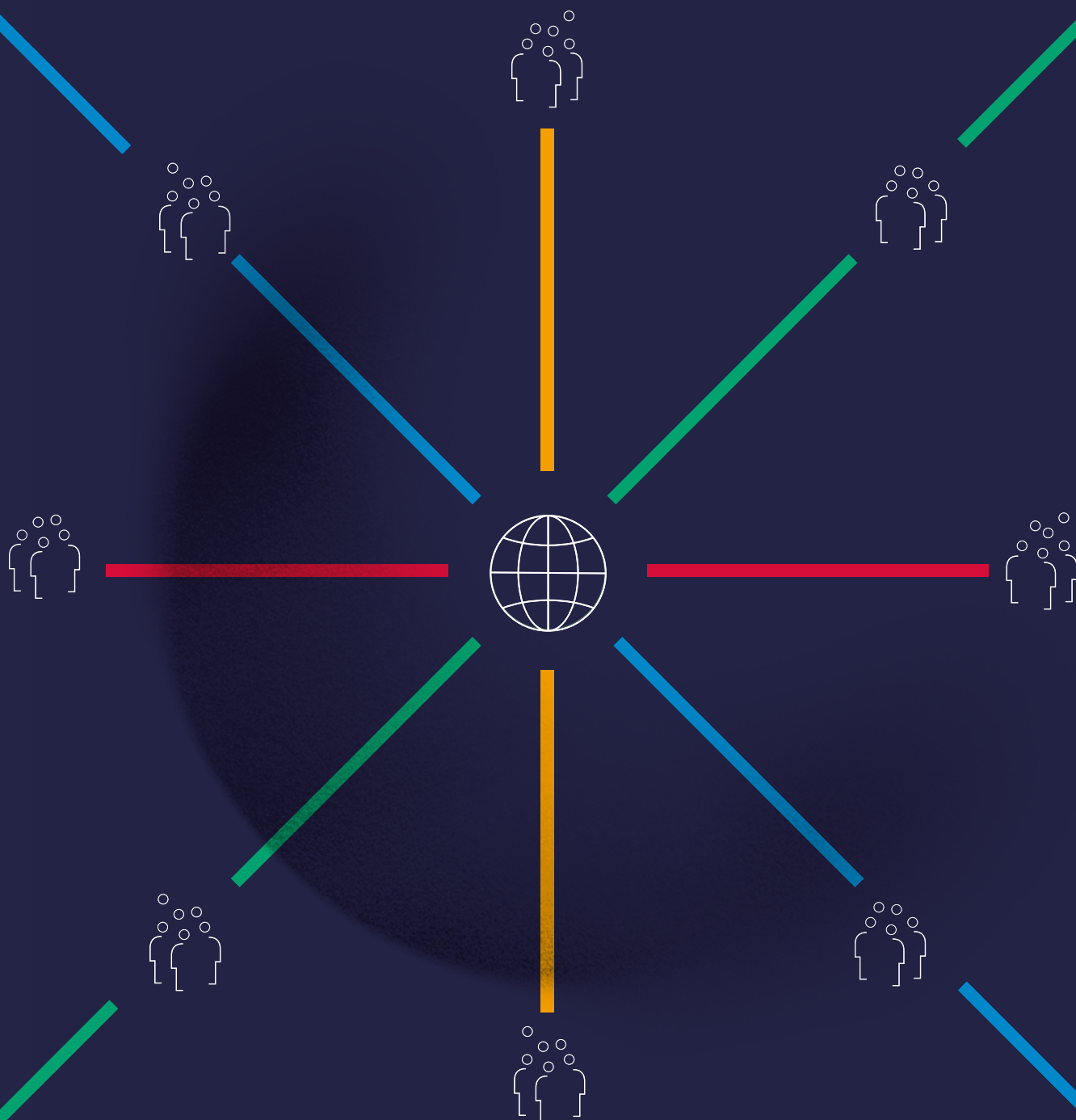


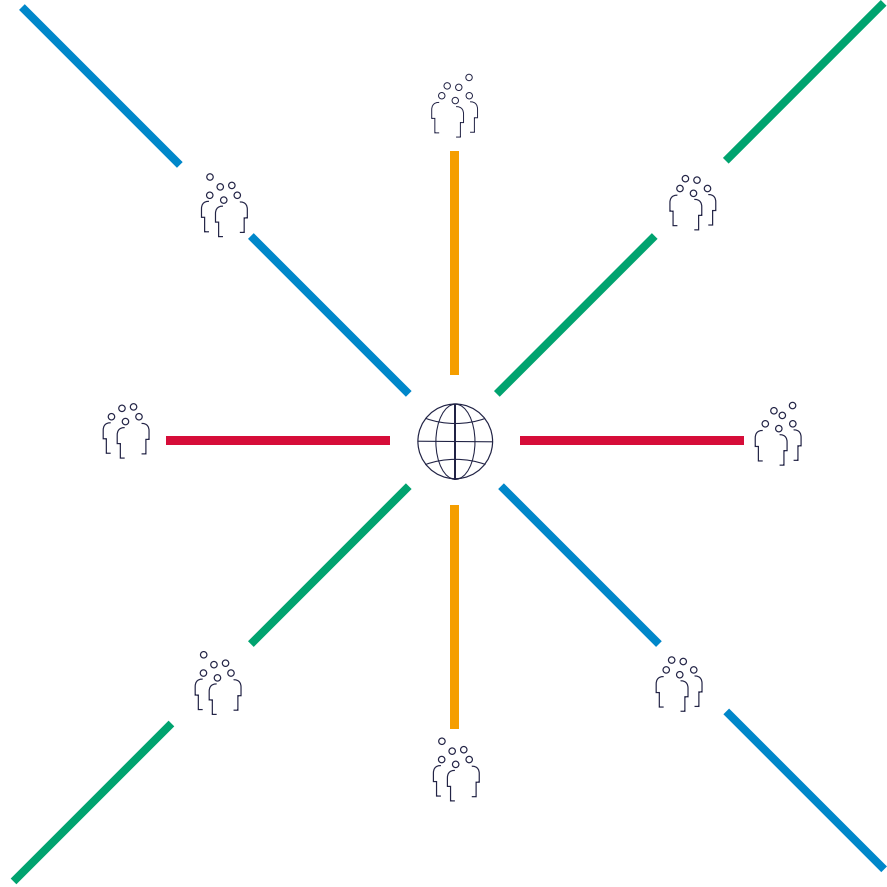


GLOBAL OVERVIEW OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

And guide for the Formulation of
Collaborative Social Projects



Co-funded by
the European Union



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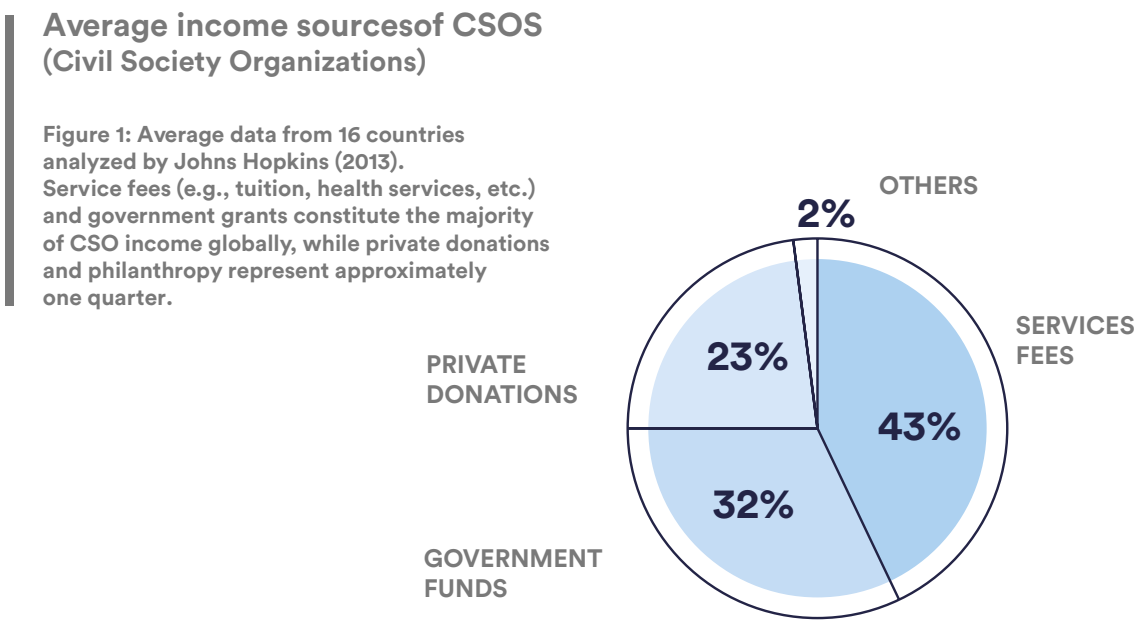
Global analysis of civil society organizations

Global analysis of civil society organizations

Civil society organizations (CSOs*) – represent a fundamental pillar across the globe. It is estimated that there are over 10 million CSOs worldwide (*Konchady, 2024*), although precise figures are difficult to determine. This sector contributes significantly to both national economies and social well-being: in several countries, it accounts for an average of 4.5% of GDP (*Johns Hopkins, 2013*) and employs millions of people. In fact, in many countries, CSOs employ nearly 10% of the workforce – comparable to or even exceeding sectors such as construction or transportation. Moreover, the economic contribution of CSOs has grown faster than overall GDP in many places over the past decade (*Johns Hopkins, 2013*).

Globally, more than 1 billion people engage in some form of volunteering each year (*TeamStage, 2025*). This is equivalent to the work of 109 million full-time workers when all hours are aggregated (*TeamStage, 2025*). On average, 1 in 5 adults worldwide participates in formal volunteering over the course of a year (*CAF, 2019*), although the majority of volunteer work occurs informally within local communities (approximately 70% is outside of formal organizations) (*TeamStage, 2025*). These figures highlight the global scale of the third sector.

Sources of Funding: CSOs obtain resources from diverse sources. On a global average, only a portion comes from philanthropic donations. A comparative study in 16 countries found that, overall, 43% of CSO income comes from service provision (fees and service sales), 32% from government funding, and 23% from donations and philanthropy (*Johns Hopkins, 2013*). The following chart illustrates this typical distribution of funding sources:



CSOs*. In this document, the term Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) refers to both legally registered organizations and informal collectives or other forms of social organization without legal status. However, it should be noted that most available data and statistics primarily reflect formally registered entities, which means that informal initiatives may be underrepresented.

However, this global average masks significant regional variations. In high-income regions (Europe, North America, Oceania), it is common for CSOs to be funded through a combination of public subsidies, service fees, and local donations. In contrast, in lower-income regions (Latin America, Africa, parts of Asia), many CSOs rely heavily on international cooperation funds and external donors (*CIVICUS, 2022*), due to a limited local philanthropic base and lower government support. The following is a regional analysis with key indicators (number of organizations, sources of funding, areas of work, staff and volunteers, financial sustainability, and trends over the past 10 years), as well as the relationship between CSOs and international cooperation.

Latin America and the Caribbean



Number of organizations

Latin America and the Caribbean host a vibrant civil society. It is estimated that over one million active CSOs operate in the region (*Centro para el Desarrollo Social, 2004*). Brazil alone records around 815,676 active nonprofit organizations (*Vergueiro, 2023*), including associations, foundations, and religious organizations. Other large countries, such as Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia, each host tens of thousands of registered CSOs (though figures vary by national source). This proliferation of community-based entities and NGOs has grown steadily since the democratization processes of the late 20th century, consolidating a broad associative fabric.



Areas of work

Latin American CSOs address a wide variety of issues. Common areas of focus include community development, poverty alleviation, education, health, human rights, the environment, and the empowerment of vulnerable groups. For example, many NGOs work to promote Indigenous rights, gender equality, government transparency, or humanitarian aid. There is also a large number of grassroots associations (such as community action boards, cooperatives, sports and cultural clubs) which, while small, are integral to the nonprofit ecosystem.



Human resources

The nonprofit sector in Latin America involves thousands of employees and millions of volunteers, although its share of the labor market varies by country. In Brazil, it is estimated that around 3 million people work with or support CSOs, including paid staff and volunteers (Brazil had approximately 2.2 million employees in the associative sector in 2016, and about 7.4 million active volunteers according to IBGE data). In smaller countries, staff tends to be modest in size and volunteer work is crucial to sustaining operations. Nevertheless, the culture of volunteering in the region is relatively low compared to other parts of the world — it is estimated that only about 20% of the population engages in formal volunteering in a typical year (*CAF, 2019*), highlighting challenges in mobilizing broader civic participation.



Sources of funding

A prominent feature in the region is the high dependence on external and international funding. Many CSOs, especially those focused on social development and human rights, receive funding from international cooperation agencies (such as UN agencies, the European Union, USAID, etc.) or foreign foundations. A CIVICUS study found that local CSOs face significant barriers in accessing funds from major development donors, often competing with international actors for calls for proposals and experiencing the “projectization” of resources (short-term funding tied to specific projects) (*CIVICUS, 2022*). Furthermore, there is little support for core or institutional costs, which hinders long-term sustainability (*CIVICUS, 2022*). On the other hand, domestic public support is limited: while some governments channel grants to CSOs, these funds are often insufficient or concentrated in specific sectors. Local philanthropy (from Latin American individuals and businesses) has grown slowly but still accounts for a small share of the budgets of most local NGOs.



Sustainability and evolution (last 10 years)

Over the past decade, Latin American CSOs have navigated a shifting environment. There was a growth in the number of organizations during the 2000s, driven by increased democratic openness and international support for civil society. However, more recently, many face financial difficulties and growing legal restrictions. Several countries have seen reductions in external aid flows and changes in traditional funding models (*CIVICUS, 2022*). This has forced some CSOs to downsize programs or even shut down. An extreme case is Nicaragua, where the government revoked the legal status of over 300 organizations in 2023 as part of a broader closure of civic space (*U.S. Department of State, 2023*). Similar challenges are reported in countries like Venezuela and El Salvador, where registering and operating NGOs has become increasingly difficult. Nonetheless, the region has also shown resilience: many CSOs have professionalized, diversified their funding sources (e.g., through social enterprises, crowdfunding), and formed national and regional networks to strengthen their advocacy and impact.



Relationship with international cooperation

(Further global details are provided in another section, but regionally speaking) International cooperation has been essential in Latin America. Multilateral agencies and international NGOs have supported local programs related to poverty reduction, human rights, and more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Local CSOs often align their projects with global agendas (Agenda 2030/SDGs, climate change) to access these funds and maximize impact. However, as several countries in the region have been reclassified as middle-income economies, some donors have cut back on aid, placing pressure on CSOs that are heavily dependent on external funding. Currently, efforts are being made to establish more strategic partnerships — for instance, Latin American CSO consortia submitting joint proposals to the European Union, or collaborations with the private sector through corporate social responsibility initiatives, aiming to reduce reliance on external donors.

Sub-Saharan Africa



Number of organizations

Africa has seen rapid growth in the number of CSOs since the 1990s, driven by international aid and responses to various humanitarian crises. It is estimated that there are hundreds of thousands of active CSOs across the continent. In South Africa alone, approximately 200,000 NGOs currently operate—an enormous increase from around 70,000 a decade ago (an increase of over 200% in ten years up to 2020) (*Nkonyeni, 2020*). Kenya recorded 8,893 active NGOs in 2019, four times more than in the late 1990s (*Matthews, 2018*). Countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania have also seen a multiplication of civil society organizations. In South Sudan and the Sahel region, many local CSOs have emerged to provide essential services in areas where the state is weak. However, exact numbers vary, as some counts include small community-based associations, women's groups, religious organizations, etc., making unified estimates difficult.



Areas of work

African CSOs are largely engaged in development and basic assistance. Many NGOs focus on health (e.g., HIV/AIDS, malaria), education, water and sanitation, food security, sustainable agriculture, and livelihoods—often in partnership with international agencies. Humanitarian and emergency relief organizations are also common due to frequent crises (conflicts, famines, natural disasters). In terms of rights, there are CSOs dedicated to human rights, women's empowerment, child protection, peacebuilding, and good governance, although they often operate in politically sensitive contexts. In recent years, CSOs focused on the environment and climate change have grown, in response to the region's vulnerability to these impacts.



Human resources

The nonprofit sector is a significant employer in some African countries. For example, in South Africa, CSOs employed approximately 1 in 14 workers (7% of formal employment) as of 2015 (*Nkonyeni, 2020*). Large organizations—such as international NGOs like Oxfam, World Vision, and CARE—operate with hundreds of local staff in several countries. However, the majority of African CSOs are small: a study in South Africa found that most new NGOs had very low annual income (R50k–R500k) and small teams (*Nkonyeni, 2020*). Community volunteering is the backbone of many initiatives—networks of health promoters, education volunteers, etc. In sub-Saharan Africa, the rate of formal volunteering is low (perhaps less than 10% of the population), but informal mutual aid is high—many people contribute to their community or church even if not formally recorded as “volunteers” (*TeamStage, 2025*). This reflects local traditions of solidarity, even if the formal NGO concept is externally introduced.



Sources of funding

In Africa, international cooperation funds are critical for the survival of most CSOs. In many countries, more than 50%—and in some cases 70–90%—of NGO budgets come from foreign donors (Western governments, the UN, the World Bank, global foundations). For example, in Malawi and other Southern African countries, a large portion of the rural healthcare system is financed and operated by NGOs with external support (*Matthews, 2018*). This high dependence on external aid means that cuts in international funding have an immediate impact on local operations. In fact, in South Africa, “the increase in the number of NGOs has not been accompanied by an increase in funding; on the contrary, decreases in both local and international funding have forced several NGOs to reduce services or shut down” (*Nkonyeni, 2020*). Domestic sources—such as donations from local citizens, African philanthropy, or government contributions—remain underdeveloped. Exceptions include South Africa (which has more established corporate donors and local foundations) and some countries like Kenya or Nigeria, where foundations by local entrepreneurs are emerging. Some governments provide small grants or offer tax exemptions for donations, but in general, the financial ceiling for African CSOs is determined by donor agendas and the availability of international support.



Sustainability and evolution (last 10 years)

The past decade has brought both expansion and greater challenges. The 2010–2015 period saw a proliferation of CSOs, thanks to global attention on goals like the MDGs/SDGs and international commitments to invest in civil society. However, since 2015, several trends have complicated the landscape: 1) Stagnation or reduction in traditional international aid in real terms (as some donors prioritized specific crises or cut development funding); 2) Increased competition among CSOs for funding—as the number of organizations has grown, many compete for the same limited budget pool, resulting in micro-NGOs with very precarious funding (*Nkonyeni, 2020*); 3) Growing legal restrictions in certain African countries. Several governments have implemented NGO laws that limit the receipt of foreign funds or impose strict registration requirements (examples include Ethiopia (2009, later partially relaxed), Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and proposed legislation in Nigeria). A report found that at least 12 African countries have recently proposed or passed restrictive measures targeting CSOs (*Musila, 2019*). These measures may include requiring NGOs to raise a certain percentage of their funds domestically, banning them from engaging in “political” activities, or labeling them as “foreign agents” if they receive external funding. All of this complicates the financial and operational sustainability of CSOs.

Despite these challenges, African CSOs have shown adaptability:

Many are becoming more professional in project management, diversifying donors (e.g., seeking funding from the African diaspora, collaborating with international NGOs in consortia), and moving toward income-generating projects (e.g., small fees for educational or microcredit services).



Relationship with international cooperation

The relationship between African CSOs and international cooperation is characterized by close ties. A large share of official development assistance (ODA) to Africa is channeled through implementing NGOs. For instance, in global humanitarian aid, NGOs (mostly international ones working in Africa) accounted for 20% of humanitarian funding in 2020—the highest share in the last decade (*Development Initiatives, 2022*). Additionally, many local CSOs serve as partners to UN agencies and large international NGOs operating in their countries.

There is a growing “localization” movement in humanitarian and development aid that seeks to empower local actors. The Grand Bargain (2016) committed major donors and agencies to channel at least 25% of global humanitarian funds directly to local and national actors by 2020 (*Agenda for Humanity, 2020*). While that target was not fully met, it encouraged international NGOs to establish sub-grant partnerships and capacity-building programs with African CSOs.

Global agendas (such as the SDGs and the fight against climate change) have also influenced CSO work. For example, many African NGOs are engaged in clean energy, climate-resilient agriculture, or quality education projects aligned with SDGs 7, 2, and 4, respectively, in line with international funding priorities.

In summary, international cooperation remains a critical pillar—both an opportunity and a vulnerability—for civil society in Africa.

Asia (including the Middle East)



Number of organizations

Asia hosts the largest absolute number of CSOs in the world, consistent with its population size. India stands out, with estimates ranging between 2 and 3.3 million registered NGOs (*Babu, 2010*), approximately one organization for every 400 inhabitants. Only a fraction of these are formally active on government platforms (around 100,000–200,000 registered on the Darpan portal as of 2023), but this reflects a vast informal volunteer sector. China, for its part, had about 700,000 registered CSOs in 2016 (*Xiaoyun-Li & Qiang-Dong, 2018*)—officially referred to as “social organizations,” excluding unregistered groups—which marks a huge leap from fewer than 50 in 1990 (*Song, 2024*). In other parts of Asia,

numbers are also significant: Bangladesh has tens of thousands of NGOs (famous for microfinance and rural development work), and both Pakistan and the Philippines also have tens of thousands. In Southeast Asia, countries like Indonesia are home to a myriad of Islamic charitable (zakat) and community development organizations. In the Middle East, organized civil society is smaller and often state-controlled, but there are still thousands of charitable associations in countries like Egypt and Lebanon, along with a growing number of local humanitarian NGOs in crisis contexts (e.g., Syria, Yemen, Iraq).



Areas of work

Given Asia's diversity, CSOs operate across a wide array of sectors. In South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal), NGOs are often focused on rural development, health, basic education, women's empowerment, microfinance, and poverty alleviation. In Southeast Asia, in addition to development work, many CSOs are involved in natural disaster prevention, emergency response, and reconstruction (e.g., after the 2004 tsunami or Typhoon Haiyan in 2013), as well as labor rights in countries with large manufacturing sectors. In East Asia, civil society in countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan is well-established and focused on social services, aging populations, the environment, and international aid (many Asian NGOs have become donors in other countries). In China, the allowed NGOs mostly operate in charity, social assistance, culture, and environmental protection, while sensitive areas (civil rights, minorities) are handled by a limited number of organizations under strict supervision. In the Middle East, many CSOs are Islamic charitable organizations, humanitarian aid groups (especially in conflict zones), and development NGOs focused on education, water, and livelihoods in refugee communities.



Human resources

Human resources: Asia shows sharp contrasts in CSO staffing and volunteering. In emerging Asia, employment in CSOs is lower as a percentage of the labor force but still significant in key sectors (e.g., health NGOs in India employ tens of thousands of community health workers). India has a vast informal volunteer base tied to religious organizations and social movements, though only about 2–3% of the population formally reports being active volunteers in surveys (likely an underestimation). Indonesia has one of the highest volunteering rates globally (63% reported having volunteered in the past year) (CAF, 2022), mainly in community and religious activities. In contrast, formal volunteering in China is still nascent but has grown rapidly over the past decade (e.g., mass volunteer programs during the 2008 Olympics set a trend). In the Middle East, volunteering is often channeled through religious organizations (such as Islamic waqf networks) and has been crucial in citizen-led responses during crises (e.g., the White Helmets in Syria, made up of local emergency volunteers).



Sources of founding

CSO funding sources in Asia range from strong domestic support to significant external dependency, depending on the national context:

- In developed East Asia (Japan, South Korea, Singapore), most CSO funding comes from governments (grants, contracts) and the local private sector. Corporate philanthropy and individual donations (especially after natural disasters) are substantial. For example, Japan has international NGOs almost entirely funded through local private donations (e.g., Peace Winds Japan).
- In South Asia, many countries have historically relied on international funding for their CSOs. India received significant funding from international donors (World Bank, DFID, USAID, foreign foundations) for health, education, and human rights NGOs. However, in recent years, India enacted the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), tightening restrictions on foreign funding. This affected thousands of NGOs (~9,000 FCRA registrations were revoked) (*Foreign Policy Association, 2025*). As a result, the sector has sought more internal support: fortunately, domestic philanthropy in India has grown, with contributions from major business leaders and the middle class (India now has numerous important local foundations). Bangladesh and Pakistan still depend heavily on international development aid, although they also receive diaspora donations and limited government funds for shared programs.
- In Southeast Asia, middle-income countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam draw on multiple sources: they receive cooperation funds (UNICEF, USAID, EU) for poverty reduction and climate projects, but also have local fundraising networks (e.g., Islamic organizations in Indonesia collect zakat amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars for social purposes). In Myanmar, before the 2021 coup, much of the pro-democracy and development CSO sector depended on Western donors; after the coup, this funding has been suspended or moved underground.

In the Middle East, many countries (e.g., Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon) have mixed funding: humanitarian NGOs receive funds from the UN and Western donors to serve Syrian refugees, while traditional local associations rely on community donations. In the Gulf monarchies, governments and philanthropists fund most charitable initiatives and also export funds to Islamic NGOs in Asia and Africa.



**Sustainability
and evolution
(last 10 years)**

National CSO trajectories in Asia vary, but general trends include:

- ➔ **Expansion and professionalization:** In countries like India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, the number of CSOs has continued to grow over the past decade, with increasing specialization and professional capacity.
- ➔ **Stricter legal frameworks:** Several Asian governments have tightened regulations: China passed a foreign NGO management law in 2017 requiring police supervision (*Batke, 2020*); India strengthened FCRA; Bangladesh introduced new requirements for NGOs receiving foreign funds.
- ➔ **Financial innovation:** New income sources have emerged, including digital philanthropy (crowdfunding on Asian platforms), hybrid social enterprises, and the rise of ultra-wealthy local philanthropists (especially in India and China) channeling resources into domestic foundations—slightly reducing the funding gap.
- ➔ **Impact of COVID-19:** CSOs in the region were deeply involved in community responses during 2020–21 but simultaneously suffered income losses and reduced volunteer engagement (many countries saw volunteer rates drop due to lockdowns).
- ➔ **Shrinking civic space:** Unfortunately, in some parts of Western Asia (Middle East), independent civil society has been severely restricted for political reasons, with NGOs being shut down or co-opted (e.g., Syria, Egypt post-2014, Afghanistan post-2021).

Relationship with international cooperation: Asia maintains strong relationships with international organizations. Many Asian CSOs hold consultative status with the UN or work directly with UN agencies and the World Bank to implement national projects. There has been a notable rise in Asian CSO participation in the UN: in 2019, 860 new consultative status applications were submitted to ECOSOC (many from Asia), a record number and four times higher than in 2010 (*United Nations, 2020*), reflecting the region's interest in contributing to the 2030 global agenda. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have guided the strategic plans of many Asian NGOs; governments such as Indonesia and India actively encourage CSOs to align their initiatives with national SDG goals.

Recent strategic alliances include the creation of regional networks (e.g., Asian Disaster Reduction & Response Network, Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network) where CSOs from multiple countries collaborate and share resources. South-South cooperation is also expanding: NGOs from India, China, and other emerging economies are now offering technical assistance to poorer CSOs in Africa and Asia, complementing traditional North-South aid.

Pacific (Oceania)



Number of organizations

In Oceania, the number of CSOs is more modest in absolute terms but significant relative to population size. Australia has approximately 60,000 registered charitable organizations (*Accounting for Good, 2024*), in addition to many more community associations that are not federally registered. New Zealand has over 27,000 registered charities. Across the Pacific region—including the Pacific Islands—there are likely tens of thousands of CSOs operating, including churches, cooperatives, development NGOs, and others.



Areas of work

In Oceania, CSOs in Australia and New Zealand focus both on domestic services (health, education, disability, sports, and culture) and on international cooperation projects in the Asia-Pacific region. In the Pacific Islands, CSOs commonly engage in community development, environmental conservation (especially marine resources), and climate change adaptation—reflecting the existential importance of climate change for these countries.



Human resources

In the developed countries of the region, the nonprofit sector is a major employer. In both Australia and New Zealand, around 10% of the labor force is employed in CSOs (or third sector entities), similar to levels seen in Europe (*Johns Hopkins, 2013*). For comparison, in France—a comparable OECD country—nonprofit associations employed 2.2 million salaried workers and mobilized 21 million volunteers in 2018 (*Insee Première, 2021*), representing 3.3% of French GDP (*Associatheque, 2024*). Proportionally similar figures can be expected in countries like Japan or Australia.



Sources of funding

CSOs in Oceania tend to have relatively strong access to both national and international funding sources:

- CSOs in Australia and New Zealand are primarily funded through government contracts to deliver public services, private local donations, and service fees. For example, large welfare organizations in Australia (such as the Salvation Army or Lifeline) combine public subsidies with fundraising from the general public. Australian international NGOs (such as World Vision Australia) raise significant funds from individuals to support projects in Africa and Asia, often complemented by grants from the national government agency (DFAT).
- In the Pacific Islands, CSOs often survive thanks to international donors (e.g., the UN, EU, Australia, and New Zealand), who support projects in countries where local economies are too small to sustain a strong third sector independently.



Sustainability and evolution (last 10 years)

In Australia, for example, it was reported that around 620,000 volunteers ceased their participation in organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) (*Associatheque, 2024*), although some recovery is expected as conditions normalize.



Relationship with international cooperation

Relationship with international cooperation: In Oceania, Australia and New Zealand play a key role in supporting Pacific civil society through capacity-building programs and joint funding of UN-CSO local initiatives. These efforts are central to strengthening the nonprofit ecosystem in small island states and advancing development goals in the region.

Europe



Number of organizations

Europe has one of the densest civil society ecosystems in the world. The European Union as a whole hosts several million associations and foundations. For example, France had an estimated 1.37 million active associations in 2020 (*Associatheque, 2024*), Germany about 600,000 registered associations, Italy around 350,000, Spain approximately 300,000, and the United Kingdom around 170,000 with charitable status (plus hundreds of thousands of unregistered associations). These figures range from small sports or cultural associations to large international NGOs.



Areas of work

In developed countries, civil society covers both domestic needs (e.g., charity, supplementary welfare services, sports, culture, minority rights advocacy, local environmental protection) and international cooperation projects. In Western Europe, it is common for large NGOs to manage hospitals, elder care centers, schools, and more (e.g., many schools in Belgium are run by nonprofit associations). Typical areas of work in Europe and North America include: health (e.g., cancer associations, nonprofit hospitals), education and research, social services (poverty, homelessness), arts and culture, sports and recreation, environmental protection, civil rights advocacy, political activism (think tanks, advocacy groups), and international aid.



Human resources

The nonprofit sector in Europe and North America is a major formal employer. On average, between 5% and 15% of the labor force is employed in CSOs depending on the country (*Johns Hopkins, 2013*). In the Netherlands and Canada, for example, this figure exceeds 12% (including nonprofit health services), while in Spain it is around 4%. In France, there were 22.5 million active volunteers in associations (34% of the population) (*Associatheque, 2024*). After the pandemic, volunteerism declined slightly in some countries, but numbers are rebounding through new modalities (e.g., virtual volunteering, micro-volunteering).



Sources of funding

In Western Europe, CSO funding models are characterized by strong public sector support. Governments often subsidize or contract CSOs to provide social, health, and education services. In France, for instance, while 90% of associations are run solely by volunteers, the ones that do employ staff absorb more than 90% of the sector's total budget (*Associatheque, 2024*), much of it coming from government agreements in health, education, and social services. Revenue also comes from service provision and membership fees—for example, sports associations that charge dues. Private philanthropy (individual and corporate donations) plays an important complementary role: in countries like the UK and the US, it represents a larger share of funding compared to continental Europe. Many large NGOs manage mixed funding portfolios—for instance, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) funds its missions with approximately 90% private donations (mostly from Europe), while Save the Children combines donations with public grants from governments and the EU.



Sustainability and evolution (last 10 years)

In general, the sector in Europe is considered stable and mature, though not without recent challenges. The Great Recession (2008–2012) and subsequent austerity measures across Europe reduced available public funds for CSOs in some countries, leading to cutbacks and greater competition for grants. Later, many countries recovered and increased social spending, benefiting the nonprofit sector again.



Digitalization and new forms of activism

Social movements that are less formalized (e.g., the “Yellow Vests,” Black Lives Matter) have emerged, operating outside traditional NGO structures. While this has diversified civil society, it sometimes draws attention and resources away from established NGOs.



COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic dealt a major financial blow to many CSOs due to the cancellation of fundraising events and increased demand for services. However, it also highlighted the importance of CSOs (e.g., food banks, vaccination support). In Europe, NGOs are now facing the exhaustion of emergency relief funds and must adapt to high inflation, which raises project costs. On the positive side, innovation has also emerged: more online fundraising, large-scale campaigns (e.g., #GivingTuesday), and collaboration with governments on recovery programs (e.g., NextGenerationEU funds with CSO participation).



A key emerging issue is the protection of civic space

While Europe and North America have traditionally protected freedom of association, in recent years, some governments have sought to restrict CSO activity—particularly those focused on human rights and migrants (e.g., in Hungary, Poland, Russia). Russia passed its “foreign agent” law in 2012 (which inspired similar laws elsewhere), and Hungary passed a comparable law in 2017 (later annulled by the EU). Between 2014 and 2018, more than 60 countries globally—including several in Eastern Europe—adopted laws that hinder NGO operations (*Jedele, 2020*). These trends have forced civil society to litigate for its rights and seek international support to keep civic space open.



Relationship with international cooperation

Relationship with international cooperation: European and North American CSOs are deeply embedded in global cooperation, typically serving as donors and implementers. Many international NGOs headquartered in these regions channel their governments’ funds into projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For instance, the EU funds European CSOs that then carry out development projects in third countries; USAID allocates around 20% of its assistance to programs implemented by nonprofit organizations (*Ingram, 2019*)—including both U.S.-based and local NGOs in partner countries.

CSOs from these countries also lead global networks such as CIVICUS (a global civil society alliance), ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies), and others, helping coordinate transnational efforts. In short, Europe and North America provide much of the funding, technical knowledge, and international platforms upon which CSOs around the world depend—while also bearing the responsibility of safeguarding democratic space at home to ensure civil society can continue to thrive.

North America



Number of organizations

The United States has approximately 1.48 million registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations (*Donor Box, 2024*), which include charitable and public benefit entities. Additionally, there are tens of thousands of nonprofits with other classifications. Canada, for its part, has around 170,000 registered nonprofit organizations. Altogether, North America is estimated to have between 1.6 and 1.8 million active CSOs. Unlike in developing regions, the number of organizations here has remained relatively stable, with gradual annual growth (e.g., the number of nonprofits in the U.S. increases by around 2% annually). It is also worth highlighting the global reach of major international CSOs based in this region—organizations like the Red Cross, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Oxfam, World Vision, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have headquarters or strong chapters in Europe/North America and operate globally.



Areas of work

In the U.S., a significant proportion of organizations are religious or community-based—churches and congregations are typically registered as nonprofits and account for around 32% of all charitable donations (*Nonprofits Source, 2023*).

(Although this point refers to Eastern Europe, it is misplaced in this section and may be edited out for clarity.) In North America, there is also a broad category of philanthropic foundations that fund projects (they do not directly operate services but are considered part of the third sector).



Human resources

In the U.S., before the pandemic, the nonprofit sector employed approximately 12.5 million people, making it the third-largest employer after retail and manufacturing (*TBRC, 2025*). Volunteers also play a central role: roughly 25–30% of the population in these countries engages in formal volunteering each year (about 30% in the U.S. (*TeamStage, 2025*), around 44% in Canada). In comparison, Europe varies: 40% in Nordic countries and around 20% in Southern Europe. For reference, culturally similar Australia reported 36% adult volunteer participation in 2010 (*Australian Government, 2011*). This human capital enables many CSOs to operate on a large scale (e.g., the American Red Cross mobilizes around 300,000 volunteers).



Sources of founding

The United States has the most developed culture of individual giving in the world. In 2022, private charitable contributions reached approximately \$485 billion—32% to churches/religious organizations, 16% to education, 12% to human services, 9% to health, and 5% to the environment, among others (*Nonprofits Source, 2023*). North American CSOs also receive income through service fees (e.g., hospitals, universities) and philanthropic foundations that manage endowments

and provide grants (e.g., the Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation). A notable feature in the U.S. is the tax deductibility of donations, which strongly incentivizes large-scale philanthropy. While Europe also offers tax incentives, donation patterns tend to be more modest, with the exception of the United Kingdom.



Sustainability and evolution (last 10 years)

By 2023–2024, many U.S. NGOs reported rising operational costs (47% noted increased expenses) and challenges in covering program budgets (*Network Depot, 2024*), leading 68% of them to plan cuts to programs or staff in the short term to survive (*Network Depot, 2024*).



Relationship with international cooperation

In 2018, approximately 20% of U.S. official development assistance (ODA) was implemented by NGOs—roughly the same proportion allocated to recipient governments (*Ingram, 2019*). These organizations have played a key role in shaping global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in climate negotiations, and in multi-sector partnerships—for instance, with tech and pharmaceutical companies for education and vaccine distribution.

This landscape changed dramatically with Donald Trump’s second administration in 2025. Under the “America First” policy, Executive Order 14169 was signed, imposing a 90-day moratorium on all foreign aid. This led to the cancellation of 90% of USAID contracts and abruptly cut over \$60 billion in international programs (*AP News, 2025a*). USAID was effectively dismantled, with its functions transferred to the Department of State and its staff reduced to fewer than 300 people (*AP News, 2025b*).

U.S. aid has become highly conditional, excluding programs related to gender, reproductive health, or climate change (*White House, 2025*). This shift has affected thousands of CSOs, disrupted key programs such as PEPFAR, and raised concerns about the politicization of aid (*KFF, 2025*; *Oxfam America, 2025*).



Global networks and platforms



Global networks and platforms

Beyond regional dynamics, there are global support institutions and “networks of networks” that connect civil society at the planetary level. One key example is CIVICUS, a worldwide alliance of CSOs and activists present on all continents. CIVICUS promotes citizen action and strengthens civil society through research (e.g., the annual *State of Civic Space* report), global advocacy (before the UN and international forums), and capacity-building programs (such as solidarity funds, activist protection campaigns, etc.).

Within CIVICUS, the Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA) emerged in 2004 as a truly global network of national platforms. AGNA brings together national CSO associations and regional platforms from around the world to foster greater cooperation and mutual learning (*CIVICUS & AGNA, 2022*). Guided by its 2023–2027 Strategy, AGNA envisions itself as a legitimate and independent global community of practice, committed to peer learning, exchange, and supporting the dynamic accountability and visibility of civil society. Through safe networking spaces, skill-building, regional cooperation, and advocacy, AGNA members strengthen their capacity to enable civil society to meaningfully contribute to public discourse, global solidarity, and the protection of open civic space. In 2025, AGNA included 88 members from 75 countries, representing around 30 thousand civil society organizations and networks. This broad membership gives it unprecedented reach to exchange best practices and coordinate global action in support of civil society.

Another key global initiative is Forus International (formerly IFP/FIP, the International Forum of National NGO Platforms). Forus is an innovative network made up of 68 national NGO platforms and 7 regional coalitions, collectively representing over 24,000 organizations around the world (*FORUS, n.d.*). Similar in spirit to AGNA, Forus focuses on empowering civil society for effective social change, facilitating exchange among its members and delivering a unified voice in international decision-making spaces. Both AGNA and Forus collaborate with previously mentioned regional networks—many Latin American, African, and Asian platforms are members of both.

In the field of philanthropy, WINGS (Worldwide Initiatives for Grantmaker Support) stands out as a global network of over 200 philanthropic leaders and institutions across 58 countries. It supports the infrastructure of institutional philanthropy (community funds, associations of foundations, etc.), which indirectly strengthens recipient CSOs (*WINGS, n.d.*).

In the humanitarian field, ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) brings together over 160 NGOs operating in more than 160 countries to improve coordination and capacity in emergency responses (*ICVA, n.d.*).

Finally, on the technology front, the TechSoup Global Network includes 63 leading civil society organizations worldwide that work together to improve CSO access to technology, with a presence in nearly every country (*TechSoup, 2022*). These global networks exemplify the “network of networks” model, connecting multiple nodes (national or thematic) in a global infrastructure that supports civil society.



International cooperation and global trends in partnerships



International cooperation and global trends in partnerships

International cooperation has been both a driving force and a conditioning factor for nonprofit civil society organizations around the world. Some key aspects of this relationship include:

➔ External funding

In developing regions, a high percentage of CSOs survive on external funds. One study found that 39 low- and middle-income countries have adopted laws to restrict foreign funding to NGOs over concerns of foreign interference (Kendra et al., 2016), reflecting the scale of these flows. In contrast, in developed countries, CSOs receive little external funding—and many act as global donors themselves (philanthropic foundations from the U.S., Europe, and Japan that provide global grants). This asymmetry is clear: while \$153 billion in Official Development Assistance (ODA) was disbursed globally in 2023 (USAFACTS, 2024)—much of it channeled through CSOs—domestic sources in recipient countries do not match this amount. This financial imbalance gives cooperation actors influence over local CSO agendas.

➔ Alignment with global agendas

UN agendas such as the SDGs and the Paris Agreement have deeply influenced CSO work. After the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), thousands of organizations revised their strategic plans to map how their programs contribute to specific targets (e.g., poverty eradication, gender equality, climate action). International donors began requiring funded projects to demonstrate alignment with specific SDGs. This has created a shared framework of language and goals between donors and CSOs. For example, a girls' education NGO in Uganda will now typically state its contributions to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), which may improve access to foreign funding. However, some criticize that this alignment is sometimes more cosmetic than substantial—activities are simply rebranded to match donor terminology. Still, the influence is undeniable: a UN official noted that with the launch of the SDG “Decade of Action,” *“the role of civil society as a partner of the United Nations has never been more important”* (United Nations, 2020). This reflects that without CSOs, global goals—in climate, health (see the role of NGOs during the pandemic), or human rights—will not be achieved.

➔ Links with international organizations

More CSOs than ever are seeking consultative status with the UN and other forums to influence global policy. As mentioned earlier, 2019 set a record for new applications for ECOSOC consultative status (United Nations, 2020). Today, over 5,400 NGOs hold consultative status with the UN—from global giants like WWF to small foundations—allowing them to attend and contribute to official meetings. Beyond the UN, many CSOs partner with multilateral banks (e.g., the World Bank directly funds local CSOs in community projects) and with regional organizations (e.g., the OAS and EU have formal

mechanisms for civil society dialogue). These institutional relationships give civil society a voice in global governance, even if sometimes symbolic. On the ground, many UN agencies (UNICEF, UNHCR, UNDP) channel much of their budget through implementing partners—typically NGOs—thus integrating them into the broader cooperation architecture.

➔ **Strategic alliances and emerging trends**

Recent years have seen the rise of new forms of collaboration:

Multi-stakeholder partnerships: Collaborations between governments, the private sector, and CSOs to tackle complex challenges. For example, the COVAX vaccine initiative brought together the UN, governments, pharmaceutical companies, and foundations/NGOs to distribute COVID-19 vaccines. Another example is public-private education coalitions (e.g., governments + NGOs + tech companies expanding digital education access).

Localization and local ownership: As mentioned earlier, the “local ownership” trend has led major international NGOs to reevaluate their role. Some have localized their offices—for instance, Oxfam converted several country offices into autonomous, locally led NGOs. Donors are increasingly discussing how to fund local NGOs directly without intermediaries. While the 25% funding target for local actors by 2020 (*Agenda for Humanity, 2020*) was not fully met, progress has been made—especially in discourse—toward strengthening local CSOs rather than concentrating funds and visibility in international ones.

Technology and social media use: CSOs have partnered with tech companies and digital platforms to enhance their impact—from online fundraising campaigns to big data tools for SDG monitoring. Partnerships with the tech sector are now common. Additionally, digital activism has emerged as a complement to traditional NGO action, sometimes resulting in informal partnerships (e.g., environmental NGOs collaborating with youth influencers from movements like *Fridays for Future*).

Philanthropy from new actors: Major tech fortunes (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Ma) have created their own foundations operating with social investment models. Some NGOs seek partnerships with these mega-donors for ambitious projects. Additionally, sovereign wealth funds from nontraditional donor countries (e.g., Gulf States or China) are investing in cooperation through CSOs in third countries, expanding the alliance landscape beyond the traditional OECD donors.

Transnational coalitions and networks: Global platforms for CSO coordination have been strengthened to amplify collective voices. One example is CIVICUS – World Alliance for Citizen Participation, with members in over 175 countries, which monitors civic space and coordinates global civil society defense campaigns. Another is Public Services International (PSI), which brings together trade unions and NGOs advocating for high-quality public services globally. These networks are increasingly recognized interlocutors in international arenas and allow for coordinated responses to global trends—e.g., campaigns against restrictive NGO laws, where a global network can apply joint pressure across multiple countries.

Comparative table by region – Key indicators of CSOs (approximations):

REGION	REGISTERED ORGANIZATIONS	EMPLOYMENT IN THE CSO SECTOR	VOLUNTEERS	MAIN SOURCES OF FUNDING
AFRICA	More than 100,000 (e.g., South Africa ~200k, Kenya ~9k active)	0.5–2% of the workforce (South Africa ~7%, an outlier)	Low formal volunteering (<10% of population), high informal volunteering (community-based solidarity)	Mostly international funding (70%+ in many CSOs), minimal local philanthropy
LATIN AMERICA	~1,000,000+ organizations (Brazil ~815k; large numbers also in Mexico, Argentina, etc.)	1–3% of the workforce (Brazil: no exact data, estimated ~2%)*	Moderate formal volunteering (10–20% of the population)	Significant international funding (cooperation), some public funding and emerging local philanthropy
ASIA (South, Southeast, East)	~3,000,000+ organizations (India 2–3M; China ~700k; other countries with tens of thousands)	1–5% of the workforce (high in Japan/South Korea, low in South Asia)	Variable volunteering rates (Indonesia 63% very high; others 5–15%)	Mixed funding: In developed Asia, primarily domestic; in developing Asia, substantial external aid and growing local philanthropy
EUROPE	~3,000,000 (France 1,37M, Germany ~600k)	5–15% of the workforce (France ~5%, Netherlands ~13%)	High (20–40% of the population)	Mostly national: public subsidies, quotas, local donations; EU funds for international NGOs
NORTH AMERICA	~1,600,000 (EE.UU. ~1,48M, Canada ~170k)	~10% of the workforce (USA approx. 10.2%)	High (25–30% volunteer population)	Mostly national: private donations (very high in the USA), foundations, government contracts
OCEANIA	~60,000 (Australia ~60k, NZ ~27k)	~10% of the workforce (Australia ~10%)	Very high (Australia 36%)	Mostly national: government funds, donations; international cooperation in Pacific islands

Table 1: Regional comparison of key indicators of the CSO sector at a global level. Own elaboration based on data from CIVICUS, Johns Hopkins University, Charities Aid Foundation, OECD, academic and government reports. Notes: approximate figures; pop. = population; n/a = not available.

Notable Time-Based Trends: As an illustration, South Africa experienced exponential NGO growth (+200% between 2010 and 2020) (Nkonyeni, 2020), in contrast with the decline in volunteering across Western countries in 2020 due to the pandemic (France lost volunteers across approximately 620,000 associations) (*Associatheque*, 2024). Similarly, UN data shows a steady increase in CSO participation in international forums—applications for UN consultative status quadrupled from 2010 to 2019 (*United Nations*, 2020). These time-based trends highlight both growth dynamics and contextual challenges faced by CSOs.



From global analysis to collective action: strengthening the joint design of social projects



From global analysis to collective action: strengthening the joint design of social projects

The global analysis of the civil society organization (CSO) ecosystem reveals a dynamic landscape, characterized by their growing relevance in rights advocacy, service delivery, and public policy influence. Despite regional diversity, CSOs face common challenges related to financial sustainability, autonomy from funders, and the shrinking of civic space in several contexts.

In response, interorganizational and transnational collaboration has emerged as a key strategic approach. Joint project design becomes a vital tool to channel such alliances—structuring collective interventions that articulate shared visions, equitable commitments, and impactful actions.

In this context, it is necessary to move from analysis to concrete action. The following is a practical guide for jointly drafting social projects, aiming to provide technical and strategic guidance to strengthen CSOs' capacities to design collaborative initiatives effectively, inclusively, and sustainably. This thematic transition seeks to translate the insights of the global assessment into applicable tools for structured responses to today's challenges.





Let's get to the basics!





Technical approach to project design



Technical approach to project design

A strong social project begins with solid technical planning. This means clearly defining what the project aims to achieve and how success will be measured, while detailing the necessary steps and required resources.

This section covers the key elements of technical design: objectives, results, indicators, activities, and budget. Carefully developing each of these components ensures that all alliance partners share a common vision and a clear work plan.

Defining objectives (general and specific)

Every project must begin with clearly defined objectives. It is helpful to distinguish between the general objective (the broader change or impact the project aims to contribute to) and the specific objectives (concrete achievements to be reached in the medium term). When drafting objectives, it is important that they be clear and measurable.

➔ General Objective

Describes the ultimate goal of the project, connected to a broad social need (*UNDP, 2009; OEI, 2007*). *Example:* Improve citizen participation in local governance in Region X, contributing to a stronger and more democratic civil society.

➔ Specific Objectives

These are the immediate results the project must achieve to contribute to the general objective (*UNDP, 2009; UNEG, 2013*). They should be precise and verifiable. *Example:*

1. Strengthen the capacities of 20 community organizations in Region X in political advocacy mechanisms over an 18-month period.
2. Establish permanent channels of dialogue between civil society organizations and local authorities by the end of the first year.

Best Practices: Involving all alliance partners in the definition of objectives ensures mutual understanding and shared commitment. Joint brainstorming sessions and participatory methodologies (such as the logical framework or theory of change) are recommended to agree on the project's intervention logic. Each specific objective should be clearly linked to at least one responsible partner or one with a comparative advantage in that area, fostering co-responsibility from the start.

Expected results and performance indicators

Expected Results: Once objectives are clear, expected results are defined—these are the tangible achievements that demonstrate progress toward specific objectives. Results usually describe observable changes in the situation or in the capacities of direct beneficiaries (UNDP, 2009; UNEG, 2013). Each result should be linked to one or more specific objectives, creating a coherent project logic. Example: For the objective of strengthening capacities, an expected result might be: “Community organizations trained and applying policy advocacy tools.”

Indicators: Each result should be accompanied by indicators to measure progress. An indicator is an objective, verifiable, and precise measure of the change achieved. Good indicators are clearly defined, quantifiable, relevant to the result, and verifiable through available sources of information (UNDP, 2009). Example: “Number of community organizations that develop and implement at least one successful policy advocacy plan during the project.” It is also recommended to define a baseline (initial situation before the project) and a target for each indicator, to allow for progress evaluation.

Quantitative vs. Qualitative Indicators: Both types are useful. Quantitative indicators (e.g., percentages, counts) provide hard data, while qualitative indicators (e.g., testimonials, case studies) offer context and insight into the nature of change. A strong project often combines both to get a full picture of progress.

Means of Verification: Alongside indicators, specifying how information will be collected (e.g., surveys, meeting minutes, financial reports, direct observation) ensures that data will be accessible and reliable during project evaluation.

Best Practices: Develop a logical framework matrix or a planning table that summarizes objectives, results, indicators, means of verification, and key assumptions. This helps visualize the internal logic of the project and check for coherence.

A simplified example of a planning matrix follows:

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE	EXPECTED RESULT	INDICATOR (WITH TARGET)	MEANS OF VERIFICATION
Strengthen capacities of local CSOs	Community organizations implement advocacy plans	15 local CSOs implementing an advocacy plan by year 2	CSO reports; observation of initiatives
Improve CSO-government dialogue	Dialogue tables established and functioning regularly	4 quarterly dialogue tables with active participation of authorities and CSOs	Meeting minutes; signed agreements

Table 2: Example of a summarized matrix of objectives, results, and indicators for a project.

Through this type of tool, all partners can agree on exactly what is expected to be achieved and how they will know if they are on the right track, which facilitates joint monitoring later.

Activity plan and timeline

With clear objectives and expected results, the next step is to define which activities will be carried out to achieve those results. Activities are the concrete actions that project partners will implement. It is important to describe each activity in sufficient detail—its scope, participants, methodology, and duration—without overloading with unnecessary information.

➔ List of activities

It is advisable to list the main activities under each expected result. For example, if the expected result is *CSOs trained in advocacy*, the activities might include: advocacy training workshops, tailored technical assistance, peer exchange internships between organizations, etc. Each activity should clearly contribute to achieving the associated result.

➔ Leads and collaborators

For each activity, designate which organization or partner will be primarily responsible for its implementation, and which other actors will collaborate. This helps avoid confusion and overlaps. *Example:* Advocacy training workshop – Lead: Organization A; Collaborators: Organization B (logistics) and external expert (facilitation).

➔ Timeline

Developing a realistic calendar is essential. Use a timeline to show in which months (or weeks) the activities will take place. Tools like Gantt charts can be useful to visualize the sequence and simultaneity of activities. The timeline should account for dependencies (e.g., training materials must be developed before workshops can take place) and avoid overburdening any one partner with impractical simultaneous tasks.

➔ Required resources

Alongside each activity, it's helpful to note key resources needed (human, material, technical). This later helps to link activities with budget lines.

Best Practices: Joint participation in activity planning improves coordination. Bringing partners together to build the timeline ensures that local holidays, cultural contexts, and each organization's administrative timelines are taken into account. Also, including checkpoints in the calendar (e.g., mid-term evaluations, monthly coordination meetings) will help monitor progress and make timely adjustments if activities are delayed or face challenges.

Budget and resource allocation

The budget translates the activity plan into financial resources. In alliance-based projects, the budgeting process should be transparent and participatory, as it is closely linked to the commitment and trust among partners.

➔ Budget structure

Organizing the budget by components or by expected results makes it easier to understand how funds are distributed. For example, categories may include training, communications, local staff, evaluation, etc., or one section per specific objective. Be sure to include all direct costs (materials, travel, fees, events) and necessary indirect costs (coordination, administration, communications).

➔ Allocation by partner

In alliance projects, it may be useful to present what portion of the budget each partner organization will manage, especially if the funds will be sub-granted. This allocation should reflect the responsibilities each partner assumes. A simple table can clarify this, for example:

PARTNER / ORGANIZATION	ROLE IN THE PROJECT	ALLOCATED BUDGET (USD)
Organization A (local)	General coordination, field workshops	\$50,000 (40%)
Organization B (international)	Technical assistance, monitoring, financial management	\$60,000 (48%)
Organization C (local network)	Community mobilization, translations	\$15,000 (12%)

Table 3: Budget distribution among partner organizations.

Note: Percentages indicate the proportion of the total funds managed by each partner.

➔ Details and Justifications

Each budget item should be accompanied by a brief justification that links the expense to specific activities and objectives. *Example:* “Local transportation – \$5,000: transport for facilitators and participants to 10 community workshops (required for the advocacy training activity).” This helps demonstrate the coherence and necessity of the resources to both funders and alliance partners.

➔ Contingency and Sustainability Funds

Including a small contingency percentage (for unforeseen costs) shows prudence. Similarly, thinking about how some activities will be sustained after the funding cycle ends can lead to reserving resources for exit strategies—such as investing in training local trainers during the final project year to ensure continuity.

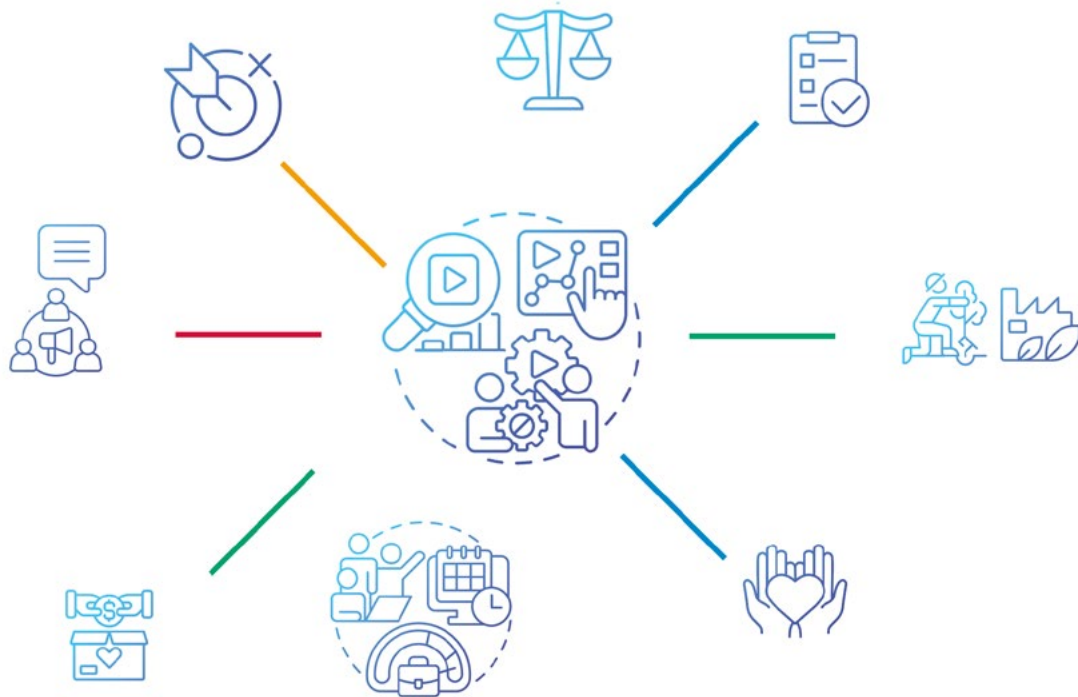
Best Practices: Transparency is key. All partners should have access to and a say in budget development, agreeing on realistic and fair amounts. Open discussions about administrative or indirect costs and negotiating reasonable institutional support percentages—if the donor allows it—can help ensure no organization is weakened by participating. Also, establish mechanisms for financial accountability within the alliance (e.g., periodic expense reports, shared audits) to maintain mutual trust and ensure that funds are used as agreed. This is especially important in contexts with international funders, where financial justification must be flawless both to donors and among local partners.



How to work as a team?



How to work as a team?



Strategic approach: governance, partnerships, and sustainability

Beyond strong technical design, an alliance-based project requires strategic planning to ensure practical success. This includes defining how the alliance will be governed, how relationships between actors will be structured, how achievements will be sustained, and how the project will impact its broader context.

Governance and decision-making in the alliance

Governance refers to how decision-making and project management are organized among partners (IDB, 2017). In alliances, it is critical to establish a clear and jointly agreed governance structure from the outset to avoid confusion or disputes later.

➔ Organizational Structure

Define a structure that outlines coordinating bodies or groups. For example, a Project Coordination Committee could be created, with all main partners represented. This committee could meet regularly (monthly or quarterly) to review progress and make strategic decisions. There may also be a General Project Coordinator (from one of the organizations, as agreed), responsible for day-to-day management and serving as a liaison among all stakeholders.

➔ **Roles and Responsibilities**

Clearly define each partner's role in governance.

Who will be responsible for financial decisions? Who will lead communication with the donor? Who will handle internal conflict resolution?

A Partnership Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by all partners can outline these roles. *Example:* "Organization A acts as the administrative lead and will manage finances and reporting to the donor, while Organization B will lead technical field monitoring. Strategic decisions will be made by consensus in the Coordination Committee, where each partner has an equal vote."

➔ **Decision-Making Mechanisms**

Decide whether decisions will be made by consensus, majority vote, or whether specific areas will be led by a particular organization. To promote equity, many alliances opt for consensus or at least equal voting rights so that no partner (not even the funder, if participating in the committee) can unilaterally impose decisions. It is also useful to define processes for disagreements, such as mediation mechanisms or escalation procedures (e.g., to the boards of involved organizations).

➔ **Internal Communication**

Establish clear communication channels (regular meetings, written reports, shared online platform). Clear and documented communication prevents misunderstandings and keeps everyone informed. *Example:* Share meeting minutes with decisions and assigned tasks.

Best Practices: Formalize governance early in the project. An alliance manual or governance section in the project document can outline the above. Include guiding principles—such as commitment to transparency, mutual respect, and consensus-building—to reinforce trust. In contexts with power imbalances (e.g., an international donor and several local CSOs), it is especially valuable to create spaces for local organizations to express themselves freely and to recognize their contextual knowledge in decision-making. Governance should be inclusive, ideally allowing for the participation of beneficiary representatives or other key stakeholders in advisory spaces to ensure community voices are heard.

Managing the alliance and strengthening relationships

Beyond formal structures, the success of an alliance lies in the trust and collaboration built among participants. Managing the alliance means consciously working to maintain a good team dynamic among organizations with sometimes very different cultures, sizes, or experiences.

➔ Trust-Based Strategic Partnerships

Investing time in strengthening partner relationships is just as important as completing technical tasks.

This might include initial team-building workshops, sessions to align mutual expectations, and discussions on cultural or organizational differences. *Example:* A local NGO might have more flexible processes, while an international partner may follow strict protocols—acknowledging these differences and finding middle ground avoids friction.

➔ Daily Communication and Coordination

Designating focal points in each organization for daily communication helps coordination. These focal points (e.g., a project coordinator within each local partner) stay in constant contact (via email, messaging, weekly virtual meetings) to resolve operational matters promptly. Maintaining regular information flow prevents partners from becoming isolated and allows quick adaptation to changing circumstances.

➔ Shared Knowledge Management

In an alliance, each organization brings knowledge and learns from others. Implementing knowledge management practices strengthens the partnership. *Example:* Create a shared document repository, systematize experiences (what’s working and what’s not), and conduct joint evaluations of selected activities. If the project is multinational, encourage South-South exchanges or field visits between partners in different countries to enrich everyone’s capabilities.

➔ Conflict Resolution

It’s wise to agree in advance on how disagreements or tensions will be handled. Establish a simple protocol: first, direct dialogue between the involved parties; if unresolved, escalate to the general coordinator or committee; and ultimately, involve external mediation (e.g., CIVICUS/AGNA or another neutral entity) if needed. The key is to address misunderstandings early so they don’t damage collaboration.

Best Practices: Foster a culture of respect and empathy within the alliance. Publicly recognizing each partner’s contributions (e.g., in reports or external communications) helps motivate and promote equity. It’s also advisable to develop a joint work plan that looks beyond the current project—to envision whether this collaboration can continue in the future. This long-term mindset strengthens relationships and avoids limiting cooperation to short-term project deliverables.

Project and alliance sustainability

Sustainability refers to the ability to maintain the project's results over time, as well as the continued collaboration among partners if relevant (*OECD, 2023*). From the design phase, it is important to consider how to ensure that the impact does not fade once external funding ends.

➔ Sustainability Plan

Include a dedicated subsection in the proposal to describe strategies for sustaining results.

Example: If the project trained organizations in advocacy, how will they continue applying that knowledge later? Possibly by creating a local trainer network or integrating those CSOs into platforms like AGNA for ongoing support.

➔ Local Capacity Building

One of the most effective paths to sustainability is investing in local actors' capacities.

When communities and local CSOs gain new skills, tools, or relationships, they can carry the work forward. Successful alliance projects often include components such as training, technology transfer, institutional development, or mentorship that empower local actors. This reduces long-term dependency on external resources.

➔ Financial Sustainability

If the achieved changes require ongoing funding (e.g., a community center, follow-up staff), the alliance should explore funding mechanisms. These may include: involving government actors early so they later assume costs, launching productive or social economy activities, creating community funds, or planning a follow-up fundraising strategy (new donors, complementary projects) before the current project ends.

➔ Institutionalization and Public Policy

In terms of advocacy, a sustainable achievement is one embedded in policy or institutional frameworks. Therefore, linking the project to public authorities or influencing regulations can ensure results are formally supported. *Example:* If a pilot project creates an effective citizen participation model, work to get the local government to adopt it as a permanent regulation, so that the practice continues institutionally.

Best Practices: Include sustainability indicators in the project, even if measured after the project ends. *Example:* "By the end of the project, X% of activities will continue without external support" or "The local authority will have allocated its own budget to continue initiative Y." While international donors highly value sustainability, it is equally vital for local communities, as it ensures long-term impact. Additionally, planning a clear exit strategy signals responsibility: define how external support will be gradually reduced and what milestones will indicate that local actors are ready to carry on independently. The entire alliance should be aware of this plan to work toward autonomy from the beginning.

Advocacy and strategic reach

The term *advocacy* refers to actions aimed at influencing policies, institutional practices, or broader social behavior beyond direct beneficiaries (OECD, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). In collaborative social projects, including an advocacy strategy can enhance impact by achieving structural changes or scaling up solutions.

➔ Define advocacy goals

Just as project objectives are defined, it is useful to identify what the project seeks to influence. Is it a specific public policy? Is it changing public attitudes on a particular issue? *Example:* “Ensure the local government approves a bylaw institutionalizing the citizen dialogue roundtables created by the project.”

Advocacy objectives should align with project goals but reach beyond immediate outputs.

➔ Map key actors

Identify those you aim to influence or involve in achieving broader change. This can include decision-makers (authorities, community leaders, media, private sector). A simple power map helps—identify allies, potential blockers, and neutral but influenceable actors. In alliances, each partner can bring different connections—for example, a local NGO may have close access to communities and authorities, while a global network (like AGNA or CIVICUS) can amplify the message internationally.

➔ Concrete advocacy activities

Integrate advocacy-oriented activities into the plan. Examples include: political dialogue meetings, public awareness campaigns, research or reports to support arguments, media and social media outreach, and participation in public forums or government consultations. These activities should be carefully planned with designated leads—often a combination of local and international partners.

➔ Unified messaging

When working in alliance, agreeing on unified key messages is essential. Speaking with one voice increases effectiveness. Drafting joint position papers or co-signed statements can demonstrate unity and collective weight. Here, the alliance’s governance plays a key role: it should be clear how public positions will be approved on behalf of the alliance.

Best practices: Leverage membership in broader networks (like AGNA or CIVICUS) to amplify advocacy efforts. For example, share project findings or best practices on the CIVICUS platform, or invite other AGNA members to join a regional advocacy campaign based on local experience. Also, document lessons from advocacy efforts during the project—what worked in engaging authorities and what didn’t—as input for future initiatives. Remember: a well-designed project doesn’t just deliver services—it also transforms power relations in society; strategic advocacy is an integral part of many successful social initiatives.

Multi-stakeholder participation and a collaborative approach

Multi-stakeholder participation involves engaging not only the implementing organizations but also all groups with an interest in or affected by the initiative: local communities, government authorities, private sector, academia, other networks, etc. A broad collaborative approach enriches the project and enhances its success.

➔ Identification of key actors

During the formulation phase, conduct a stakeholder analysis. Identify categories: primary beneficiaries (e.g., target communities), potential allies (other local NGOs, community leaders, relevant public institutions), interested donors or funders, and even potential opponents. For each group, consider their interest in the project and how to engage them constructively.

➔ Participation mechanisms

Design spaces and mechanisms for these actors to participate actively. *Example:* Establish a Local Advisory Council for the project with representatives from the community, authorities, and local leaders who meet regularly to provide feedback. Ensure that key activities (workshops, campaigns) include and consider diverse voices (youth, women, Indigenous peoples, etc., depending on the context). Citizen participation must be meaningful—not symbolic. Involve community members as volunteers or monitors, open public consultations when proposing new policies, etc.

➔ Actor-specific communication

With diverse stakeholders, communication must be adapted. Prepare materials in plain language and, if needed, in local languages or accessible formats (e.g., infographics for the general public, executive summaries for busy officials, community radio for rural areas). This ensures all stakeholders are informed and able to contribute or provide feedback.

➔ Cross-sector collaboration

Consider non-traditional partnerships, for instance with the local private sector (companies that can co-finance activities or offer corporate volunteers), or with universities (which may offer technical assistance or interns). These actors bring new resources and perspectives. However, collaborations should align with the project's values (e.g., a project focused on environmental sustainability should only partner with companies that share that principle).

Best practices: Apply participatory approaches such as Participatory Community Diagnostics early on, where the community helps define problems and solutions with CSOs—this fosters early local ownership of the project. Also, apply principles of interculturality when working with diverse stakeholders: respect traditional organizational structures, community decision-making timelines (which may be slower), and engage cultural mediators when needed (e.g., Indigenous language translators or community-recognized facilitators). The more inclusive and horizontal the engagement of actors, the more legitimate and robust the project will be.

Best practices for equitable stakeholder engagement

In partnerships between civil society organizations and external funders (such as international cooperation agencies, foundations, or large international NGOs), power asymmetries often arise. Those who provide funding or wield greater influence may unintentionally dominate decision-making, while local organizations may feel reduced to implementing directives. To counter this and ensure equitable involvement, intentional practices and principles must be applied. The following strategies help level the playing field and foster more balanced, respectful relationships:

➔ **Co-designing the project**

All partners—especially local ones—should be involved from the idea stage. Instead of a donor or lead partner arriving with a pre-designed project, organize co-creation workshops where problems, goals, and strategies are jointly defined. This ensures the project reflects real local priorities, not just donor agendas. Co-design fosters shared ownership.

➔ **Valuing local knowledge**

Local organizations bring deep understanding of the sociocultural, political, and environmental context. This knowledge must be recognized as a valuable asset. In practice, this means giving weight to local recommendations during planning and project adaptation. *Example:* If a local NGO suggests modifying a methodology that isn't culturally appropriate, others must take it seriously and adapt the plan accordingly. Respect for local knowledge balances the technical expertise and resources brought by external partners.

➔ **Mutual transparency and accountability**

Accountability should not flow only from local actors to donors. Arrangements where all parties report and justify actions and expenses to each other build horizontality. *Example:* Donors can openly share funding conditions, limitations, and criteria, so local CSOs understand the bigger picture. Likewise, local CSOs should report progress and financial usage transparently. Holding joint financial reviews fosters trust and allows all partners to ensure funds are used appropriately.

➔ **Fair distribution of resources and responsibilities**

Equitable involvement means the workload and recognition are fairly shared. Balance responsibilities—administrative and fieldwork. If one local partner leads implementation, another might manage reporting; rotating or sharing roles helps prevent overload or underutilization. Also, allocate funding to strengthen local partners (e.g., equipment, training, management improvements). Some donors offer institutional strengthening budgets—these should be used to narrow capacity gaps between large and small organizations.

➔ **Participatory decision-making**

Even if one entity manages the funds, programmatic decisions must be made jointly. *Nothing about us without us* applies—no major decision should be made without active participation of those affected or their local representatives. This includes budget changes, objective adjustments, scheduling activities, etc. One mechanism: require joint committee approval for any major project amendments.

➔ **Inclusive communication and cultural respect**

In international alliances, language and culture can become power barriers. Ensure that communication (documents, meetings) is in a language accessible to all (e.g., translate into Spanish if the donor only speaks English, and vice versa), and respect different communication styles (some cultures are more direct, others more reserved). Inclusive

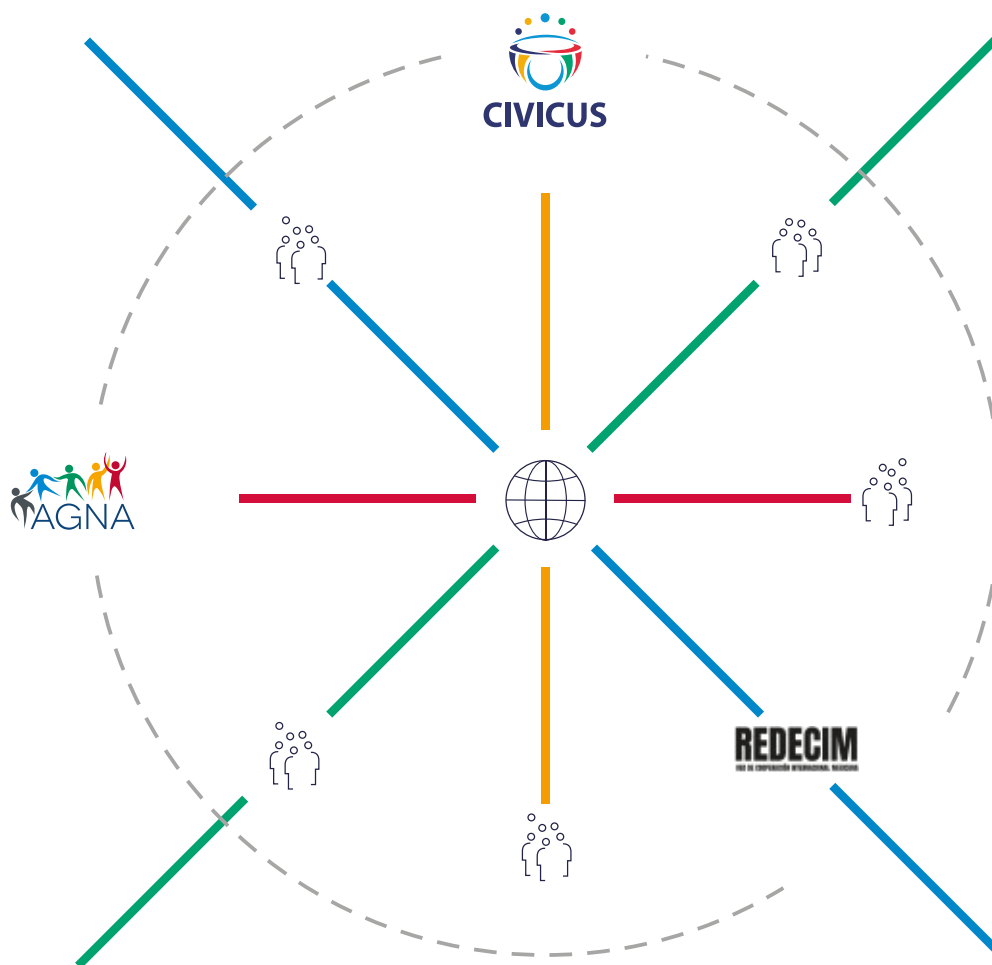
communication also means actively listening, giving everyone space to speak in meetings, and adapting formats or schedules to local partners' realities (e.g., understanding that a small community organization may not reply to emails promptly due to limited internet or staff).

➔ **Building trust and solidarity**

Equity is not achieved solely through rules—it relies on quality human relationships. Invest in trust-building—honor commitments, show openness and empathy, and spend time in the field with local partners. When there is trust, it's easier to address disagreements peer-to-peer. Foster solidarity too: if one partner faces a political crisis or internal issue, the rest of the alliance should offer support, not pressure.

➔ **Joint flexibility and adaptation**

In changing contexts, original plans may need to shift. Best practice: agree and adapt jointly, not through top-down imposition. If the project needs reorientation due to force majeure (e.g., a natural disaster or political change), all partners should analyze the situation and agree on a new course. Being flexible while preserving joint participation ensures equity is not broken under pressure.





Leave no one behind



Mainstreaming relevant cross-cutting approaches

For a social project in partnership to be truly comprehensive, it is essential to mainstream certain approaches throughout the entire project cycle. *Mainstreaming* means integrating considerations of rights, equity, environmental sustainability, interculturality, and participation into every stage—from diagnosis and formulation, through implementation, to evaluation. This ensures that the project not only *does the right thing*, but also *does it the right way*, by upholding and promoting fundamental principles. Below are the key cross-cutting approaches and how to incorporate them in practice:

CROSS-CUTTING APPROACH	HOW TO INTEGRATE IT INTO THE PROJECT (BEST PRACTICES)
Human Rights-Based (HRBA) 	→ Rights-focused diagnosis: Identify which human rights are being violated in the issue the project addresses (health, education, participation, etc.) and guide the objectives toward the fulfillment of those rights. → Participation and empowerment: Treat beneficiaries as rights holders who actively participate, not as passive aid recipients. Include mechanisms for them to claim their rights (e.g., basic legal training, safe spaces for complaints or denunciations). → Non-discrimination: Ensure that beneficiary selection criteria and implementation do not exclude anyone for arbitrary reasons (ethnic origin, gender, religion, etc.) and provide special attention to traditionally marginalized groups to guarantee equal access to project benefits.
Gender Equity 	→ Initial gender analysis: Before planning activities, examine gender gaps and roles in the community. How does the issue affect women, men, and people of diverse genders differently? Use that information to design specific interventions (for example, if women have less access to meetings, schedule accessible times or provide childcare during events). → Transformative activities: Go beyond numerical parity and aim to change unjust gender relations. For example, include workshops on new masculinities for men in the community, promote teamwork between women and men in project actions challenging stereotypes, or form alliances with local feminist organizations to strengthen this approach.
Environmental sustainability 	→ Environmental approach in planning: Assess the environmental impact of project activities and seek eco-friendly alternatives. For example, if the project involves printing, use recycled paper; if there are travels, optimize routes to reduce emissions or consider reforestation to offset carbon footprint; minimize plastics at events, etc. → Climate change adaptation: If the context requires, integrate climate resilience measures. For example, if working on community agriculture, introduce sustainable techniques to face droughts or extreme rains. Or if building infrastructures, apply green building standards.
Interculturality 	→ Respect for cultural diversity: In contexts with indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities, ensure that the project is designed and implemented respecting their customs, language, and worldview. This may require translating materials into local languages, having interpreters, and adapting methodologies (for example, using participatory dynamics compatible with the local culture, incorporating traditional authorities into the project structure).
Citizen and community participation 	→ Participatory methodologies: Use methodologies such as rural participatory diagnosis, social theater, participatory budgeting, or other tools where the community not only receives information but actively takes part in identifying problems, solutions, and implementation. This increases ownership and ensures the project addresses the real felt needs. → Strengthening community organization: Alongside core activities, support the formation or strengthening of grassroots organizations (committees, local associations) so they become permanent actors beyond the project. A truly participatory project aims to leave communities more organized and with greater capacity to influence their own affairs.

Table 4: Key cross-cutting approaches and recommendations for their effective integration in social projects.

How to Apply These Approaches: The key is to incorporate them from the outset, rather than as last-minute add-ons. For example, when drafting objectives and outcomes, ask: *Does this objective reflect gender equity considerations?* or *Can we formulate an outcome related to citizen participation?* When budgeting, allocate resources for these activities (e.g., items for intercultural translation, accessibility adaptations, etc.). During implementation, monitor these dimensions specifically, and during the final evaluation, assess whether the project improved (or at least did not harm) human rights, equity, the environment, etc. Integrating these approaches reflects the social justice and sustainability values shared by AGNA organizations and demonstrates to funders a commitment to holistic impact.

Towards a Shared Future: Recommendations for Horizontal Leadership and Collective Decision-Making in Civil Society Networks

As civil society organizations (CSOs) increasingly operate within complex, interdependent ecosystems, traditional vertical structures are proving insufficient for meeting the demands of inclusive, adaptive, and innovative collaboration. Some networks are well-positioned to embrace a more horizontal leadership model that empowers diverse stakeholders and promotes shared responsibility. These recommendations offer practical strategies for fostering collective project development, participatory decision-making, and responsible leadership in multi-actor networks.

Embrace a Horizontal Governance Framework

Horizontal governance fosters democratic participation, mutual accountability, and relational equity (Centre for Literacy, 2009). It promotes shared ownership, discourages hierarchy, and recognizes the importance of trust and collaboration. To implement this model, we recommend:

- ➔ Creating decentralized working groups with rotating coordination roles.
- ➔ Establishing transparent protocols for shared budgeting, knowledge management, and conflict resolution.
- ➔ Prioritizing relational processes alongside project outcomes (REDECIM, 2025).

Adopt Adaptive Decision-Making Models

Effective horizontal leadership requires context-sensitive decision-making (Unfix, n.d.). We suggest networks adopt a three-tiered method:

DECISION TYPE	RECOMMENDED METHOD	EXAMPLE
Strategic/Structural	Democratic methods	Changing the network's mission or legal framework
Operational	Sociocratic consent	Designing a joint campaign or selecting tools
Urgent	Autocratic methods	Responding to time-sensitive funding opportunities

Table 5: Adaptive decision-making models and recommended methods for each type of decision in horizontal governance frameworks.

All decisions should be documented in an accessible log for transparency and future reference, therefore we share the unfix method that could be implemented within AGNA <https://unfix.com/decision-methods> .

Shift from Old Power to New Power Logics

According to Heimans and Timms (2014), old power is centralized, closed, and top-down, while new power is participatory, open, and peer-driven. To operate with new power:

- ➔ Facilitate open knowledge-sharing platforms and tools.
- ➔ Encourage remixing and collaborative adaptation of ideas.
- ➔ Limit permanent leadership roles and promote community-based accountability.

Distribute Responsibilities through Shared Leadership

Shared leadership recognizes the expertise and agency of all network members (Centre for Literacy, 2009). Mechanisms include:

- ➔ “Work With Me” documents: Members declare their working preferences, boundaries, and communication styles (Build Up, 2024).
- ➔ Role rotation: Leadership and spokesperson roles change biannually.
- ➔ Peer-led evaluation: Regular feedback loops to support growth and mutual learning.

Foster a Culture of Radical Transparency and Mutual Care

Transparency is not merely a matter of sharing data, but cultivating honest, respectful relationships. Recommendations:

- ➔ Use visual storytelling and public reporting tools to present decisions and finances.
- ➔ Establish a feedback culture based on celebration, self-reflection, and constructive dialogue.
- ➔ Implement restorative processes for addressing conflict and realigning expectations.

By moving from control to collaboration, networks can become more agile, just, and sustainable. Horizontal governance is not the absence of structure, but the redesign of it to prioritize inclusion, equity, and co-creation. AGNA and similar networks could be leading this shift, demonstrating that another way of working is not only possible, but essential.



Tips to keep in mind



Tips to keep in mind

Recommendations for inclusive, clear, and effective writing

➔ Use inclusive, non-discriminatory language

Use terms that include all people and groups, avoiding gender bias or stereotypes. For instance, instead of saying “migrants and their families,” it’s preferable to use “the migrant population,” which includes everyone without making women seem secondary (BBVA, 2025). Similarly, avoid stereotypical job labels such as “cleaning ladies,” and instead use “cleaning staff” (BBVA, 2025). These small choices lead to more equitable and representative writing.

➔ Use clear and simple language

Favor common words over technical jargon or unfamiliar acronyms. A proposal doesn’t need to be overly complex to be taken seriously; on the contrary, it should be understandable to diverse audiences (ASANA, 2025). If the project includes a tech component, there’s no need to detail code or specialized terminology—explain in accessible language what the technology will do (ASANA, 2025). When acronyms or jargon are necessary, define them on first use and apply them consistently.

➔ Write with clarity and conciseness

Use short sentences and paragraphs, focusing on one main idea at a time. Avoid rambling or redundant information. Concise writing maintains attention and makes the essential content easier to identify. For example, instead of mixing problems, activities, and outcomes in one paragraph, break them into separate sentences or bullet points. Clear, direct writing conveys professionalism and respect for the reader’s time.

Best practices in writing and designing social projects

➔ Use collaborative tools

Leverage digital platforms that support joint writing. Editing shared online documents (like Google Docs, Office 365, or project management platforms) enables everyone to work on the same version, comment on edits, and resolve inconsistencies in real time (ASANA, 2025). Storing and organizing project information in one central location improves coordination and ensures all contributions are cohesively integrated.

➔ Ensure visual appeal and layout

Present the text clearly and with a clean layout. Use bullet points or numbered lists to highlight key information (e.g., objectives, activities, or outcomes), and include tables or graphics to summarize data (e.g., timelines, budgets, or logical frameworks). Avoid continuous blocks of text without visual breaks—a well-designed layout communicates professionalism and improves understanding.

➔ Cite reliable sources and data

Back up claims with verifiable evidence. Include data, studies, or specific cases with proper citations (e.g., official statistics or reports from recognized institutions). Add a brief bibliography or reference links to strengthen the proposal and show it is based on diagnostics, evaluations, or relevant prior experience (ASANA, 2025).

➔ **Draw inspiration from official templates and guides**

Review manuals or formats published by cooperation agencies and international funders (such as the EU, GIZ, USAID, AECID). Check what information they request in each section and use their terminology to ease the evaluation process. Use expressions like “general objective,” “verifiable outcome,” or “value added” when commonly found in these guides to speak the evaluator’s language.

➔ **Know your target audience**

Write with the reader in mind and provide the necessary context, especially if they are unfamiliar with the local setting. Tailor the focus depending on the type of funder:

▶ For multilateral agencies, highlight replicability or alignment with global commitments.

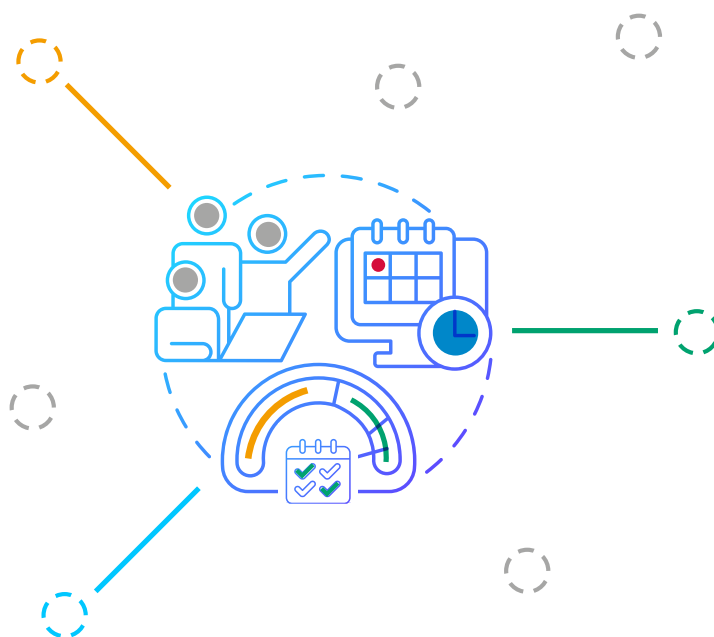
▶ For foundations, include testimonials or human-interest stories to convey impact. Identify what matters to the funder and emphasize it throughout the document (ASANA, 2025).

➔ **Highlight the capacity of the implementing alliance**

Show why the participating organizations are particularly well-suited to implement the project. Briefly mention prior experience, relevant achievements, and complementary strengths. Emphasize the alliance’s added value—e.g., if it combines international experience with local knowledge. Include this in the justification section or in the team description to build funder confidence in management capacity.

➔ **Refine the proposal in advance**

Plan enough time to write, review, and polish the document before submission. Translate if necessary, and seek external feedback to identify unclear or weak areas. Conduct a critical read-through or simulate a donor evaluation to anticipate possible concerns. Iterate and improve the content until it meets expected donor standards (Slidebean, 2024).





Conclusions



Conclusions

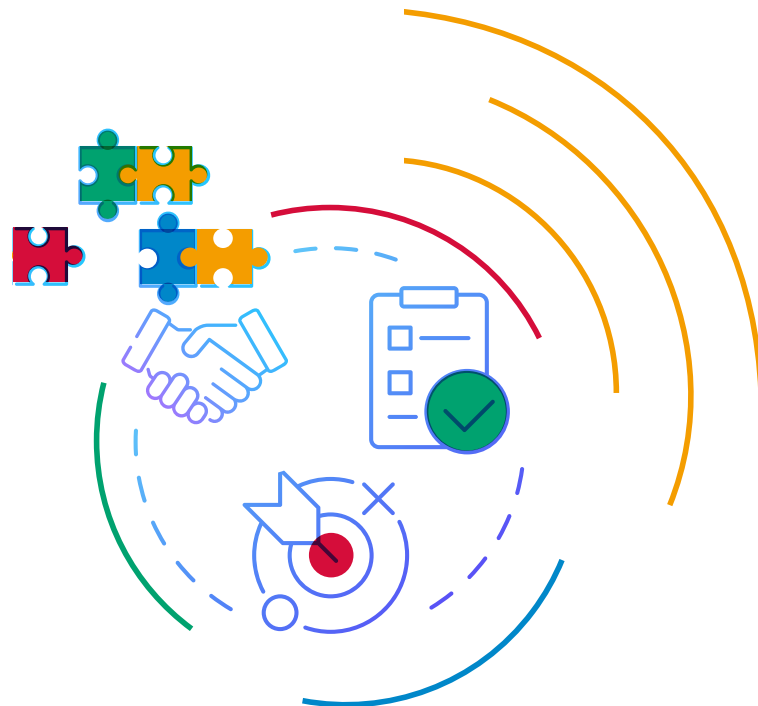
Formulating social projects in partnership brings both the challenge and the opportunity of combining diverse actors' strengths to generate meaningful change. A well-crafted project proposal—combining technical rigor with strategic vision—is the foundation for successful implementation.

This document has reviewed practical recommendations: from how to structure clear and measurable objectives, to how to establish participatory governance mechanisms; from the importance of a transparent and equitable budget, to the integration of human rights, gender, environmental, intercultural, and participatory perspectives in every step.

By putting these recommendations into practice, AGNA member organizations and their allies can improve the quality of their proposals—and, later, the effectiveness of their work on the ground. It's not only about meeting funder requirements, but about designing projects that are true to our values—where each actor feels like a co-protagonist of change.

In contexts with power imbalances, applying these good practices helps balance the relationship and build more just and resilient alliances.

Ultimately, a successful allied social project is not measured only by its immediate outcomes but by the legacy it leaves behind: more empowered communities, stronger organizations, more inclusive policies, and long-lasting partnerships rooted in trust. We hope this guide serves as a useful and applicable tool for planning and implementing high-impact collaborative initiatives.





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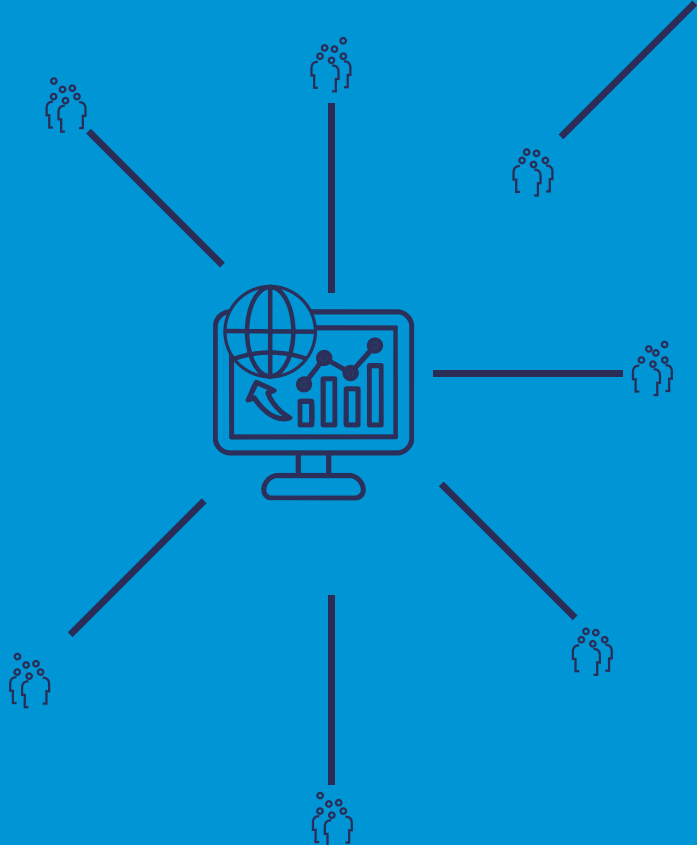
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