

Policy Brief

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# CIVIC SPACE AND THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT



CIVIL SOCIETY 7 (C7) is an official engagement group of the Group of Seven (G7) that brings together voices from G7 countries and beyond. In 2026, under the French presidency, C7 is coordinated by Coordination SUD, the platform of French civil society organizations working for global solidarity.

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# PROTECT CIVIC SPACE TO SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION FOR PEACE, CLIMATE AND DEVELOPMENT

As civic space faces growing threats worldwide, G7 leaders must move from declarations to measurable commitments to promote and protect it, invest in a positive public narrative for civil society to counter delegitimization and misinformation that often precede restrictive laws, and strengthen grassroots organizations' ability to tell their stories safely using digital tools.

For the purposes of this paper, civic space refers to the legal, political, financial, digital and societal conditions in which civil society actors, people and groups can organize, operate, access resources, meaningfully participate in political, economic, social, cultural and public life, express views without fear of repression or undue restriction and engage in dialogue with one another and with authorities.

It rests on the protection and exercise of the fundamental freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, including effective protection for human rights defenders and other at-risk actors, access to justice and accountability for serious violations, and on whether the wider enabling environment allows civil society to operate safely and effectively. That wider enabling environment includes:

- A supportive legal and regulatory framework, including non-discriminatory CSO laws and rules on proportionate anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT), consistent with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) standards as they relate to civil society;
- Accessible and sustainable resources: predictable official development assistance (ODA) and flexible core/programme funding, alongside domestic resource flows;
- An open and responsive state that enables meaningful participation, accountability and dialogue; a supportive public culture and discourse that counters smear campaigns and recognizes civil society's legitimacy;
- And a secure digital environment where civil society can communicate and organize freely and safely online, without censorship, shutdowns or unlawful surveillance.

The civic space ecosystem encompasses civil society organizations, grassroots and community groups, social movements, human rights defenders, trade unions, independent media, journalists, faith-based actors, Indigenous organizations, youth and women-led groups, diaspora networks and other non-state actors who contribute to public life and accountability.

The C7 represents hundreds of civil society organizations from around the world. It brings a human-rights perspective to the G7 and advocates for policies that advance social and environmental justice, economic equity and peace.

In early 2026, civil society is facing a compounding crisis driven by (1) repression and restrictions, (2) financial asphyxiation, and (3) digital threats. While civil society is expected to respond to intersecting crises (conflict, climate, inequality, and democratic backsliding) its ability to defend rights, deliver services, hold power to account, and shape sustainable futures is being undermined.

This paper summarizes recent evidence on civic space from global civil-society monitoring initiatives and proposes concrete recommendations for G7 leaders to reverse the deterioration and build resilient societies.

### KEY ASKS AT A GLANCE

#### → **Stop financial asphyxiation**

Reverse aid cuts; scale multi-year, flexible and core funding; simplify and harmonize compliance; share risk; and apply “do no harm” standards to exits and reprioritizations.

#### → **Prevent and respond to repression and restrictions**

Adopt a whole-of-government enabling environment approach; institutionalize early warning to early action support; protect defenders and meaningful participation; and strengthen multilateral accountability, while leading by example at home.

#### → **Safeguard digital civic space and counter disinformation/smear campaigns**

Regulate spyware and surveillance; prevent shutdowns and blanket bans; require human-rights safeguards for high-risk tech/AI; and invest in independent media, fact-checking and digital literacy.

# THE STATE OF CIVIC SPACE: EVIDENCE OF A WORSENING CRISIS

Across regions, civil society is facing a compounding crisis driven by three mutually reinforcing dynamics, restrictions and repression, financial asphyxiation, and digital threats, alongside escalating smear narratives and delegitimization campaigns. Evidence from global monitoring initiatives including the CIVICUS Monitor, Freedom House, and the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) shows that these pressures are spreading quickly and interacting in ways that undermine civil society's ability to act. Negative or misleading portrayals of civil society organizations (CSOs), often amplified online, fuel public distrust and are frequently used to justify restrictive legislation, burdensome compliance requirements, and 'foreign agent' framings. Taken together, these dynamics constrict the full spectrum of conditions that enable civil society to operate: rights and freedoms, legal frameworks, resourcing, public discourse, participation, and digital safety.

## Restrictions, repression, and “grey-zone” controls are intensifying

Over the past year, civic space ratings have deteriorated in 15 countries, and only 39 of 198 countries now have open civic space<sup>1</sup>. Seventy-three% of the world's population lives under restricted conditions and 30,7% live in countries where civic space is completely closed<sup>2</sup>. CIVICUS Monitor's 2025 *Tactics of Repression* analysis records over 1,350 incidents targeting freedom of expression (44.8% of all violations), more than 900 violations of freedom of peaceful assembly (29%) and over 800 violations of freedom of association (26.6%). Detention of protesters is the most common tactic, documented in at least 82 countries, followed by the detention of journalists (73 countries) and of human rights defenders (71 countries)<sup>3</sup>. Civic protests have been met with excessive force and mass arrests across multiple regions, highlighting the urgency of protecting the right to peaceful assembly.

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1 CIVICUS, [Global Findings Civicus Monitor](#) (2025).

2 CIVICUS, [In Numbers Civicus Monitor](#) (2025).

3 CIVICUS, [Tactics of Repression - Civicus Monitor](#) (2025).

Alongside overt crackdowns, civil society is increasingly constrained by “grey-zone” tactics: legal and bureaucratic barriers, foreign-funding constraints, administrative harassment, deregistration pressures, and stigmatizing rhetoric<sup>4</sup>, while anti-democratic forces are attacking the rights of women, LGBTQIA+ people and migrants<sup>5</sup>. Major funding sources, including state donor agencies, have been cut back and aligned with defence, diplomatic and trade agendas, making it harder for civil society to secure support for core work. These tendencies, combined with authoritarian politics, threaten to push civil society to the margins.

### **Financial asphyxiation is accelerating the squeeze and enabling further restrictions**

Data from EU SEE points to a “perfect storm” undermining the enabling environment: drastic reductions in international funding have destabilised civil society and emboldened authorities to adopt draconian “foreign agent” laws and financial transparency measures. The sudden funding freeze that occurred in 2025 affected directly 67% of CSOs, with 40% experiencing budget cuts of between 25% and 50%<sup>6</sup>, leading to layoffs and programme closures. Country examples show how these cuts, combined with restrictive regulations, are crippling civic actors: the closure of the EU-funded Democratic Governance Facility in Uganda, an 80% reduction in Mexico’s federal support to civil society and onerous “control and transparency” laws in Paraguay and Cambodia all create crippling financial and regulatory barriers.

The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) review of progress in implementing the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society finds that across every pillar (respecting civic space, supporting civil society and incentivising accountability), providers have either maintained or reduced their efforts. Respondents of the civil society survey<sup>7</sup> highlight drastic ODA cuts, a retreat to narrowly defined national interests and declining rapid-response capacity, while heavy administrative and financial requirements continue to burden CSOs. These trends coincide with growing political polarization and reduced political appetite to defend human rights.

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4 EU SEE, [Supporting an enabling environment for civil society](#) (2025).

5 CIVICUS, [STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT](#) (2025).

6 EU SEE, [The Impact of the US Funding Freeze on Civil Society](#) (2025).

7 Aid Watch Canada, [Final Report on the CSO Survey Results](#) (2026).

## Digital repression, spyware, and surveillance are becoming core tools of civic space restriction

Recent findings underscore the scale of digital repression: global internet freedom declined for the 15th consecutive year, with rights online deteriorating in 27 countries and only 17 countries experiencing improvements<sup>8</sup>. The report warns that this downward spiral will not stop unless governments and the private sector take decisive action to protect internet freedom. Governments are also weaponizing digital technologies and regulatory frameworks as extensions of offline repression. The EU SEE's report identifies three intertwined trends undermining the digital civic space: pervasive online surveillance and spyware; content-driven disinformation and harassment campaigns; and securitised legal frameworks that legitimise censorship and surveillance<sup>9</sup>. Tech giants compound the problem by failing to protect users' rights and engaging in anti-competitive practices. A secure digital enabling environment is one where civil society can participate freely and securely online, without censorship, shutdowns or surveillance.

## Civil society resilience is strong but requires faster, more coherent support

Despite extraordinary pressure, civil society continues to mobilize: community-based groups are filling gaps in humanitarian response, documenting human rights violations, preventing democratic backsliding and advancing gender and LGBTQIA+ rights<sup>10</sup>. Civil society is also resisting through strategic litigation, advocacy at regional and international mechanisms and coordinated engagement in national policy processes. But the scale, and quick spread of threats means that more supportive action is required. Across monitoring initiatives, civil society calls for: (i) early-warning systems with clear triggers, (ii) rapid-response mechanisms linked to diplomatic and funding tools, and (iii) investments in narrative change and solidarity to counter authoritarianism and populism. Many EU SEE snapshots and country focus reports likewise recommend stronger coordination and faster action to protect and sustain civil society. These calls are increasingly echoed by public strategies. For example, the EU Strategy for Civil

8 Freedom House, [Freedom on the Net](#) (2025).

9 EU SEE, [The Enabling Digital Environment for Civil Society: Global Trends in Repression and Resistance](#) (2025).

10 CIVICUS, [People Power Under Attack](#) (2025).

Society<sup>11</sup> underlines that monitoring must translate into concrete follow-up actions both preventative (in response to early warning signs) and reactive (in the face of threats/attacks), including public statements, legal advice, and emergency funding. It also points out the need to strengthen early-warning systems in some contexts.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE G7

#### → **Stop financial asphyxiation: reverse aid cuts and reinvest in civil society**

- **Reverse aid cuts, reform provider practices, and ensure predictable, flexible, risk-sharing financing for civil society:** restore and expand official development assistance and humanitarian funding and recommit to meeting the 0.7% ODA/GNI target. Recent aid reductions have destabilised civil society and emboldened restrictive governments. The G7 should ringfence resources for civic space protection and allocate multi-year, flexible and core funding for civil society actors in the Global South. Funding must prioritise women led, youth led, Indigenous and grassroots organisations and marginalised groups, and should be aligned with human rights and social justice objectives rather than narrow geopolitical interests. Across funding instruments, G7 members should explicitly permit advocacy, watchdog functions and public campaigning, and avoid donor restrictions that echo “foreign agent” narratives. In line with recent C7 communiqués, G7 members should ensure that AML/CTF regulations are proportionate and do not burden non-profit organisations; beneficial ownership registers should be transparent, and banks should be discouraged from over compliance that denies services to civil society actors.

- **Enable locally-led development through risk-sharing,** by moving from heavy one-size-fits-all compliance to proportionate, risk-based models, and moving from risk transfer to risk sharing via tiered requirements, harmonised reporting and recognition of CSO-developed accountability frameworks.

- **Adopt “do no harm” standards for aid cuts, exits and reprioritisations,** including early communication, protection of core partners, flexible windows for local actors and coordination to avoid sudden “funding cliffs.”

- **Align with the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society and report progress:** Most G7 members are also DAC members, they should fully implement the DAC Recommendation, including its call for enabling legal frameworks, predictable and flexible funding, meaningful participation and the use of early-warning and rapid-response mechanisms. G7 leaders should encourage

11 European Commission, [Communication on the EU Strategy for Civil Society](#) (2025).

all development providers to adopt the DAC toolkits<sup>12</sup> and report transparently on their progress in the upcoming five-year review. This will ensure coherence between G7 commitments and the international standards they have already endorsed. G7 members should commit to publishing annual progress reports on the implementation of these commitments, including ODA/GNI ratios, flexible funding allocations, and metrics on civil-society participation. Civil society must be involved in monitoring and evaluating progress to ensure transparency and genuine accountability. Reporting should also cover whether early warning to early action protocols are in place and used (triggers, timelines, actions taken) and whether administrative barriers are being reduced, particularly for smaller and at-risk groups.

→ **Prevent and respond to repression and restrictions, at home and abroad, and strengthen provider coordination for early action**

• **Adopt and operationalise a holistic enabling-environment lens through a whole-of-government approach.** To avoid fragmented action, G7 leaders should commit to addressing the full spectrum of factors that enable civil society in development co-operation and humanitarian assistance through six measurable, actionable and inter-related dimensions: (i) respect for fundamental freedoms of association, assembly and expression; (ii) supportive legal and regulatory frameworks; (iii) accessible, sustainable and flexible resources; (iv) an open and responsive state that ensures participation and accountability; (v) supportive public discourse and countering smear campaigns; and (vi) a secure digital environment. To operationalise this, G7 members should make the enabling environment explicit in a whole-of-government approach, co-creating civic space strategies with civil society, coordinating across line ministries, equipping missions with guidance and diagnostic tools, training staff, and ensuring accountability. G7 leaders should commit to mainstreaming this lens across all foreign, development, trade and digital policies and encourage other donors to do the same. Embedding these dimensions in country strategies, ministerial communiqués and budget frameworks will enable systematic monitoring and early action and align G7 practice with the DAC Recommendation’s call for a comprehensive enabling environment. Providers should use consistent language when communicating commitments: apply the enabling environment lens as the practical umbrella for implementation and ensure that “civic space” measures address both overt restrictions and the “grey-zone” barriers that often constrain civil society in practice.

12 OECD, [Shifting Power with Partners](#) (2024)

- **Institutionalize early warning to strong providers' coordination for early action. Create a simple protocol that converts civil society alerts into provider-coordinated action**, jointly developed with local CSOs. Building on civil society monitoring mechanisms such as EU SEE alerts, the CIVICUS Monitor and national watchdogs, the G7 should institutionalize early warning to early action support through a simple protocol that converts credible alerts into coordinated action, jointly developed with local CSOs. A minimum operational standard should include: (i) trigger types (draft restrictive laws, violent protest repression, digital shutdowns, major spikes in intimidation/harassment); (ii) timeline (within 30 days of a credible alert, decide on a coordinated response, faster where violence or shutdowns occur); and (iii) a menu of actions (joint démarches or statements, quiet diplomacy, emergency legal/protection support, accelerated grant approvals, flexible contract adaptations). Embassies and missions should have explicit mandates, protocols ready for implementation, and resources to act. G7 members should also use CSO monitoring as formal evidence for decision making: treat independent CSO monitoring systems (e.g., EU SEE, CIVICUS Monitor, V-Dem) as primary operational inputs; mainstream these data into risk analyses, programming and diplomatic messaging; and train and hold staff accountable for responding beyond specialist units. To be credible, G7 members must also lead domestically, including the 2026 host: civil society organizations in France are facing growing pressures, including the use of funding as a tool of political regulation and selective restrictions on protest and assembly; these trends should be addressed alongside external commitments.
- **End the criminalisation of human rights defenders and civil society actors, and prevent restrictive laws before they pass.** The G7 should condemn and oppose laws and practices that stigmatize and penalize defenders, journalists, grassroots movements and CSOs, including by halting the misuse of anti-money laundering, transparency and foreign funding regulations as tools of repression. In line with the DAC implementation agenda, G7 members should employ the Recommendation proactively in law- and policy-making, engaging early on draft NGO laws, foreign funding restrictions, AML/CFT frameworks and cybercrime/online safety legislation, and resourcing legal analysis and participation so CSOs can influence drafts before adoption. G7 members should adopt a collective action plan to protect human-rights and environmental defenders, grounded in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. The plan should include public commitments to not prosecute or extradite defenders for peaceful advocacy; targeted sanctions against officials

who perpetrate violence against defenders; dedicated emergency visas and protection programmes; clear timelines for government responses to attacks on defenders and public reporting on follow-up actions; and ensuring that all diplomacy, trade and aid policies are consistent with defender protection.

- **Guarantee meaningful participation and inclusive dialogue.** G7 processes and national decision-making must be co-created with civil society. Leaders should institutionalize structured, inclusive consultations at all stages of policy development, including ministerial tracks, summit preparations and post-summit implementation, and include feedback loops showing how CSO inputs shaped outcomes. This requires providing resources for translation, accessibility and remuneration for participants, and protecting participants from retaliation. Special attention must be paid to ensuring safe participation of women, youth, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ people, migrants and refugees, and communities affected by digital divides. G7 governments should review national security and counter-terrorism frameworks to ensure they are proportionate and do not suppress peaceful assembly and dissent.

- **Strengthen multilateral frameworks and accountability.** The G7 must recommit to the international human-rights system and work with other governments to safeguard civic space in all multilateral forums. This includes supporting and adequately funding UN Special Rapporteurs and Treaty-Body mechanisms; ensuring civil-society participation in multilateral processes and G7 ministerial meetings; integrating civic-space indicators into Sustainable Development Goal monitoring and climate and digital agendas; and pushing for the adoption of a UN resolution recognising the right to a safe, clean and enabling environment for civil society. G7 members should champion initiatives like the Open Government Partnership and encourage peer learning on civic-space reforms, including the development of national-action plans and regular progress reports. G7 governments should lead by example by protecting civic space domestically, reviewing and repealing restrictive laws, and publishing regular reports on their progress. The G7 should endorse the creation of a UN Civil Society Envoy to champion civil-society engagement across UN processes and bridge the gap between global institutions and grassroots voices. Members should also engage with the UN80 reform initiative launched in 2025 and ensure that efficiency and mandate-review processes strengthen human rights and civic participation rather than leading to austerity or exclusion.

### → **Safeguard digital civic space, address surveillance and algorithmic harms, and counter online smear/disinformation**

- **Protect the digital civic space.** The G7 should champion a rights-based digital agenda by banning the export, import and use of commercial spyware against civil-society actors; establishing clear legal limits on surveillance and requiring judicial oversight; outlawing internet shutdowns and blanket platform bans; and ensuring that AI and technology regulations respect human rights and civic freedoms. The G7 should introduce liability for developers and vendors of surveillance and artificial-intelligence technologies, require algorithmic transparency and human-rights impact assessments before deployment, and adopt evidence-informed risk and bias-mitigation frameworks. Digital repression, including platform bans, shutdowns, surveillance and cybercrime misuse, should be treated as an early-warning trigger and activate early action protocols and diplomatic responses. Public investment is needed in secure digital tools, digital security training and legal-defence funds for at-risk groups. Governments should maintain access to internet services and digital platforms; legal frameworks addressing online content must uphold international human-rights standards of legality, necessity and proportionality. Surveillance programs should be grounded in human-rights principles, and companies should implement end-to-end encryption, support anonymity software, resist government requests for decryption backdoors and notify victims of surveillance abuse. Supporting independent media, fact-checking and digital literacy is essential to counter disinformation, and investment is needed in inclusive digital infrastructure and affordable connectivity to bridge the digital divide.

- **Counter disinformation and smear campaigns while protecting freedom of expression.** Disinformation and smear narratives erode trust and undermine civil society's legitimacy. G7 governments should invest in independent public-service media, ensure regulatory frameworks that protect media freedom, and support fact-checking and digital-literacy programmes. They should also proactively promote positive narratives that recognise civil society's public value (service delivery, community resilience, accountability and innovation) and support sustained public communication that showcases local solutions and impact. This includes investing in the capacity of grassroots CSOs to document and share their stories safely and effectively using digital tools (training, equipment, secure platforms, and storytelling support), especially where traditional media rarely covers their successes. They should work with

civil society and affected communities to develop positive narratives that celebrate civic action and social cohesion, and counter populist appeals that scapegoat marginalized groups. Tech platforms should be required to address disinformation and hate speech while respecting freedom of expression. To strengthen accountability, the G7 should commit to algorithmic transparency requirements for social-media platforms and mandate independent audits of content-moderation systems.

## CONCLUSION

Civil society is a source of resilience, innovation and accountability. Evidence from monitoring networks shows that the enabling environment for civil society is eroding under the combined weight of funding cuts, authoritarian politics, securitised digital technologies and restrictive laws. Yet, civil society continues to organise, mobilize and defend rights. The G7 has the power and responsibility to reverse this trend. By embracing an enabling-environment lens, reinvesting in independent civil society, safeguarding the digital civic space, institutionalising early-warning and rapid-response mechanisms, ensuring inclusive participation, ending the criminalisation of defenders and adopting domestic reforms, the G7 can help build societies where people and planet thrive. The future of democracy, sustainable development and global justice depends on it.



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