmanuel Museruka/Oxfam

1. CIVIC SPACE OVERVIEW IN F4A COUNTRIES

This chapter describes the state of civic space in the F4A countries participating in this study and highlights the challenges faced by CSOs across contexts. Our analysis is based on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with programme partners and the 2024 CIVICUS Monitor ratings[4] (classified as 'Open', 'Narrowed', 'Obstructed', 'Repressed' or 'Closed').[5]

Brazil

Brazil's civic space is classified as 'obstructed'. In recent years, Brazil has experienced significant shifts in its civic space and public policy landscape. Under the Bolsonaro administration (2019–22), civil society faced severe restrictions, with many participatory governance bodies dismantled, limiting their influence over national policy. With the election of Lula in 2022, a renewed commitment to civic participation emerged, notably through the reinstatement of the country's Social Participation Council and the creation of the Interministerial Social Participation System, both of which build on institutions first introduced during his earlier presidency. Since these councils were established by law, their restoration has opened institutional channels for citizen engagement and strengthened dialogue with social movements (Secretaria de Comunicação Social, 2023). Despite improvements in the political context, CSAs engaged in the value chain and trade work still face challenges as powerful private sector interests clash within Lula's broad political coalition and the conservatives in the National Congress.

Cambodia

Cambodia's civic space is classified as 'repressed'. This repressive environment is closely tied to the country's political context: after decades in power, Hun Sen retired in 2023, handing power to his son Hun Manet following elections that were neither free nor transparent (Ratcliffe, 2023). Authorities use restrictive laws to criminalize Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), trade unionists, environmental activists and journalists. Additionally, the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations remains a powerful tool, granting authorities broad powers to shut down groups or deny their registration. Despite these challenges, online HRDs, especially young people, have found indirect and creative ways to exercise their freedom of expression. Information and expression related to trade; value chains; micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); women-led small-scale farmers; the informal economy; and agricultural cooperatives are less sensitive and face less scrutiny and intimidation (F4A, 2021).

Ghana

Ghana remains a 'narrowed' civic space. While the country has a relatively open environment for civil society, there have been instances of police brutality against protesters and attempts to pass laws that could restrict freedom of expression. At the national level, journalism faces threats from the mining sector. Journalists who report on mining activities – particularly those who address the negative impacts of irresponsible mining – have been intimidated and threatened. CSOs continue to advocate for greater protections and reforms to safeguard civic freedoms and rights.

India

India's civic space is rated as 'repressed'. The government has increasingly used laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) to target human rights defenders, journalists and NGOs.[6] These laws have been applied with varying severity, ranging from restrictions on foreign funding to the suspension of tax-exempt status for CSOs; this has created a climate of uncertainty and pressure (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2021).

Indonesia

Indonesia is rated as 'obstructed'. The country has experienced the repression of protests, during which security forces have reportedly used excessive force against demonstrators. In late August 2025, this repression escalated during the country's largest protests in years, sparked by public outrage over a new law granting

lawmakers additional perks and benefits; has generated several casualties in the unrest (Dela Paz, 2025; Sulaiman and Suroyo, 2025). Beyond protests, restrictive laws and regulations are also used to silent dissenting voices. HRDs and journalists continue to face harassment and legal threats, which hinder their ability to operate freely. In addition, digital attacks on human rights defenders and journalists, such as wiretapping, hacking social media accounts or the unauthorized distribution of personal data, are employed to intimidate or weaken their activism (F4A, 2021).

Mozambique

Mozambique's civic space is rated as 'repressed'. There is openness in some areas, however, the country has experienced a deterioration of civic freedoms, particularly after the 2023 and 2024 elections which were marked by violence, intimidation and increased pressure on human rights defenders. Human rights violations have worsened with increased physical attacks and threats, as well as the arbitrary detention of journalists and human rights defenders. Press freedom is under significant threat and CSOs operate in a hostile environment in which they experience unwarranted restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly (F4A, 2021).

The Netherlands

In 2024, the Netherlands' civic space rating was downgraded from 'open' to 'narrowed'. This shift reflects the increasing repression of protest rights, particularly around activism related to the climate or solidarity with Palestinians (CIVICUS, 2024). Authorities have searched the homes of HRDs and disrupted peaceful environmental protests using water cannons and mass arrests. Politicians and the media have also advanced negative narratives against HRDs, gender equality advocates ('gender ideology' and 'wokeism'[7]), NGOs and the judiciary. This raises concerns about democratic commitments and protections for peaceful assembly and expression.

The women's group sit under a tree in Michika, Nigeria. Photo: Dinovate Solutions

Nigeria

Nigeria is classified as a 'repressed' civic space, although the work of the F4A programme is contributing to some positive outcomes, such as the Supreme Court's 2025 ruling on the Freedom of Information Act. However, journalists and human rights defenders still face harassment, arrests and violence, while the government imposes internet shutdowns and censors the media during unrest and elections, undermining expression and access to information. Moreover, gender disparities, rooted in socio-cultural norms, legal frameworks and institutional practices, remain a challenge in the country (F4A, 2021).

Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)

Civic space in OPT is rated as 'closed', although some work on social, developmental and economic issues is taking place through the F4A programme, including advocacy with authorities in the OPT. The Palestinian Authority influences how CSOs work, limits freedom of expression or act, and to some extent supports the restrictive measures imposed by others, while CSOs continue to be left out of law-making and policy discussions. Additionally, the Israeli government has increasingly restricted civic space, impeding the work of foreign and national entities while also heavily impacting social networks and basic services (F4A, 2021). Research participants explained that the shrinking civic space in OPT occurs on three levels. On the first level, the regulatory framework governing civic space is increasingly restrictive, while weak institutions fail to protect rights. On the second level, the Israeli government undermines civil society through military actions and direct attacks on human rights defenders, journalists and CSOs. On the third level, political pressures and international funding limitations restrict CSOs' operations.[8]

South Africa

South Africa's civic space is rated as 'obstructed'. Although the country has robust democratic institutions and a progressive constitution, civil society faces increasing challenges. Human rights defenders work under dangerous conditions, experiencing intimidation and limited resources. Media freedom is under pressure, with journalists enduring threats and harassment for exposing abuses of power. While the legal framework and judiciary are designed to protect civic space, the political climate has grown increasingly hostile compared to a decade ago. Violence against student protesters in 2015 and police brutality during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown illustrate a narrowing environment discouraging the right to protest.

Uganda

Uganda's civic space is rated as 'repressed'. Civil society actors face surveillance, intimidation and legal restrictions. Arrests, intimidation and physical threats against HRDs and journalists are on the rise. During the 'March to Parliament' demonstration against corruption in June 2024, over 100 human rights defenders were arrested and, by the end of 2024, some remained in detention (Al Jazeera, 2024). The government uses laws that limit the operation of NGOs and suppress freedom of expression. Digital platforms, while offering avenues for expression, are also subject to control and censorship, restricting their effectiveness in promoting civic engagement.

Vietnam

Vietnam's civic space is classified as 'closed'. CSAs face ongoing challenges, including surveillance, administrative barriers in project approval, and complex legal compliance requirements. Despite these constraints, F4A actors continue to engage by building trust, fostering constructive relationships with stakeholders, and strengthening their awareness of legal and compliance obligations.

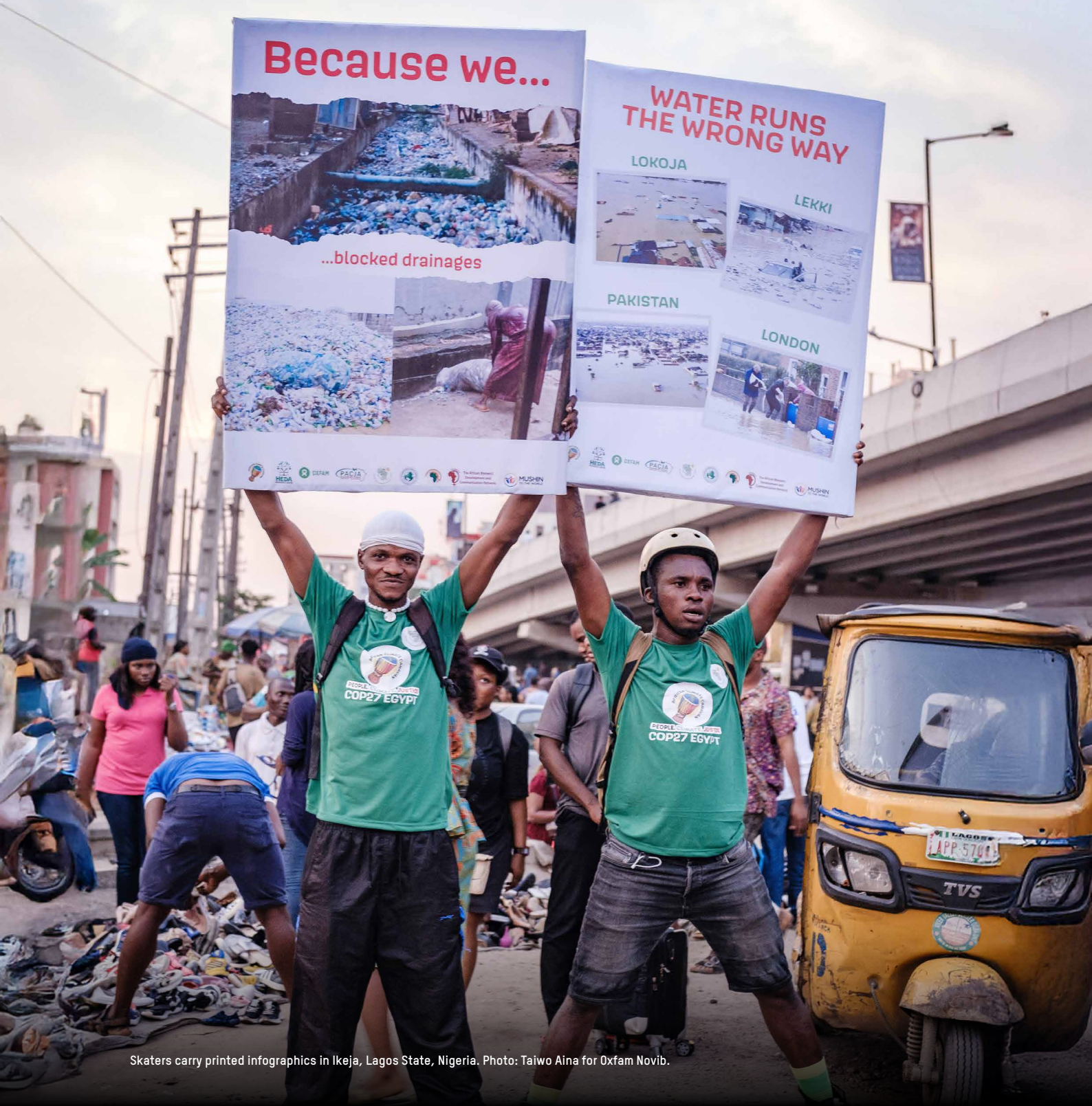
SUMMARY

This overview highlights a persistent and, in many contexts, worsening trend of shrinking and shifting civic space across F4A countries. CSAs have nevertheless demonstrated resilience and innovation, adopting strategies to safeguard civic space, amplify marginalized voices, and sustain their activities under increasingly adverse and at times high-risk conditions. Given the heterogeneity of contexts and actors, there is no universal approach; **civic space strategies must be context-specific and shaped by the identity, capacity and positionality of each organization.** The following chapters analyse these strategies in depth, illustrating how civil society navigates constraints and develops adaptive responses to sustain its role.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, combining complementary methods, to ensure that insights into the challenges and strategies were comprehensive and grounded in lived realities.

The methodology followed a sequential and integrated process that included a desk review, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs). Each stage was designed to build upon others, allowing for the triangulation of data and ensuring that the analysis reflected both documented evidence and the diverse perspectives of CSAs directly engaged in advocacy and rights-based work.



Skaters carry printed infographics in Ikeja, Lagos State, Nigeria. Photo: Taiwo Aina for Oxfam Novib.

Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to enable diversity of participants and civic space contexts relevant to the F4A programme. Participants were identified in consultation with consortium partners, civic space advisers and country teams, with attention to organizational type, thematic focus and regional representation. Participants were selected based on three criteria:

1. active involvement in civic space advocacy;
2. direct experience navigating restrictive environments;
3. willingness to contribute insights to the study.

Instruments for data collection

The research design prioritized three instruments of data collection to balance contextual relevance with participatory engagement. First, the desk review provided the foundation for the study by consolidating knowledge from existing F4A project documentation and related literature. This phase offered a broad overview of civic space conditions across different contexts and highlighted common patterns as well as country-specific nuances. Second, FGDs served as a participatory method to elicit collective reflections among CSAs. Through semi-structured conversations, participants were encouraged to share experiences, exchange perspectives and knowledge, and reflect collectively on the challenges and opportunities related to civic space. Third, KIIs were conducted to deepen the understanding of specific issues. These one-on-one conversations with individuals possessing specialized knowledge allowed the research team to capture detailed insights that might not surface in group settings, especially with regard to very sensitive contexts.

Desk review

The research team reviewed documents including outcome statements, capacity assessments, baseline reports, mid-term reviews, training materials, and notes from Communities of Practice. This was a non-systematic review, aimed at identifying insights on challenges and strategies from existing project documentation rather than producing an exhaustive or comprehensive evidence base.

Data collection and analysis

In addition to data collected from existing documents, the researchers conducted five FGDs with a total of 27 people, organized by thematic cluster to facilitate peer engagement and knowledge exchange among participants working in similar contexts or confronting similar challenges, and five KIIs. All FGDs and KIIs were conducted in English and transcribed before analysis.

The analysis adopted an integrated qualitative approach that combined findings from the three data sources. To analyse documents identified in the desk review, two multilingual researchers used MAXQDA software[9] to thematically analyse the documents and identify themes that were either frequently referenced or highly relevant to the research question (even if infrequently referenced). This process led to the identification of 27 themes related to challenges and 28 themes related to strategies.

To analyse data obtained through the FGDs and KIIs, researchers identified themes using an inductive approach. Statements, reflections and experiences shared in the FGDs and KIIs were coded and clustered into categories that aligned with the 27 and 28 overarching themes identified during the desk review. The iterative nature of the analysis allowed the research team to refine categories as new insights emerged. This approach ensured that findings were both systematic and flexible, capturing the complexity of civic space dynamics.

As a final step, a validation workshop was facilitated with the research participants. This session enabled joint reflection, ensuring that findings resonated with those who had contributed to the study. It also provided space for the co-creation of recommendations and mutual learning which was appreciated by participants. The final validated framework included nine challenges and roughly 40 strategies.

The Imam with community members outdoors under a tree on the premises of a school in Adamawa State, Nigeria. Photo: Dinovate Solutions

Research limitations and strengths

This study had several limitations alongside notable strengths. The first limitation concerned the scope of civic space as the qualitative evidence was restricted to contexts where F4A partners operate. Based on this, findings should be understood as illustrative rather than representative of entire civic space landscapes, whether at national, regional or global levels. This limitation was mitigated by triangulating findings with desk-review sources to strengthen the validity of conclusions made.

The second limitation related to limited representatives. In some FGDs, there was insufficient representation of countries or regional contexts, while in other cases it was not possible to reach key informants for interviews. Follow-up KIIs were conducted to help address these gaps; however, some participants from specific countries and thematic areas were still unable to take part. Moreover, from an intersectional perspective, certain voices and lived experiences, across gender, age and other dimensions, may have been less visible. This limited the diversity of perspectives captured.

The third limitation related to security and confidentiality concerns, given the sensitivity of civic space. This may have led to self-censorship among participants and influenced the depth of information they shared. This was mitigated by creating safe conversational environments, including participants checking surroundings and disabling monitoring devices (for example, switching off mobile phones, laptops, or voice assistants that could record or track conversations). Moreover, all data was anonymized to safeguard participants. While this limited contextual detail and reduced analytical richness at times, it was necessary to protect participants.

Finally, language barriers were present as research participants communicated in English which was not the first language for many of them. While this may have led to a loss of certain nuances and culturally specific expressions, this was mitigated by employing multilingual team members and clarifying meanings during discussions.

Despite the limitations faced, the study demonstrated important strengths. The use of different methods, combining desk review, FGDs and KIIs, enabled both breadth and depth of insights by integrating multiple sources of evidence. The participatory orientation of the research created safe spaces for dialogue and collective reflection among CSAs, which enhanced the contextual validity of the findings. Moreover, the iterative process of data collection and analysis allowed emerging themes to be cross-checked across instruments, thereby strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the results. Taken together, **these elements contributed to a robust, contextually grounded and participatory analysis that is well-aligned with the study's objectives**.

3. CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

This chapter examines the strategies adopted by CSAs to defend fundamental rights in contexts where civic space is under pressure. It highlights how restrictions often emerge when CSAs challenge political and economic interests, making the defence of rights a complex and ongoing struggle.

In addition to analysing these dynamics, the chapter also explores how the protection of civic space connects with the work of CSAs on inclusive and fair trade value chains, showing how access to rights and participation are essential for building more equitable economic systems. The study is organized around key challenges that CSAs encounter, and this chapter presents concrete strategies to address each challenge. These strategies have been developed to navigate restrictions, protect rights, and strengthen CSOs' contribution to fairer and more inclusive value chains.

Limitations to the right to protest

The right to protest is a central component of civic space, enabling individuals and groups to voice concerns, influence decision-making and demand accountability (Sapienza, Manzotti and Patel, 2023). Yet, across diverse contexts, increasing restrictions on the right to protest are justified on the basis of protecting public health, public order and stability. Such restrictions not only undermine democratic participation but also directly affect efforts to hold public and private sectors accountable. Communities, workers and HRDs are prevented from challenging harmful business practices, demanding fairer working conditions, and influencing the policies that shape economic systems.

In the **Netherlands**, **South Africa**, **Nigeria**, **Indonesia** and **Cambodia**, the **right to protest** is being increasingly limited, resulting in the arrests of people peacefully protesting and expressing dissent. In some cases, protest rights are denied based on perceived political orientation or affiliation. In **Cambodia**, for example, FGD participants highlighted a sharp contrast between government-aligned NGOs and traditional NGOs,[10] with the latter often denied protest permits under the pretext of maintaining social order.

Similarly, in **the Netherlands**, research participants noted growing restrictions on protest rights (Breed Mensenrechten Overleg (BMO), 2025), exemplified by the January 2023 Extinction Rebellion (XR) protest in The Hague, where HRDs blocked the A12 highway to demand an end to fossil fuel subsidies (Efthymiou and Scherpenisse, 2023). Two days before the protest, police targeted eight XR climate activists, of whom seven were arrested for mobilizing people to join the action — an unprecedented action in the country (F4A, 2023).

> **"They were lifted out of their beds and arrested for sedition. So, what is sedition?[11] I had not heard of it before that moment […] But apparently when you mobilize for demonstrations the Government thinks [it is] illegal."**
> Research participant based in the Netherlands

In **South Africa**, restrictions also take the form of confrontational negotiations with authorities, who often impose obstacles such as limiting protest routes. As one key informant explained during an interview:

> **"We were chanting and singing and waiting […] for more than an hour, […] and then they started to shoot us with rubber [bullets]"[12]**
> Research participant based in South Africa

BOX 1: GENDER-SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES AND EXPERIENCES

Across regions, women and other people from marginalized groups face compounded barriers to protest including state violence, social stigma and impunity. In Indonesia, women resisting military-led land seizures were forced to withdraw as violence escalated. In **Cambodia**, protests and arrests are frequently accompanied by sexual harassment, which is rarely prosecuted, creating fear and discouraging women from engaging in journalism or activism. In India, LGBTQIA+ individuals, though legally recognized, still lack social acceptance, limiting their ability to protest safely. However, despite these risks, women and people from marginalized groups persist in defending human rights. For example, a research participant in **South Africa** mentioned that women often mobilize to defend labour rights by singing, carrying placards, and demanding dialogue with those in power. Even when authorities refuse to engage directly, their actions and messages still reach the public through media coverage, demonstrating women's persistence in defending civic space despite institutional disregard.

Strategies

- **Supporting the right to protest through coalitions.** Dutch CSOs, including the F4A consortium member Oxfam Novib, have together publicly supported the right to protest in solidarity with climate activists.[13] Their efforts have included attending demonstrations, engaging with the media and lobbying politicians. For example, when HRDs blocked the A12 highway, major Dutch media outlets reported on the growing concerns over the right to protest, prompting authorities to act more cautiously (F4A, 2023). A FGD participant noted that this approach on defending national civic space is relatively new for some CSOs in the Netherlands as they have traditionally focused on such issues abroad.[14] Also, CSOs such as Oxfam Novib have joined a coalition called *'Article Five'* to collectively respond to attacks on civil society, especially from right-wing actors. Rather than launching public campaigns, the coalition focuses on jointly preparing statements, sharing information and aligning responses behind the scenes.[15]
- **Amplifying women's voices against sexual harassment.** In **Cambodia**, CSOs support women facing sexual harassment during protests by raising awareness on the issue, primarily by highlighting women's experiences.[16] Media actors have also collaborated in this effort, helping to broaden visibility (Cambodian Leage for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, 2023).
- **Using social media to verbalize demands and safeguard civic space**. In contexts where physical demonstrations are restricted or risky, online platforms are increasingly used as alternative spaces for protest and civic engagement. For example, one participant illustrated how social media activism supported their efforts in ensuring that a human rights defender was released after being unjustly arrested in **Nigeria**. In **Indonesia**, CSOs strengthen public engagement by collaborating with influencers and well-known public figures on social media platforms to amplify community voices and outreach diverse audiences. In **Cambodia**, a research participant mentioned that young people are increasingly using digital spaces to express themselves, often outside of traditional NGO structures.

Erosion of freedom of expression

Across different contexts, a combination of intimidation tactics and structural restrictions progressively undermines freedom of expression, including online. These measures not only generate a pervasive climate of fear but also foster patterns of self-censorship that limit civic engagement and weaken democratic debate.

For example, in **Indonesia**, participants described the use of 'buzzers' – paid influencers who spread disinformation to discredit criticism and portray government programmes positively. CSOs also reported more subtle forms of intimidation, such as police officers visiting their offices under the pretext of conducting surveys. While no direct action was taken, their presence and questioning were perceived as a deliberate attempt to discourage activism and create a climate of fear. Similarly, in **Uganda**, a FGD participant explained

that freedom of expression is heavily curtailed, including with predictable internet shutdowns during elections.[17] These repressive contexts discourage public engagement and foster self-censorship.

Strategies

- **Building constructive engagement and collaboration by adopting adaptive strategies**. In **Vietnam**, some CSAs adopt a constructive approach by engaging through official channels to acknowledge government efforts while also raising policy challenges in a solutions-oriented manner. In **India**, organizations balance caution with collaboration, inviting officials to forums and screenings to foster dialogue and shift perceptions, though engagement is often easier at state and district levels than nationally. In **Indonesia**, CSOs increasingly work through coalitions with government and the media, using research and programme support to influence policies, particularly around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[18]
- **Diversifying strategic partnerships**. In **Cambodia**, financial institutions have become key partners in advancing social and environmental safeguards. Banks and microfinance institutions, motivated by reputation and international standards, have shown openness to civil society engagement to promote transparency and responsible practices. In **Vietnam** and **India**, academic institutions have partnered with civil society to support leadership development, joint research and policy engagement. These collaborations not only help strengthen CSAs and sustain civic participation but also provide evidence-based insights that can inform policymaking and contribute to more inclusive and responsive governance.
- **Creating alternative spaces for civic engagement**. In **Nigeria**, 'Civic Clubs' were implemented in partnership with the Anti-Corruption Agency in secondary schools and states where the F4A programme is active. These clubs serve as student-led platforms to promote civic values, raise awareness of anti-corruption, and encourage youth participation in governance processes. Complementing these efforts, a Nigerian CSO developed a platform called Gender Advocate Movement of Africa where they share learning and resources to demand gender equality. Another example in **Uganda** is the digital platform 'Civic Space TV', which is broadcast on social media to foster critical discourse on social, political and economic issues.

Syaeun is the head of Perempuan Tangguh, which supervises and trains small and medium industry businesses in her region. Photo: Kyo Umareta/Oxfam

Backlash against actors addressing sensitive topics

Restrictions on civic space are most visible when CSOs work on sensitive issues that challenge political or economic interests. This dynamic demonstrates how activism in areas such as inequality, corruption or environmental protection often triggers targeted government responses. These restrictions have direct implications not only for the defence of fundamental rights, but also for the advancement of inclusive and just trade and value chains as silenced voices limit the possibility of fair participation in shaping economic systems.

In **Cambodia**, the **Netherlands**, **Indonesia**, **Uganda**, **South Africa** and **India**, CSOs face increasing obstacles when addressing **sensitive topics**. For example, CSOs expressing dissent in **India** are experiencing the cancellation or delayed renewal of various licences and clearances, frequently based on unsubstantiated legal provisions and without sufficient explanation, undermining their organizational capacity and legitimacy. Even in a more open context, such as the **Netherlands**, research participants observed clear disparities in the authorities' responses. For instance, protesters in support of Palestinian rights often face more severe state responses, including the deployment of riot police, while climate activists typically encounter a somewhat more restrained approach.[19]

Land access is another politically charged issue that illustrates the intersection of shrinking civic space and economic interests. In **Uganda**, **Indonesia** and **South Africa**, research participants mentioned that land grabbing under the guise of government or business projects is widespread, often sidelining community voices and undermining democratic participation. This practice directly affects actions aiming at fairer and just value-chain and links to shrinking civic space; it not only restricts civil and political rights but also violates environmental, economic and social rights, particularly through the loss of land ownership and its exploitation.

Strategies

- **Language framing and media caution**. In **Cambodia** and **India**, organizations replace sensitive terms such as 'advocacy' with alternatives including 'voice for change', 'awareness', or 'public engagement'. While this reduces confrontation, in **Cambodia** such framing may still attract government suspicion, particularly when organizations are perceived as independent from state structures or not aligned with government agendas.[20] In conflict-affected countries, CSOs avoid military scrutiny by using softer terms such as 'livelihood' or 'food security' instead of 'human rights' or 'environmental impacts'. They also refrain from showing faces in public campaigns and limit direct posting to reduce risks of surveillance, harassment and arrest. Neutrality is crucial because being perceived as aligned with either armed groups or the regime can be dangerous.[21] In **Uganda**, given the potential consequences to CSOs to mitigate repressive measures from authorities (for example, shutdowns or refusing to renew their licences), some have adopted cautious communication strategies. For instance, certain organizations closely monitor what is shared on social media and limit public communication to two individuals (the expert and one public relations officer) who are authorized to represent the organization's position publicly.
- **Targeting less controversial topics**. In **Cambodia**, organizations focus on SMEs, women's economic power, and climate finance to maintain dialogue without direct conflict.[22] In contrast, some climate organizations and HRDs in the **Netherlands** adopt a confrontational stance, relying on demonstrations and media engagement to challenge government actions. However, such strategies are not easily transferable to restrictive contexts, where open confrontation can have severe repercussions.[23]
- **Using research and evidence-based advocacy as a strategic tool to address sensitive issues**. In **South Africa**, strategies for selecting advocacy tactics are informed by experience rather than formal planning. Their responsiveness and creativity, such as using research findings during protests or

campaigns to highlight injustices at international forums, have allowed them to seize opportunities as they arise. In **Indonesia**, disseminating research on corruption, trade and taxation has proven effective in advocacy, especially when findings are shared with journalists and CSAs to broaden reach.

- **Expanding alliances across sensitive issues**. In the **Netherlands**, advocacy for Palestinian rights has become an active (though contested and subject to considerable debate) part of the broader climate activism landscape. For example, communication between climate activists and those supporting Palestinian rights are becoming more frequent. This shift reflects a growing commitment within the movement to engage with complex and politically sensitive issues, and the recognition that such challenges cannot be addressed in isolation but require interconnected approaches.

Government distrust of (perceived) foreign influence

Across several countries, governments increasingly frame foreign funding to civil society as a threat to sovereignty or national security. This perception has led to restrictive regulations, the direct targeting of NGO leaders, and growing suspicion towards organizations receiving external funding. In **India**, the FCRA has narrowed the civic space and the operational capacity of CSOs by regulating their access to foreign funding. In other countries, governments are labelling CSOs as foreign agents as well, demonstrating the deterioration of trust in civil society.

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY REMAINS VITAL TO AMPLIFY VOICES FROM THE GROUND AND KEEP KEY ISSUES ON THE GLOBAL AGENDA.

Ottilia Tarutira, a participating farmer for the Ruti Irrigation Project, standing on her plot of land in Gutu District, Zimbabwe. Photo: Loliwe Phiri/Oxfam

Strategies

- **Leveraging international solidarity to raise visibility**. In some F4A countries, support from global partners has facilitated open dialogue with national authorities, bringing attention to issues such as arbitrary legal enforcement and shrinking civic space for civil society operations. International advocacy remains vital to amplify voices from the ground and keep key issues on the global agenda, especially in fragile contexts. For instance, some research participants mentioned they share documentation of violence and human rights abuses with international allies or engage in lobby tours with donors and diplomatic missions to share evidence from the ground and convey the complexity of the situation.
- **Fostering formal spaces for dialogue to express concerns and co-develop solutions.** In **Vietnam**, around 100 representatives from civil society, academia, the private sector, and media participated in a policy dialogue with government stakeholders to explore ways to build a more transparent and equitable tax and public finance system. These platforms promote mutual understanding, support evidence-informed policymaking, and strengthen collaboration between state and non-state actors. Also, CSOs in **Indonesia** are actively coordinating with government institutions to voice public interests in national planning, legislative programmes, and contributions to sustainable development reporting.

Increasing challenges to freedom of association

Restrictive state practices continue to undermine freedom of association and CSOs' operational capacities. In **Cambodia**, the burdensome and opaque registration process, often involving unofficial payments, acts as a gatekeeping mechanism that limits the formation and functioning of CSOs (F4A, 2021). In **Indonesia**, regulations concerning the registration and operation of CSOs have increasingly restricted the freedom of association. The 2017 amendment to the Law on Mass Organizations allows the government to revoke licences or dissolve organizations without judicial proceedings. Various sectors of society have protested against this regulation, yet it remains in effect to this day.

Strategies

- **Advocating for transparent registration systems**. In **Cambodia**, CSOs adopted a constructive strategy in response to widespread practices where authorities did not provide official receipts during the NGO registration process. These practices created space for non-transparent or unofficial payments, but CSOs advocated for receipt-based transactions to strengthen transparency and accountability rather than directly accusing the government of corruption. This approach prompted the government to acknowledge the issue and agree to pilot an online registration and payment system. As a result, the Ministry of Interior has launched a six-month pilot (July to December 2025) for online registration of national NGOs.[24]
- **CSOs continue to adapt and strengthen their capacities to sustain operations and uphold legitimacy in evolving regulatory environments**. For example, in **Vietnam**, this has included efforts to align with national frameworks and demonstrate accountability, contributing to constructive engagement with government institutions.[25] In **India**, one of the CSOs in the FGD has developed strict compliance with financial reporting deadlines and legal spending limits, such as administrative costs not exceeding 20% of total funding. Moreover, they mentioned that their staff received training to ensure the accurate documentation of expenses and adherence to these regulations.
- **Minimizing risks and constraints through strategic legal identities**. Although the participants from the **Netherlands** did not report significant challenges in establishing or running CSOs, there are certain legal ways of functioning that help maintain a sense of security for HRDs. A FGD participant explained that their organisation functions as an informal network that cannot be directly sued. Its financial operations are managed through a separate legal entity (*Stichting* in Dutch), creating a legal separation that reduces the liability of both individual HRDs and the association itself.[26]

Limited and uncertain funding opportunities

CSOs across the globe face numerous challenges in securing funding to sustain their activities; this concern became particularly evident during the course of this research as major donors announced significant budget cuts. These cuts have directly affected some of the F4A partners and the coalitions they work with, reducing their ability to implement planned and future activities. While the nature of funding challenges varies by region, common themes emerged. In particular, CSOs working on sensitive issues, such as human rights and civic space, reported being disproportionately affected as donors often consider such activities contentious; they are therefore more vulnerable to financial withdrawal.

In the **OPT**, one of the most significant challenges faced by CSOs is the imposition of political conditions by international funding agencies. These conditions are often put in place in response to allegations made by the Israeli authorities towards Palestinian CSOs. Consequently, the reduction in funding has led to cuts in programme activities, making it challenging to maintain previous levels of civic engagement and support.

Ugandan CSOs have faced significant impacts due to the closing of USAID in 2025, leading to a reduced pool of funding opportunities and increased competition among CSOs. This has made it challenging for organizations to achieve their goals. Similarly, CSOs in **Mozambique** have experienced significant funding cuts, particularly from USAID, which has affected their ability to carry out activities. Some CSOs have had to reduce staff and scale back their movements and activities due to these funding restrictions. In **Cambodia**, CSOs have seen a significant reduction in funding from various sources, including the EU and other international donors. For example, Sida (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), which has long played a key role in supporting civic space and human rights, is now phasing out its support. This shift has weakened the backing available to human rights organizations.

Strategies

- **Building networks and alliances**. CSOs in **Uganda** have focused on building strong networks and alliances with other CSOs and international organizations. This enables them to share resources and support each other in times of need.
- **Donor diversification**. In **South Africa** and **Cambodia**, organizations maintain a diverse pool of donors for their different programmes. This helps them to mitigate the risk of losing a single funding source.
- **Alternative sources of income**. CSOs have created business centres to generate income; this provides additional support for organizations and staff. Sustainable business models aim to provide services such as renting space, selling products and offering training.
- **Ensuring access to flexible and emergency funds**. In response to shrinking donor support, some CSOs emphasized the importance of ensuring that funding proposals include flexible resources and emergency lines to provide quick support during crises. By maintaining a degree of financial flexibility, CSOs are better positioned to sustain their activities and protect staff even when external funding becomes uncertain or delayed.
- **Advocacy for sustainable funding and enabling frameworks**. CSOs in **Indonesia** are actively working to secure more supportive funding systems and policy environments. For example, they are promoting a national framework to strengthen the philanthropic sector and advocating for the establishment of an endowment fund that would provide support, especially for grassroots organizations. Additionally, CSOs in Indonesia are monitoring government procurement policies to ensure fair opportunities for collaboration and access to funding for civil society.

Threats to safety and wellbeing

Many CSAs face increasing pressure, stress, and even risks to their safety in their efforts to defend civic space and specifically in their work to promote just and inclusive value chains and trade. Addressing their wellbeing is not only urgent but essential for sustaining their engagement in the long term.

'Security, psychosocial support and wellbeing should definitely be part of future projects.'

Research participant based in Mozambique

CSOs across different contexts are increasingly prioritizing mental health and psychosocial support. This focus is crucial for ensuring the wellbeing of HRDs and staff, as well as their families and communities. It can help them to cope with stress, trauma and the emotional demands of their work.

Strategies

- **Psychological and emotional support for civil society**. In the **Netherlands**, there is a strong emphasis on psychological and emotional support during climate protests. HRDs have access to therapists, post-action debriefings, and buddy systems. This approach ensures that participants can express their emotions freely. In the **OPT**, CSOs are supported through counselling and support groups to help them cope with trauma and stress. Innovative approaches such as psychodrama and secondary trauma support are also offered to frontline workers and community leaders. Participants emphasized that this type of psychosocial support is not just beneficial but often a necessary precondition for sustaining their activism and continuing community work.
- **Promoting open communication and emotional expression**. In **Indonesia** and **India**, organizations foster a culture of open communication where staff regularly share field experiences, challenges and insights through open dialogue. This can help to mitigate the stress they experience due to being exposed to threats and negative narratives.'
- **Institutional wellbeing and safeguarding policies**. **Nigeria** implements safeguarding policies to ensure that staff know the right channels to report harassment or threats. **Mozambique**'s approach includes building broader networks, such as the Mozambican Human Rights Defenders Network, to provide psychosocial and legal support.
- **Community and organizational wellbeing practices**. CSOs offer training sessions focused on psychosocial support and wellbeing. Additionally, some research participants mentioned that their organizations hold regular review meetings and annual activities for wellbeing, including motivational talks. This fosters a sense of community and moral support.
- **Digital safety protocols**. As online threats rise, CSOs are increasingly focusing on cybersecurity and capacity-sharing to ensure the online safety and digital-skills strengthening of their staff. Approaches used by CSOs in **India** and **Uganda** include regular initiatives and trainings on cyber security and safety. Similarly, a partner organization in **Cambodia** is building digital safety awareness through training support from F4A. As a next step, they would like to create internal policies to protect their staff when digital attacks occur.
- **Building alliances for national strategizing and safety.** In **Nigeria**, FGD participants emphasized the importance of strong partnerships with grassroots organizations; they explained how these partnerships provided critical insights for national strategizing and helped them to adapt activities to the sensitive political environment. For example, activities often had to be postponed or adjusted based on advice from these organizations. Their insights were essential for determining when it was safe and strategic to engage communities without exposing them to unnecessary risks.

Exclusion from decision-making, undue corporate influence, and lack of free, prior and informed consent

Across all countries, legal frameworks governing agriculture continue to reinforce structural inequalities, undermine farmers' autonomy and curtail civic engagement. Agricultural laws in these countries disproportionately benefit powerful actors while marginalizing smallholder farmers and communities, leaving them excluded from decision-making processes that directly affect their livelihoods.

In **Mozambique**, large corporates have used their influence to pressure the government in their favour. For example, a group of big companies successfully lobbied the government for an 18% export tax on sesame, which not only restricted smallholders' market access but also excluded them from the policymaking processes (F4A, 2021). Such decisions are made without the participation of those most impacted, illustrating how civic space is being closed off through legal and corporate mechanisms. Similarly, in **South Africa**, **Uganda** and **Nigeria**, restrictive policies further limit market access and resource allocation. In **Uganda**, for example, the National Coffee Bill, if it is approved, would regulate entry into the coffee market and exclude farmers who are not officially registered.[27]

Engagement with the private sector proved challenging as corporate actors often control the terms of interaction and exclude civil society from meaningful participation. In **South Africa**, protests targeted big companies for applying double standards in pesticide sales practices.[28] Despite public pressure, company representatives were initially unwilling to accept a memorandum and those who eventually responded were uncooperative and dismissive.[29]

Conflicts over land further highlight the convergence of state and corporate interests at the expense of community rights. In many contexts, governments enable the private sector to undermine the rights of communities by leveraging the private sector in economic development. For example, in **Indonesia**, the government's Job Creation Law[30] has exacerbated the issue by enabling land grabs, granting large companies easier access to land while undermining the rights of smallholders and bypassing requirements for Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)[31]. This has weakened the bargaining power of communities in land acquisition for national projects (Damayanti, Wahanisa and Fidiyani, 2025).

Women in the Dasan Geria community participate in Sekolah Setara (Equality School), a community consultation workshop organised by Oxfam local partner, Gema Alam. Photo: Aimee Han/Oxfam

BOX 2: EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN AND MARGINALIZED GROUPS FACING SPECIFIC AND SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS TO LAND OWNERSHIP

Limited land rights, as well as unequal control over natural resources, undermine participation in civic space and restricts people's role within value chains, where decision-making power is closely tied to land ownership and resource control. In **Uganda**, women farmers face significant barriers to land access and ownership, particularly in rural areas where customary ownership prevails, such as in the Northern and North-Eastern regions. Similarly, in **South Africa**, traditional authorities often block unmarried women from accessing or owning land, which also limits their opportunities to export as land ownership is a prerequisite to participate in formal markets. Without secure land rights, women have limited ability to participate in producer cooperatives and assuming leadership roles, negotiate fairer conditions or engage in advocacy around agricultural policies. In **OPT**, settler expansion backed by the Israeli authorities restricts farmers' access to their land and natural resources. To resist this, unions support farmers' resilience through land and water rights campaigns and by providing the resources needed to cultivate and remain on their land.

Strategies

- **Mobilizing public support through demonstrations**. In **South Africa**, CSOs organized public demonstrations to denounce the use of double standards in pesticide sales practices, effectively generating media coverage and building public support for their demands.[32]
- **Incrementally engaging corporations to influence standards**. In **Brazil**, CSOs and trade unions established a dialogue with major companies and certification bodies, particularly in the sugar value chain. Workers' unions, initially unsure of their capacity to engage with big corporations or auditing organizations, gradually gained the confidence and skills to hold meaningful conversations and influence standards.[33]
- **Strengthening farmers' power in private-sector partnerships**. This can enhance civic space by increasing the economic agency and participation of farmers in decision-making processes. In **Indonesia**, training provided by enterprises in the palm oil and fishing sectors helps farmers gain skills, confidence and a stronger collective voice.[34]
- **Advocating for fair regulations**. In **Uganda**, a coalition of CSOs mobilized against the 2022 Project Implementation Agreement.[35] Critics warned that it violated national coffee policy, created an unfair monopoly and marginalized smallholder farmers. The CSOs developed a position paper with 14 proposals to address these contentious clauses; they presented it to the Parliamentary Committee on Trade. The paper was adopted, contributing to Parliament's decision to declare the agreement unconstitutional and recommend its termination (F4A, 2023).
- **Involvement of faith-based groups in operations**. In some countries, ethnic and religious leaders often mediate between CSOs and powerful actors such as resistance organizations or militias allied with the military. In contexts where laws and procedures severely restrict civic action, especially around land and extractive industries, this mediation becomes essential for CSOs to continue operating despite legal and political barriers.
- **Expanding the power of women and youth farmers through financial and trade inclusion to strengthen participation**. Several countries – **Uganda**, **Indonesia**, **South Africa** and **Ghana** – are advancing civic space by supporting women and youth farmers with access to financial services, trade skills, compliance training and strategic private-sector engagement.

"According to all international human laws, [Israeli settlers] are illegal because they are occupying the land of Palestinian farmers, they are establishing settlements and restricting the access of Palestinians to their natural resources"
Research participant based in OPT

These initiatives strengthen the capacity of marginalized groups to participate in governance, claim land rights and influence policy. For example, in **Indonesia**, there have been efforts to build partnerships with private-sector actors to negotiate better terms for women-led enterprises, providing them with access to alternative business models and financial support. Similarly, in **Ghana**, CSOs have engaged with corporate agencies with sustained but discreet engagement to support female cocoa farmworkers and their children by providing childcare and education services (F4A, 2023).

Limited collective bargaining and economic agency

In some countries, smallholder farmers face significant challenges in organizing and advocating for their rights. However, through the F4A programme, they have received support to strengthen their collective voice and capacity to claim these rights. In **Mozambique**, farmers lack the information to understand the procedures for formalizing their associations; this is compounded by the lack of fiscal incentives, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation by private dealers.[36] Similarly, in **Ghana**, despite cocoa farmers' substantial contribution to the economy, they have historically lacked a unionized voice, hindering their ability to collectively advocate for fair prices and improved working conditions. Fostering the creation of strong coalitions have been critical to improving their conditions and enhancing their resilience.

> "When we visited one of the communities in Pernambuco, women leaders spoke out strongly. They described how the company claiming ownership of the land [where families have lived for more than 50 years] uses different strategies to pressure and dispossess them. Women were very vocal, naming the actions taken against their communities, but also emphasizing their own determination to resist and protect their land."
> Research participant based in Brazil

BOX 3: GENDER-SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES AND EXPERIENCES

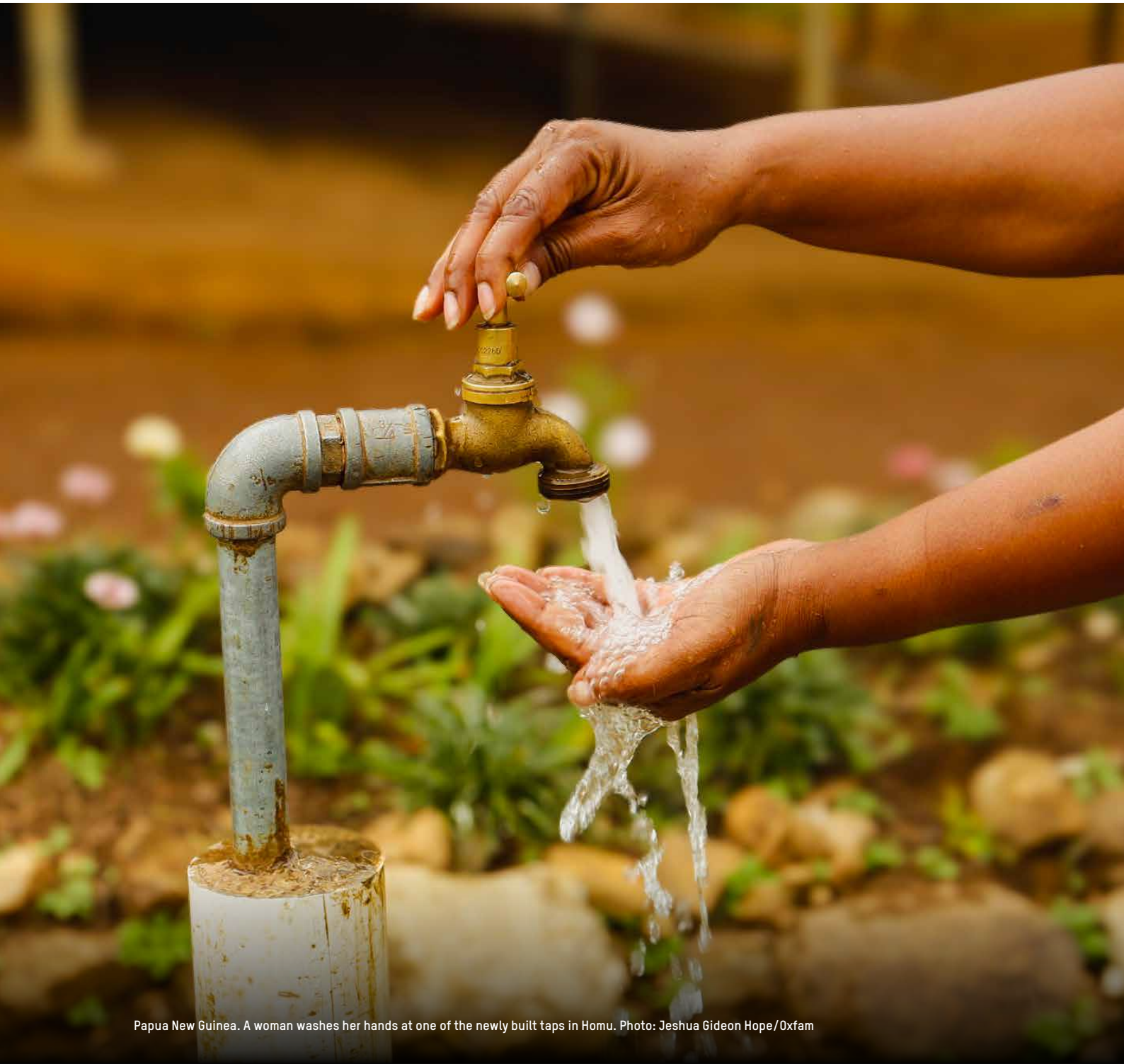
Gender-specific vulnerabilities were also raised during discussions. In **Brazil**, female labourers in slavery-like conditions are often not recognized by authorities as individuals affected by exploitation, resulting in their exclusion from reparations and official support. Thus, women are often at the forefront of community struggles but are still underrepresented in leadership roles during negotiations. In **Ghana's** male-dominated mining sector, where only 9% of employees are women and most positions are concentrated among urban elites, women in rural areas have mobilized to enter the value chain through farming cooperatives. By supplying food crops to mining companies, they are carving out an economic role in spaces that have historically excluded them; their efforts and simultaneous engagement with government and companies to push for policies that recognise women's economic contributions and expand fairer opportunities is a remarkable example of strategic adaptation.

Strategies

- **Empowering farmers through collective organization**. In **Ghana**, the formation of the National Cocoa Cooperative Union has enabled farmers to overcome challenges and build momentum to collectively advocate for fair prices and better working conditions, strengthening their bargaining power and promoting more equitable participation in the value chain. While establishing a solid coalition has proven to be a successful strategy, continued efforts are needed to expand outreach and encourage more farmers to join.[37]
- **Fostering inclusive social dialogue.** Social dialogue at the national level in **Uganda** is improving through better coordination among trade unions and more effective collaboration between trade unions and employer associations on key issues such as the minimum wage (F4A, 2021). However, according to research participants, collective bargaining agreements remain low in Uganda capturing roughly 400,000 workers out of a

total labour force of 23 million in 2024 (World Bank, 2025). More efforts are needed to promote collaboration between civil society and the private sector to address concerns and build trust.[38]

- **Strengthening women's roles in trade unions.** Women's participation in trade unions has been strengthened in **Brazil**, particularly through partnerships with the National Confederation of Rural Workers and Family Farmers (CONTAR, from its acronym in Portuguese).[39] They have supported the creation of women's secretariats and internal mechanisms to address gender inequalities within unions.[40]
- **Enabling rural unions to address labour issues**. Also in Brazil, where unions are relatively strong, strategic approaches are taken under the F4A programme to support rural worker unions to carry out labour inspections, participate in collective bargaining, and directly confront exploitative labour practices. Many of the labour rescues in recent years were the result of these collaborations.[41]



Papua New Guinea. A woman washes her hands at one of the newly built taps in Homu. Photo: Jeshua Gideon Hope/Oxfam

4. CONCLUSION

There is substantial evidence throughout this research to suggest that **the F4A partners continuously adapt, resist and innovate in the face of shrinking civic space**. The findings illustrate how CSOs navigate complex and often restrictive environments by balancing risks, building resilience and sustaining their role in society.

One of the clearest examples of this balancing act is found in how CSOs use language and communication. Public spaces, media and digital platforms are essential for civic engagement but also expose CSOs to risk. In repressive contexts, CSOs adopt neutral language to avoid government scrutiny and maintain access to stakeholders, while in less restricted and repressive settings, such as the Netherlands, they use more direct and confrontational language to challenge power structures.

COALITIONS ARE OFTEN FORMED TO COORDINATE RESPONSES, TO STRENGTHEN VISIBILITY AND PROTECTION, AND TO ENHANCE ADVOCACY SUPPORT.

Additionally, coalition-building is a recurring and powerful strategy to share resources and risk, and to enhance legitimacy. In settings focused on defending fundamental rights, coalitions are often formed to coordinate responses, to strengthen visibility and protection, and to enhance advocacy support. In inclusive and fair trade and value chain settings, coalitions are often sectoral and grassroots-based, involving farmers' unions, cooperatives and trade associations who collectively push for fairer policies and market access. These collective efforts also extend to financial resilience: in the face of precarious funding, CSOs use alliances not only to advocate but also to pool resources, embed civic space work into broader programmes, and develop income-generating initiatives. In this way, coalition-building serves both as a political strategy and a means to sustain organizations in challenging environments.

Another key trend is the recognition that civic space can be sustained through wellbeing and adopting a gender and intersectional lens. Many organizations are embedding psychosocial support, trauma counselling, peer support systems and rest moments into their operations while also creating space for women's leadership through gender-sensitive programming, women-led initiatives and networks that amplify their voices. Together, these efforts reflect a broader understanding that caring for people and advancing equality are inseparable. Only by addressing both can CSOs build the resilience needed to thrive in restrictive environments.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

For CSOs and INGOs

- To place civic space at the centre of context analysis and interventions, including in programme design and implementation (for example, incorporating it in organizations' and projects' Theory of Change), as well as monitoring (for example, using the Oxfam Civic Space Monitoring Tool[42]) and evaluation. This approach enables timely adaptations in response to shifts in the civic space context.
- To remain responsive and adaptable in challenging environments, organizations should increase the availability of flexible and unconditional funding. A dedicated Rapid Response Fund can provide urgent support during crises, covering costs such as *pro bono* legal defence, wellbeing initiatives, public advocacy, and solidarity mobilization when HRDs are detained, harassed or face legal threats. Where direct inclusion of flexible or small funds in projects is not feasible, organizations are encouraged to negotiate with donors to incorporate contingency funds in project budgets.
- To dedicate resources and capacity for HRDs and CSOs to interact together in cross-country and cross-regional spaces. These spaces enable knowledge sharing and learning; they also specifically facilitate the exchange of good practices and strategies to adapt to shrinking and shifting civic space. They are valuable platforms for peer support, and the monitoring of global and regional civic space trends.
- To strengthen the documentation of stories and evidence-based advocacy to enable effective engagement with regional and international bodies, such as the UN, the OECD, the AU, the ASEAN and the EU. This collaborative, evidence-driven approach can exert pressure on governments to respect the civic freedoms and rights that citizens and civil society are entitled to.
- To diversify partnerships for the promotion and defence of civic space by engaging with emerging CSAs, including youth-led and community-based organizations, universities, cultural institutions, journalists' councils, municipalities and selected private-sector stakeholders. In contexts where non-government-aligned CSO partners are increasingly blacklisted, monitored or burdened with heavy compliance requirements, working with newer actors offers protective and strategic advantages while bringing fresh perspectives and energy to civic space work.
- To advocate for internet freedom and digital inclusion, and actively push back against online harassment to ensure a safe online environment. Social media should be used to raise civic awareness and educate the public about their rights.
- To co-create a censorship language guide with HRDs. This guide would help identify and adapt commonly banned phrases and keywords to ensure that civic messages can still be communicated effectively in restricted digital spaces.

For government stakeholders and other donors

- To prioritize the protection, expansion and strengthening of civic space in development agendas. Donors and international development actors should place civic space high on their agendas and allocate sufficient budgets to it. These resources should be directed towards protecting the wellbeing of human rights defenders and strengthening the capacity of civil society, particularly in areas such as leadership, advocacy, and strategic litigation skills.
- To adopt more a flexible approach and requirements for reporting from grantees. Greater flexibility can support CSOs to responsively adapt their activities, budgets and programmes in the context of shrinking and shifting civic space.
- To support context-sensitive and gender-based approaches that align with national priorities. These approaches should be based on the needs of those most impacted by civic space restrictions. Collaboration with the people most impacted by restrictions will create new opportunities for defending and opening civic space.
- To consider the specific vulnerability of actors striving for inclusive and just value chains and trade. These CSAs often work on sensitive issues and require programmatic, political and diplomatic support.

For the private sector

- To respect and defend civic space, businesses must uphold human rights and protect and enable civic space across their operations and value chains. This requires full compliance with international frameworks such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights[43] and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct[44].
- To adopt and implement zero-tolerance company policies against reprisals targeting human rights defenders and ensure safe conditions for all who raise concerns.
- To consistently demonstrate public and private support for CSAs, trade unions and human rights defenders, and to amplify such support when they are under attack.
- To institutionalize regular dialogue with CSAs, trade unions and affected communities, while exercising leverage through multi-stakeholder initiatives to address negative impacts on civic space.
- To share, and allow access to, relevant data such as budgets and impact assessments to promote meaningful and informed stakeholder participation.
- To engage with CSOs and trade unions through long-term partnerships rather than limiting involvement to short-term corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives.
- To establish, maintain and cooperate in grievance mechanisms through which impacted stakeholders and rightsholders can raise complaints and seek remediation. For this, businesses should protect affected stakeholders from retaliation and reprisal, including guaranteeing anonymity and implementing protective measures for human rights defenders and whistleblowers.
- To advocate for, and support the implementation of, legislation and policies that promote civic space and human rights in business value chains. This includes mandatory human rights due diligence legislation, and protections for trade unions, human rights defenders and civil society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Al Jazeera. (23 July 2024). *Uganda police detain dozens of people at anti-corruption protests*. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/23/uganda-police-detain-dozens-of-people-at-anti-corruption-protests

Breed Mensenrechten Overleg (BMO). (2025). *Civic Space Report: Netherlands.* European Civic Forum. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Civic-Space-Report-2025-Netherlands.pdf

Cambodian Leage for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights. (2023). *Spotlight on Human Rights Defenders: Prum Chantha*. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/articles/20230615/186/index.html

Civic Space Working Group. (2023a). *Programming and Influencing Strategies to Protect and Promote Civic Space. Internal document.* The Civic Space Working Group of the Knowledge Hub on Governance and Citizenship.

Civic Space Working Group. (2023b). *Civic Space Strategizing Proposition Overview. Internal document.* Civic Space Knowledge Hub Governnce and Citizenship.

CIVICUS. (4 December 2024). *The CIVICUS Monitor downgrades the Netherlands' civic space to "Narrowed" amid increasing repression of protest rights*. Press release. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://monitor.civicus.org/press_release/2024/netherlands/

Damayanti, D. D., Wahanisa, R. and Fidiyani, R. (2025). 'Legal Implications of the Job Creation Law on the Protection of Community Land Rights in National Strategic Areas'. *Journal of Law, Politic and Humanities*, 5(5). Accessed 29 September 2025. https://doi.org/10.38035/jlph.v5i5

Dela Paz, R. (2 September 2025). *Indonesia: Investigate violations during protest crackdown and hold security forces to account*. Accessed 29 September 2025. CIVICUS. https://www.civicus.org/index.php/fr/medias-ressources/112-news/7848-indonesia-investigate-violations-during-protest-crackdown-and-hold-security-forces-to-account

Efthymiou, N. and Scherpenisse, W. (18 October 2023). *Are there constitutional barriers on the highway for demonstrators?* Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.eur.nl/en/news/are-there-constitutional-barriers-highway-demonstrators

FAIR for ALL. (2021). *FAIR for ALL Baseline Internal Report.* The Hague.

FAIR for ALL. (2023). *F4A Internal Outcome Statement 2023.*

FAIR for ALL. (2024). *Learning Journey on Land Inequality from Crosscutting Perspectives and Gender Reflection Session. Post event report.* Oxfam Novib.

Global Witness. (2016). *We don't care, we're still in power*. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/corruption-and-money-laundering/we-dont-care-were-still-in-power/

International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. (2021). *India's Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act*. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.icnl.org/post/assessment-and-monitoring/indias-foreign-contribution-regulation-act-fcra

Iqbal, H. (20 July 2018). *Who profits from the death of Cambodia's democracy?* Global Witness. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/corruption-and-money-laundering/who-profits-death-cambodias-democracy/

Mureithi, C. (2024). *Scores arrested in Uganda at banned rally inspired by Kenya protests*. The *Guardian*. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/23/scores-arrested-in-uganda-at-banned-rally-inspired-by-kenya-protests

Oxfam. (2017). *Oxfam Influencing Strategy on Shrinking and Shifting Civic Space. Mid-term review. Internal version.*

Oxfam. (2019). *Civic Space Monitoring Tool: Understanding what is happening in civic space at a local and national level.* Accessed 29 September 2025. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/civic-space-monitoring-tool-understanding-what-is-happening-in-civic-space-at-a-620874/

Oxfam. (2023). *Defending Civil Society and Civic Space in Uganda. Internal document.*

Ratcliffe, R. (26 July 2023). *Cambodia PM Hun Sen steps down and hands over power to son*. The *Guardian*. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/26/cambodia-pm-hun-sen-steps-down-hands-over-power-son

Sapienza, E., Manzotti, G. and Patel, L. (2023). *Protests, human rights and conflict prevention: Proposals to rethink the models of state response to social mobilisation.* UNDP Latin America and the Caribbean. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-06/pds-number49_protestas_en.pdf

Secretaria de Comunicação Social. (2023). *Brazilian government establishes a social participation council and reinstates its dialogue with social movements*. Governo do Brasil. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.gov.br/secom/en/latest-news/2023/brazilian-government-establishes-a-social-participation-council-and-reinstates-its-dialogue-with-social-movements

Sulaiman, S. and Suroyo, G. (31 August 2025). *Deadly Indonesia protests force U-turn on lawmakers' perks*. Reuters. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/deadly-indonesia-protests-force-u-turn-lawmakers-perks-2025-08-31/

United Nations. (24 August 2022). *UN experts condemn Israeli suppression of Palestinian human rights organisations*. Press release. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/un-experts-condemn-israeli-suppression-palestinian-human-rights

World Bank. (2025). *World Bank Open Data: Labour Force, total - Uganda*. Accessed 29 September 2025. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN?locations=UG

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was conducted in collaboration between the F4A program and the Learning, Innovation and Knowledge Unit (LINK) at Oxfam Novib. Alice Kooij and Camille Dancoisne conceived and commissioned the study, Stephanie Milan Ramos designed the methodology and led data collection, analysis and manuscript writing; Annida Putri contributed to data collection, analysis and manuscript writing. The authors gratefully acknowledge the constructive feedback provided by peer reviewers including Pia Zeinoun, Erik Boonstapel, Bart Weijs, Miguel de la Vega and Katja Koegler. Special appreciation is also extended to the research participants, partners and grassroots organizations who generously shared their knowledge, experiences and perspectives. Their contributions were indispensable to the development of this chapter and provide critical insights into the defence of civic space and the advancement of inclusive and just trade and value chains.

This report was edited by Lucie Cowie, designed by Nigel Willmott and translated into Portuguese by Eduardo Rodrigues.

Front cover photo: Hilda Flavia Nakabuye is a climate activist in Kampala,Uganda. She and her friends from regularly hold clean up actions at the shores of Lake Victoria. Photo: Emmanuel Museruka/Oxfam

NOTES

1 The countries in this research study are Brazil, Cambodia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Netherlands, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), South Africa, Uganda and Vietnam.

2 For further information, see: Oxfam. (2019). The FAIR for ALL Programme. Accessed 30 September 2025. https://www.oxfamnovib.nl/fair-for-all .

3 The F4A program is implemented in 14 countries worldwide: Brazil, South Africa, Mozambique, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, OPT, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Netherlands. For this research study, Kenya was not included, as partners did not respond to our invitation, possibly due to competing priorities or limited availability at the time. Myanmar was also excluded from the research.

4 The CIVICUS Monitor index is a monitoring tool developed by CIVICUS to track annual civic space rankings across global regions. CIVICUS Monitor. Accessed 15 May 2025. https://monitor.civicus.org/data/

5 CIVICUS Monitor. (11 August 2025). *How It Works*. Accessed 30 September 2025. https://monitor.civicus.org/about/how-it-works/ratings/

6 The FCRA was first enacted in 1976 and revised in 2010 to regulate foreign donations to Indian non-profit organizations. The 2020 amendments introduced stricter measures, including a ban on sub-granting between registered organizations, a tight cap on administrative expenses, and centralized control of funds through the State Bank of Delhi and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Accessed 30 September 2025. https://www.icnl.org/post/assessment-and-monitoring/indias-foreign-contribution-regulation-act-fcra

7 Ideas or actions against unfairness or discrimination that are sometimes perceived as too rigid, overly moralistic, harmful or not genuine.

8 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with Palestinian CSOs; conducted by the author on 11 February 2025.

9 MAXQDA (Max Weber Qualitative Data Analysis) is a software program for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis, used to organize, code, and examine textual, visual, and multimedia data.

10 In Cambodia there are two types of NGOs or CSAs: 'traditional NGOs' and 'government-aligned NGOs'. Traditional NGOs were created based on the philosophy of liberal democracy to support the establishment of Cambodian society after the civil war. They work independently, often supported by western donors. In contrast, government-aligned NGOs are actors who are part of a coalition called the Civil Society Alliance Forum. This forum is mostly funded by China and facilitated by the Council of Ministers. These organizations receive government-backed Chinese funding and are closely aligned with the Cambodian government. Interview with a Cambodian CSO conducted by the author SMR on 31 March 2025.

11 Sedition refers to conduct or a speech calling to overthrow a state or a monarchy under Article 131 of the Dutch Penal Code. FGD with Dutch, Vietnamese and Indonesian CSOs; conducted by the author on 30 January 2025.

12 Research participant based in South Africa; interview conducted by the author AP on 27 March 2025.

13 FGD with Dutch, Vietnamese and Indonesian CSOs; conducted by the author SMR on 30 January 2025.

14 Ibid.

15 According to a Dutch FGD participant, participation in strategies varies based on the issue, level of risk and strategic alignment. Some organizations take a more vocal or public stance, while others operate behind the scenes, depending on their strengths, visibility and risk tolerance. FGD with Dutch, Vietnamese and Indonesian CSOs; conducted by the author on 30 January 2025.

16 Research participant based in Cambodia; interview conducted by the author SMR, on 31 March 2025.

17 FGD with Ghanaian, Ugandan and South African CSOs; conducted by the author AP on 6 February 2025.

18 FGD with Dutch, Vietnamese and Indonesian CSOs; conducted by the author SMR on 30 January 2025.

19 Validation workshop; conducted by the authors SMR and AP on 7 May 2025.

20 Research participant based in Cambodia; interview conducted by the author SMR on 31 March 2025.

21 Research participant; interview conducted by the author SMR on 17 April 2025.

22 Research participant based in Cambodia; interview conducted by the author SMR on 31 March 2025.

23 FGD with Dutch, Vietnamese and Indonesian CSOs; conducted by the author SMR on 30 January 2025.

24 Validation workshop; conducted by the authors SMR and AP on 7 May 2025.

25 FGD with Dutch, Vietnamese and Indonesian CSOs; conducted by the author SMR on 30 January 2025.

26 Research validation workshop; conducted by the authors SMR and AP on 7 May 2025.

27 FGD with Ghanaian, Ugandan and South African CSOs, conducted by the author AP on 6 February 2025.

28 Pesticides are sold in countries across Africa, including South Africa, even though they have been banned in the EU due to health or environmental risks. Research participant based in Cambodia; interview conducted by the author SMR on 27 March 2025.

29 Research participant based in South Africa; interview conducted by the author AP on 27 March 2025.

30 The Omnibus Law (Job Creation Law), enacted in Indonesia on 2 November 2020, is a reform that simplifies licensing and land acquisition to attract investment and create jobs. UNCTAD. (2020). *"Omnibus Law" on job creation has been enacted*. Accessed 30 September 2025. https://investmentpolicy.unctad.org/investment-policy-monitor/measures/3567/indonesia-omnibus-law-on-job-creation-has-been-enacted

31 Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is the right of Indigenous people to be fully consulted and to give or withhold consent before any laws, policies, or projects that may affect their lands, resources, or rights are approved or implemented. Accessed 30 September 2025. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/IPeoples/FreePriorandInformedConsent.pdf

32 Ibid.

33 Research participant based in Brazil; interview conducted by the author SMR on 25 March 2025.

34 FGD with Nigerian, Indonesian and Ugandan CSOs; conducted by the author AP on 6 February 2025.

35 An agreement granting Uganda Vinci Coffee Company Limited (UVCCL) exclusive coffee rights, sweeping tax exemptions and subsidized electricity. Parliament of Uganda. (2022). *Report of the Sectoral Committee on Tourism, Trade and Industry on the Investigation of the alleged unfair terms in the MoU between Government of Uganda and Uganda Vinci Coffee Company Limited*. Accessed 30 September 2025. https://parliamentwatch.ug/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Sectoral-Committee-on-Tourism-Trade-and-Industry-on-the-Investigation-of-the-alleged-unfair-terms-in-the-MoU-between-Government-of-Uganda-and-Uganda-Vinci-Coffee-Company-Limited.pdf

36 Interview with CSOs in Mozambique; conducted by the author AP on 15 April 2025.

37 Ibid.

38 FGD with Ghanaian, Ugandan and South African CSOs; conducted by the author AP on 6 February 2025.

39 CONTAR is a national union confederation in Brazil. It brings together various rural workers' and family farmers' unions across the country to represent their interests at the national level. CONTAR. Accessed 30 September 2025.: https://contar.org.br/en/

40 Research participant based in Brazil; interview conducted by the author SMR on 25 March 2025.

41 Ibid.

42 For further information, see: Oxfam. (2019). *Civic Space Monitoring Tool: Understanding what is happening in civic space at a local and national level*. Accessed 30 September 2025. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/civic-space-monitoring-tool-understanding-what-is-happening-in-civic-space-at-a-620874/

43 For further information, see: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2011). *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*. Accessed 30 September 2025. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

44 For further information, see: OECD. (2023). *Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct*. Accessed 30 September 2025. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-guidelines-for-multinational-enterprises-on-responsible-business-conduct_81f92357-en.html

Oxfam Research Reports

Research Reports are written to share research results, to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy and practice. They do not necessarily reflect Oxfam policy positions. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of Oxfam.

For more information, or to comment on this report, pia.zeinoun@oxfamnovib.nl (Research Coordinator) or stephanie.milanramos@oxfamnovib.nl (Researcher)

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International in November 2025. DOI: 10.21201/2025.000102
Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK

About Oxfam

Oxfam is a global movement of people who are fighting inequality to end poverty and injustice. We are working across regions in more than 70 countries, with thousands of partners, and allies, supporting communities to build better lives for themselves, grow resilience and protect lives and livelihoods also in times of crisis. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit .www.oxfam.org

(Oxfam America (www.oxfamamerica.org
(Oxfam Aotearoa (www.oxfam.org.nz
(Oxfam Australia (www.oxfam.org.au
(Oxfam-in-Belgium (www.oxfamsol.be
(Oxfam Brasil (www.oxfam.org.br
(Oxfam Canada (www.oxfam.ca
(Oxfam Colombia (www.oxfamcolombia.org
(Oxfam France (www.oxfamfrance.org
(Oxfam Germany (www.oxfam.de
(Oxfam GB (www.oxfam.org.uk
(Oxfam Hong Kong (www.oxfam.org.hk
(Oxfam Denmark (www.oxfam.dk
(Oxfam India (www.oxfamindia.org
(Oxfam Intermón (Spain) (www.oxfamintermon.org
(Oxfam Ireland (www.oxfamireland.org
(Oxfam Italy (www.oxfamitalia.org
(Oxfam Mexico (www.oxfammexico.org
(Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) (www.oxfamnovib.nl
(Oxfam Pilipinas (www.oxfam.org.ph
(Oxfam Québec (www.oxfam.qc.ca
(Oxfam South Africa (www.oxfam.org.za
(KEDV (www.kedv.org.tr