

Civic Engagement & Government

Civic space is essential for people to be able to raise their voices and influence decisions that affect them—especially for people and communities who have been underrepresented or marginalized. A healthy and robust civic space is made possible by protecting and supporting the institutions and conditions that allow people to speak up about important issues and pressure governments and the private sector to better serve the people. Our international work on civic engagement and government is dedicated to protecting and expanding civic space around the globe.

Portfolio Snapshot

Budget
\$31 million

Grantees
205

BUILD Budget
\$78 million

BUILD Grantees
51

The Challenge

Billions of people are disempowered by the corrosive effects of inequality. Inequality means that these people are excluded from full participation in the political, economic, and cultural systems that shape their lives. One way in which governments preclude participation, thus stifling access to important avenues for change, is by imposing restrictions on civic space, undermining essential rights and freedoms, and undercutting the legitimacy of civil society.

Governments in the Global South often argue that when civil society advocates for greater transparency, accountability, and participation, they are pushing a “foreign” agenda that contrasts with the countries’ values. This marginalization of civil society has led to increased attacks on social justice leaders. Around the globe, 304 leaders were killed in 2019—the majority of whom were defending environmental and indigenous peoples’ rights.

The Opportunity

From Lebanon to Venezuela, civil society has continued to stand strong, taking to the streets to voice their concerns, pushing back against restrictive regulations, advocating in the digital space, and playing a key role in the search for solutions to complex problems. The crackdown on civic space and people organizing to demand change is getting global attention, and new efforts to counter this trend are emerging. We step into the field benefitting from the experience of seasoned actors but recognizing that this work requires sustained energy, fresh resources, and additional convening power.

Globally and locally, we see an opportunity to increase alignment by bringing critical players together, building strategic connections, and strengthening the connective tissue between civil society, government, and the private sector to increase civic engagement. Our global and programmatic footprint gives us the opportunity to build the resilience of key organizations and, in doing so, protect civil society and social justice leaders increasingly under attack.

Our Aim and Approach

Our aim is to increase and improve civic space by countering negative trends and promoting a positive, tangible understanding of its role. We focus on region-specific issues of inequality—corruption in East Africa, social protection in the Middle East and North Africa, farmers' livelihoods in India, violence in Brazil, and impunity for human rights violations in Mexico—that we believe can galvanize the public and powerfully illustrate the importance of a strong civil society and civic space to drive change and safeguard freedoms. We focus on:

- **Building a united front to protect civic space.** We work to increase coordination among international, national, and regional organizations to promote an agenda focused on the protection and expansion of civic space.
- **Protecting civic space through advocacy.** We support advocacy with regional and global bodies to create and strengthen laws and conventions that safeguard and expand civic space and increase adoption and application.
- **Shaping positive narratives.** We support strategic communications and artistic initiatives that are writing powerful new narratives about the relevance and importance of civic space, civil society, and the participation of citizens.

- **Lifting up issues of inequality.** We focus on the most pressing issues in our regions to hold governments accountable—with a robust civil society and civic space.

Our Impact

Our aim is to position both civic space and civil society as essential components of healthy, well governed countries and societies. We work toward four outcomes:

- **The value of civic space and civil society will be lifted up.** There will be a shift in how civic space and civil society are seen on a regional, national, and international level, so their value and relevance are recognized.
- **Governments that restrict civic space will be held accountable.** New actors, laws, and tactics will be put in place at every level to exert pressure on governments to preserve civic spaces.
- **Attacks against social justice leaders will decrease.** By improving the resilience of organizations and increasing the political and reputational costs of such attacks, they will be reduced in key regions and countries.
- **Civil society will have more synergy and collective strategy.** Civil society actors across sectors, issues, and geographies will work together and learn from each other to protect and expand civic space.

📍 Grantee Snapshot

Protecting civic space with the law

The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, one of our BUILD grantees, is the leading authority for careful analysis and close monitoring of trends around civic space in more than 100 countries. The center plays a critical role in strengthening the legal environment so it is conducive to civil society, philanthropy, and citizen participation. Working hand in hand with local partners, it provides detailed research into the legal developments that impact civic space. Our partnership is fundamental to bolstering collective capacities to enhance the space for people to influence decisions that affect them, as well as develop innovative strategies for strategic collaboration among organizations. *Photo: Jeff Vize*

