

PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A STRATEGY ON ENGAGING LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) should develop an official public strategy on civil society engagement. Local civil society, with space to exercise its voice, is essential to meet the promise of sustainable, inclusive, and country-owned development. USAID has a history of engaging, investing in, and protecting local civil society in partner countries. An official strategy would reinforce the agency's commitment to country self-reliance by underscoring the importance of civic engagement and a strong citizen-state compact in furthering development and democracy around the world.

Civil society is not a "one-size fits all" term - it includes schools, advocacy groups, professional associations, religious organizations, cultural institutions, and any other formal or informal non-governmental organization. Civil society actors represent a broad range of constituents and take on a wide range of functions, which can contribute to poverty reduction, inclusive economic growth, conflict prevention, and gender equality. Any approach to civil society engagement needs to recognize the value of their diverse roles and ensure that they have a strong seat at the table as a development partner.

MFAN urges USAID to establish an official civil society engagement strategy based on the following principles:

1. Promote diverse and inclusionary civil society participation in priority setting.

To drive country self-reliance, civil society groups must fully engage in setting development priorities and goals. When communities in developing countries have a voice in their development journey, it creates a pathway for greater impact and lasting results. Donors should work with local civil society groups as partners in order to achieve sustainable development.

- ❖ **Engage a diversity of local civil society on the strategic focus of U.S. investments and programmatic priorities – seek the inclusion of marginalized groups, women, and girls.**
- ❖ **To ensure missions implement agency operational guidance that encourages engagement with local stakeholders, they should be required to document and report on their local consultative processes.**

2. Strengthen and protect civic space.

For civil society to effectively provide public services, mobilize constituents, hold the government to account, educate populations, and advocate for change, it needs a political, financing, regulatory, and cultural environment that allows it to fulfill those roles. Burdensome legal or financing restrictions, corruption, and a disregard for civil and political rights are just some of the obstacles to

civic space. Excluded and marginalized groups can face even more severe challenges. As USAID has noted in its [Policy Framework](#), global trends point to an alarming closure of civic space as many countries experience a weakening of democratic institutions and a resurgence of authoritarianism. A lack of civic space can exacerbate state fragility, limit the effectiveness of humanitarian responses, exacerbate inequality, diminish access to essential services, increase the potential for human rights violations, and inhibit development progress.

- ❖ **Invest in programming that strengthens and protects civic space, including through bilateral interventions and multilateral institutions.**
- ❖ **Identify opportunities for collaboration with other U.S. government agencies to ensure a coordinated response to closing civic space.**

3. Invest in local civil society actors.

Donors should invest in local civil society actors, including marginalized groups, to increase their operational capacity and elevate their profile in-country. Core support - in addition to project-based partnerships - is vital to building effective civil society institutions. Investments should be tailored to support the specific goals, objectives, and priorities of each civil society group. Support may include helping build risk preparedness and strengthening advocacy, analysis, budgeting, and management functions, depending on the local context and needs.

- ❖ **Expand Local Works and other initiatives focused on locally-led development.**
- ❖ **Focus assessment and evaluation on locally-identified measures of success.**
- ❖ **Expand the New Partnership Initiative and increase the number of direct funding partnerships with local civil society actors to shift power and resources to local entities.**
- ❖ **Develop guidelines on capacity development for a more vibrant and diverse civil society.**
- ❖ **Assess the strength and sustainability of local civil society and civic space as part of any aid transition and explore ways to mitigate any transition-related impact.**

4. Ensure an equitable and inclusive approach across all elements of a civil society strategy to ensure the empowerment of traditionally marginalized groups, including women and girls.

Inequality within societies is a drag on economic growth and can cause or [exacerbate conflict and instability](#). To foster sustainable, long-term stability and development, donors should prioritize the inclusion of civil society actors who represent the most [marginalized groups](#) in society, including women, girls, refugees, migrants, and religious or ethnic minorities. These more vulnerable individuals may have less capacity and more limited access to civic space than majority groups or the elite. Civil society can play an important role in advocating for these groups and defending human rights, and this will help address inequalities and create a more inclusive economy and society.

- ❖ **Engage in partnerships with and get feedback from local civil society actors who represent marginalized groups.**
- ❖ **Strengthen gender and social analysis throughout all programs, policies, and procedures, and integrate findings into USAID's work.**
- ❖ **Continue to invest in disaggregated data by age, sex, ethnicity, income, and other factors.**