

Adaptive Strategies to Safeguard Civic Space

Global Survey Results

September 2026

1. About the Survey

Civic space is under growing pressure around the world. Governments have introduced new laws regulating civil society organizations (CSOs), imposed tighter controls on international funding, expanded administrative oversight, restricted peaceful assembly, and increased the use of digital surveillance and counter-terrorism measures affecting civic participation. Since 2022, ICNL has tracked over **298 legal initiatives** affecting civic space across 77 countries, **85 percent** of which can be deemed restrictive. As demonstrated by ICNL's data, we are witnessing a broader global trend toward greater regulation and scrutiny of civil society.



Less well understood is how civil society organizations themselves are responding. They are adapting their strategies, redesigning programs, strengthening partnerships, adopting new governance models, engaging new allies, and developing innovative ways to continue their work despite increasing constraints. Understanding these adaptive strategies is critical. They provide practical lessons that extend beyond individual countries or organizations, offering insights into how civil society can remain effective in increasingly restrictive environments.

To better understand these emerging practices, ICNL launched the Adaptive Strategies to Safeguard Civic Space Survey between March and July 2026: Which strategies are proving most useful? How are organizations adapting to legal, financial, and political pressures? What innovations are emerging? And how can donors better support organizations operating under increasingly restrictive conditions?

2. Current Operating Environment

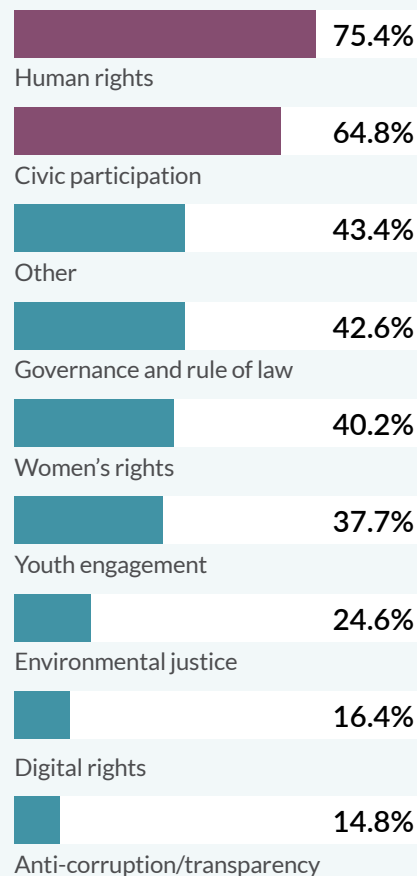
As a threshold question, the survey probed perceptions of the current operating environment since January 2025, with 72% reporting it has somewhat or significantly worsened. Across regions, respondents described a landscape marked by increasing legal, political, financial, and operational pressures that make it more difficult for organizations to carry out their missions.

Among all the challenges identified through the survey, restrictions impeding organizational resources emerged as the most significant. Nearly nine in ten respondents identified barriers to funding or financial access as one of the most significant obstacles affecting their work.

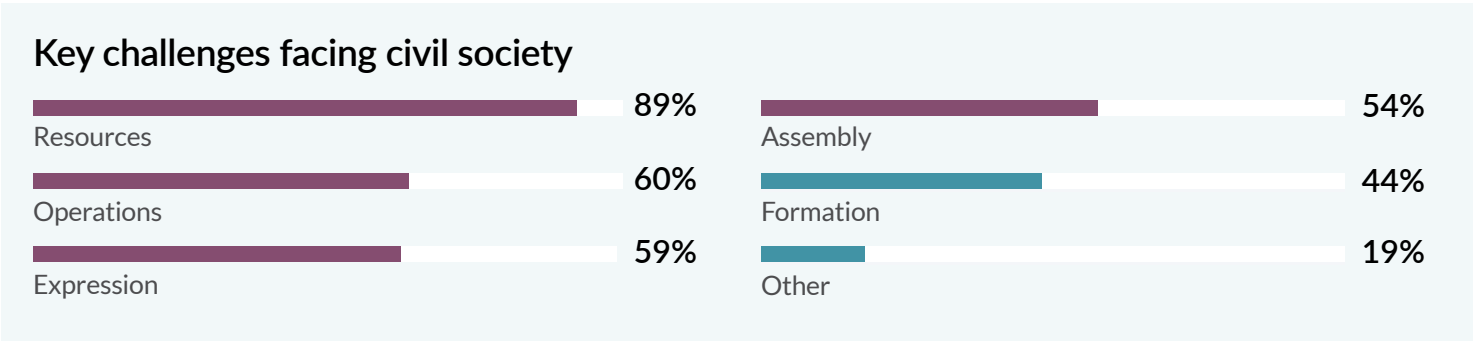
Who responded?

123 representatives of civil society organizations working in more than **65 countries and territories**, representing national, regional, multi-regional, and global organizations.

About **two-thirds of respondents** work primarily within a single country. Respondents represent a broad range of thematic sectors:



These findings reinforce ICNL’s own monitoring of global civic space trends: Since January 2025 - for the first time in ICNL’s tracking history – foreign funding restrictions are the #1 constraint civil society partners are experiencing. Thus, civil society organizations around the world are confronting a common reality: sustaining civic action now requires continuous adaptation.



3. Effective Strategies

While no single approach can fully address the challenges organizations face, respondents described combinations of strategies that strengthen resilience, reduce organizational risk, and create new opportunities for civic action. Across the survey responses, five broad categories of adaptive strategies consistently emerged:

Advocacy

Advocacy emerged as the survey’s most effective adaptive strategy: Nearly **90% of respondents** said advocacy was a strongly or partially effective strategy.

Notably, respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of evidence-based advocacy. The monitoring of legislation and other developments affecting civic space – or, as one respondent highlighted, the use of a social accountability scorecard – provides a firmer foundation for the advocacy strategies of civil society partners. A significant focus of these advocacy strategies is to engage in informed dialogue with government. Respondents noted a range of opportunities for dialogue, including bilateral meetings with policymakers and regulators; engagement with government through workshops and conferences; and collective advocacy through working groups (e.g., National NPO Working Group on FATF-Uganda). Respondents also underscored the importance of dialogue with donor governments that may be willing to convey civic space messaging to recipient governments.

Coalitions

Closely linked to effective advocacy and organizational resilience are coalitions: Nearly **88% of respondents** highlighted coalitions as strongly or partially effective.

By sharing expertise, coordinating advocacy, and supporting one another, CSOs can, through coalitions, strengthen both their collective influence and their capacity to adapt to restrictive environments. Coalitions enable resource sharing, mutual learning, coordinated communications, and collective risk management. Coalitions may be formal legal entities but are commonly informal groupings of CSOs and/or other stakeholders. One CSO coalition found it effective to collaborate with faith leaders as a means of protecting themselves from governmental scrutiny. National coalitions, such as the Defenders’ Coalition of Kenya, may be more effective advocates when engaging with government counterparts. In highly restrictive contexts, like Myanmar, a national CSO established CSO “hubs”, which have proved to be vital nodes for information exchange and CSO resiliency.



Narrative and public visibility strategies

Narrative and public visibility strategies are a core element of organizational resilience rather than simply a tool for outreach. Over **70% of respondents** said public outreach was “strongly effective” or “partially effective.”

The survey results suggest that maintaining a strong public profile, transparent communications, and trusted relationships can help organizations mobilize support and better withstand attacks on civic space.

Concretely, respondents highlighted the importance of:

- Shaping public opinion through partnerships with journalists, researchers, community leaders, and faith leaders;
- Strengthening narrative and visibility strategies through storytelling;
- Deploying communications strategies that leverage a variety of media, depending on the message and target audience, including digital and social media, radio talk shows, and in-person or hybrid community-based messaging; and
- Providing public support to partners who are subject to online attacks and harassment.



International human rights law

International human rights law continues to provide an essential foundation for civil society action. Leveraging international human rights mechanisms amplifies local voices, strengthens legal arguments, and connects national civic space challenges to global human rights standards. Respondents highlighted the importance of both UN human rights mechanisms, including the UN Human Rights Council and UN special procedures, and regional human rights bodies, such as the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights. Over **65% of respondents** called engagement with international human rights mechanisms “strongly effective” or “partially effective.”

ICNL recently published guidance on how effective multilateral engagement can defend civic space: <https://www.icnl.org/our-work/global-program/multilateral-engagement>.



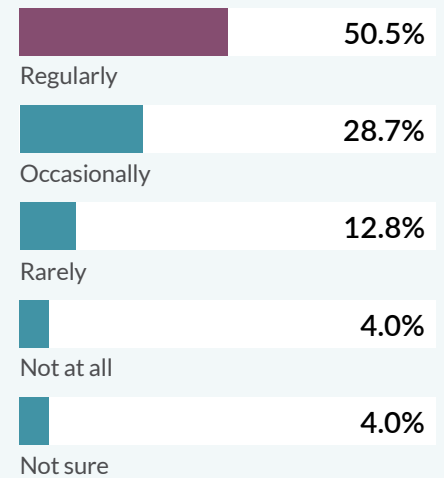
Strengthening organizational resilience

Strengthening organizational resilience has become a deliberate organizational strategy. By strengthening governance, managing risk, diversifying resources, and preparing for uncertainty, civil society organizations are increasing their capacity to continue operating under increasingly restrictive conditions.

Compliance as resistance

Once restrictive laws are enacted and implemented, it becomes essential to manage risk and reduce organizational vulnerability to sanctions for non-compliance. Respondents emphasized the importance of carefully maintaining financial accounts; navigating burdensome legal constraints; and the value of compliance guidelines, legal empowerment toolkits, and

To what extent do CSOs rely on international human rights law in their work?



Which international human rights mechanisms have been most useful?



intermediary support organizations. As an example, here is the [Practical Guide on Uganda’s Protection of Sovereignty Act, 2026](#).

Managing risk by strengthening internal governance

Core to managing organizational risk is to ensure internal governance systems are not only compliant with legal requirements, but sufficiently strong, flexible, and context appropriate. Respondents emphasized the importance of strategic planning; maintaining updated safety protocols and risk analysis; reinforcing staff awareness with safety protocols; enhancing digital security; and designing and deploying programs that are adapted appropriately for the local context.

Establishing relationships with government

Respondents noted that in less hostile country contexts, there could be benefit from outreach to and engagement with government. Strategies include engagement with sub-national (e.g., district, village) authorities (vs. national authorities) on registration and approval issues; leveraging opportunities to engage in dialogue on national policy, such as through the Open Government Partnership’s national action planning process; “institutional anchoring” through funding partnerships with government agencies.

Financial diversification

Respondents emphasized the need to diversify their funding base. The dramatic decline in international aid since 2025 has forced organizations to reconsider financing options. Many organizations have sought to diversify their funding sources, including through philanthropic support, crowdfunding, community giving, economic activities, social enterprises, endowments, and more. Laws must be adapted to foster these new approaches, helping ensure civil society’s sustainability for years to come. For more information, please see: <https://www.icnl.org/our-work/resource-diversification>.

Restructuring and relocation

Where the legal environment presents existential threats to a CSO or its leadership and staff, CSOs have sought to lower their organizational profile or merge with other organizations or, in some cases, to relocate to other countries.

Legal assistance, defense, litigation

Lawyers play an essential role in defending civic space and in countering restrictions to the operating environment. Respondents emphasized a range of strategies, including the provision of legal defense to civil society and human rights defenders; establishing a rapid response network providing legal assistance for activists and protestors; and engaging in strategic litigation to challenge restrictive legal measures. Legal assistance is not seen as an isolated strategy, but rather integrated alongside monitoring, documentation, and advocacy to enable timely and multi-pronged responses. Moreover, training lawyers on civic space issues has expanded the availability of legal support.

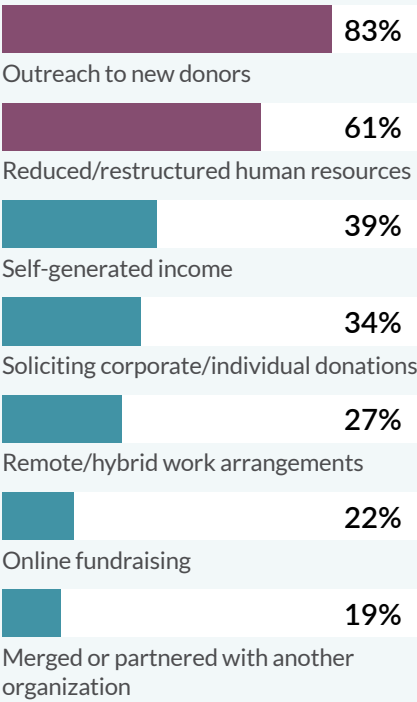
Risk management: two real-world examples

One CSO has established a “**shadow leadership**” succession plan that is activated within 24 hours of the primary leadership being compromised.



“**Fear the worst**”, as one respondent cautioned, underscores the need for contingency planning – that is, creating a backup strategy so that the organization can respond quickly and effectively if an unexpected event disrupts normal operations.

What new strategies have you introduced to bolster your financial sustainability?



4. Donor Support

In addition to financial support, respondents emphasized the important donor role in strengthening capacity, network and coalition building, and diplomatic engagement, among others.

This reflects a shift from responding to individual crises toward building organizations capable of adapting to sustained civic space restrictions.

How donor support can improve:

Flexible funding
enables adaptation



Reducing
administrative burdens



Investing in organiza-
tions, not just projects



Building trust-based
partnerships



“Donors can better support civil society by providing flexible, multi-year core funding that covers operational costs without rigid restrictions. Funding policies should adapt to restrictive environments, allowing organizations to pivot quickly. Rather than imposing compliance burdens, donors should simplify reporting, trust local partners, and prioritize core institutional support over project-based grants.”

- Participant from Tanzania

What forms of donor support are most valuable to your work?

