

MEETING REPORT

Multilateral Engagement to Defend and Expand Civic Space

On September 3, 2025, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) convened two peer exchanges with civil society partners to share learning and experiences on how partners engage with multilateral processes and mechanisms to defend and expand civic space in their countries. This brief report collects the main takeaways from those sessions, which reaffirmed the importance of multilateral engagement to protect civic space amidst current challenges while pointing to key approaches and modes of support that can strengthen this engagement.

Background

The global environment for civil society is under significant threat. We are seeing ever greater recourse to restrictive NGO laws, crackdowns on protests, restrictions on online expression, and repression of marginalized groups, even as diplomatic and financial support for civil society worldwide diminishes. In this context, multilateral processes and mechanisms remain spaces where civil society can engage to protect and promote civic space, but it is important to understand how civil society practitioners view this engagement, and to identify approaches, learnings, and forms of support that can assist civil society to deploy this engagement more effectively.

To this end, ICNL convened two peer exchanges earlier this year to provide a space for civil society partners to benefit from each other's experiences and expertise in engaging multilateral bodies to protect civic space. In these discussions, we invited participants to share thoughts and advice on the following questions:

- (1) How have you engaged with multilateral mechanisms and processes to shape state behavior and expand civic space, and with what impacts?
- (2) What approaches to multilateral mechanisms were most effective in advancing protection of civic space?
- (3) Aside from funding, what support, resources, or facilitation does civil society need to more effectively engage multilateral mechanisms?

The peer exchanges, which were conducted virtually, also included several online survey questions. Over thirty civil society partners from around the world participated in these discussions, which proceeded under Chatham House rules.

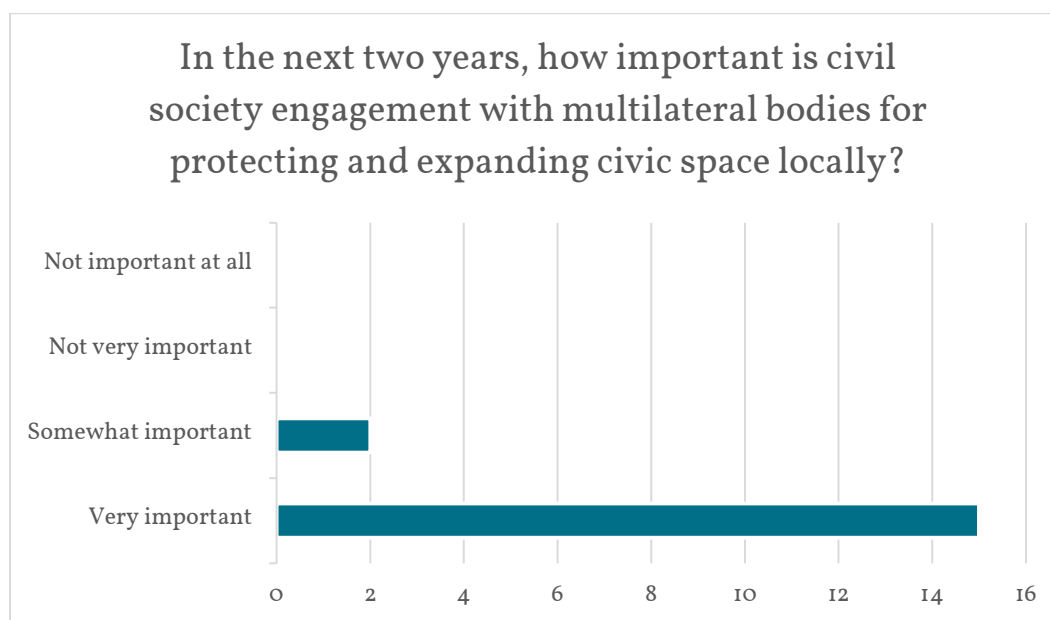
Key Findings

The peer exchanges offered insights into:

- partners' assessment of the value of multilateral engagement to defend civic space;
- modalities of engaging with multilateral bodies on civic space and civic freedoms;
- approaches that increase the effectiveness of multilateral engagement; and
- further civil society needs for support.

SURVEY RESULTS

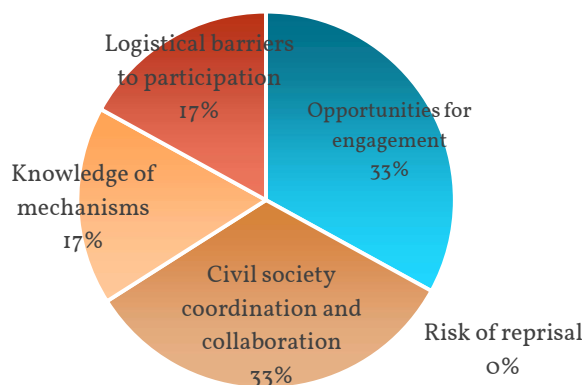
In response to our online survey questions, peer exchange participants overwhelmingly considered multilateral engagement to be very important to preserving civic space at the local level:



When asked “How likely is your organization to incorporate multilateral engagement into your civic space advocacy?”, participants answered 4.86 on a five-point scale (where 5 is very likely, and 0 is not likely).

When asked which factors were most important to their organizations' ability to engage multilaterally, participants prioritized the availability of opportunities to engage and the presence of civil society coalitions with which they could work.

Which of the following is the most important to your organization's ability to engage multilaterally?



ENGAGEMENT WITH MULTILATERAL MECHANISMS

Partners reported engaging with an array of multilateral bodies to promote open civic space at the local level, including: the United Nations (UN) system, particularly UN special procedures, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), and the UN Development Programme (UNDP); the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI); the Open Government Partnership (OGP); regional human rights mechanisms, such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR); the Financial Action Task Force (FATF); the Asia Pacific Forum (APF); and multilateral development banks (MDBs).

When asked which multilateral mechanisms were *most likely* to have influence on the behavior of their governments, participants identified several mechanisms with which they had previously engaged, including the UN and the UPR; FATF; and the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB). Participants also named the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union (EU), Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as potentially influential bodies.

Partners recounted engaging with multilateral processes and mechanisms to positively impact civic space in multiple ways:

- *Employing multilateral norms and standards as a basis for engaging with governments.* In the Caribbean, partners reported using FATF standards to open discussions with governments about measures needed to increase financial inclusion of CSOs. In the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region,

civil society was able to use standards from the UN Human Rights Committee to monitor the policing and management of protests, generating an evidence base about respect for protest rights that enabled dialogue with authorities about needed improvements to legal frameworks. In West Africa, norms from the UN and regional bodies urging protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) have led to the introduction or enactment of HRD protection laws.

- *Using multilateral assessments as pressure points on governments.* In the MENA region, FATF mutual evaluations have led governments to engage with civil society around risk-based approaches to regulating civil society. UPR processes have generated pressure on governments in the MENA region and South Asia to revise or engage with civil society around proposed associations laws or social media regulations. In Latin America, IACHR investigations of rights violations have pushed governments to lessen restrictions on civil society, while the prospect of OECD accession has provided a useful impetus to government engagement with civil society on civic space challenges.
- *Developing and implementing reform commitments.* Civil society partners have engaged with governments through the OGP process to advance reform commitments to expand civic space, including a press freedom commitment in Asia; a participation commitment in the MENA region; and a commitment to support protest and associational rights in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- *Securing relevant hearings and court rulings.* In Latin America, IACHR hearings have compelled authorities to defend and justify restrictions imposed on civic freedoms, while the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) has issued rulings protecting civic space, such as a stay on the implementation of a law restricting civil society participation in international cooperation.
- *Triggering responses from governments.* Letters and communications from UN Special Rapporteurs have led governments to provide public responses explaining measures affecting civil society, from South Asia to Latin America.

Participants also described recruiting multilateral bodies as allies in civic space advocacy (in particular, enlisting MDBs to push back against foreign agent laws in Eurasia) and engaging such bodies to advance protection of HRDs and activists (with particularly effective efforts by the ACHPR on behalf of jailed HRDs in West Africa).

EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

Participants highlighted several features that have characterized successful engagement with multilateral bodies to defend and expand civic space:

- With respect to MDBs, it has been useful to craft narratives linking civic space restrictions to development outcomes, and to specific impacts resulting from

or affecting the success of MDB-funded projects. Participants also noted that government shareholders can be helpful allies in spurring action by MDBs.

- More generally, participants found it helpful to engage with multilateral processes as part of a CSO coalition, to amplify civil society voices, leverage comparative advantages within the coalition, and exercise voice for each other (especially where some members of the coalition are under threat or pressure).
- Participants saw more dividends from engaging with multilateral mechanisms implicating significant state interests, such as FATF (eligibility for investment), IFIs and MDBs (concessional lending), and the OECD (accession).
- Developing relationships with representatives of multilateral bodies assists engagement with these bodies, especially where these relationships help deepen representatives' understanding of civil society needs and challenges.
- Similarly, a multidimensional approach leveraging engagement with multiple offices with different mandates within a multilateral body is more likely to engender action to defend and promote civic space.

SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

Elaborating on the survey results above, participants described the following support (aside from funding) that civil society particularly needs to engage effectively with multilateral mechanisms to advance civic space:

- Expert facilitation, technical assistance, and accompaniment in navigating approaches to multilateral bodies.
- Knowledge products and written resources on multilateral engagement, including: examples of previous civil society submissions and reports; case studies (especially of successful engagement on civic space); information on best practices; and databases of relevant documents and instruments.
- Support in identifying relevant multilateral bodies engaged on specific civic space issues and entry points for approaching these bodies.
- Advocacy skills training and capacity building tailored to multilateral spaces.
- Analyses of impacts of laws and policies affecting civic freedoms, and the consistency of such measures with international commitments and standards.
- Investment in CSO coalition-building and joint multilateral engagement.
- Support for institutional strengthening of CSOs (including with respect to security and legal and administrative requirements) to decrease vulnerability to reprisals following multilateral participation.

Conclusion

These discussions emphatically demonstrate that civil society partners see multilateral engagement as essential to defend civic space in the current climate and intend to prioritize this engagement in the near future. Through effective engagement with multilateral bodies, civil society can advance advocacy, awareness-raising, accountability, and coalition-building that helps to preserve an enabling environment for civic freedoms. Civil society needs additional support to bolster the effectiveness of this engagement. Most needed are resources and capacity building regarding multilateral advocacy, relevant mechanisms and entry points, and past instances of successful engagement. CSO coalitions also play a key role, helping to strengthen and protect civil society advocacy in multilateral spaces.

ICNL looks forward to continuing its collaboration with civil society and government partners to unlock and expand the contribution that multilateral processes and mechanisms can make to the protection and promotion of civic space.

For Further Information

For further information or to discuss any of these issues further, please contact: Nikhil Dutta, ICNL Senior Legal Advisor – Global Programs, ndutta@icnl.org, or Nicholas Miller, ICNL Coordinator for Multilateral Engagement, nmiller@icnl.org.

The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) supports partners around the world to promote an enabling legal environment for civil society, assisting partners to advance legal frameworks that safeguard the exercise of the core civic freedoms of association, expression, and peaceful assembly, and the right of public participation. For further information about ICNL's programs, please visit: www.icnl.org.