

Rebuilding for Good

Actions needed from governments to support & sustain civil society

The COVID-19 pandemic has had extraordinary economic, social and political impacts. We need recovery plans to expand rights, make economies fairer, level up inequalities, reverse the climate crisis and build workable international institutions. Civil society – which includes the full spectrum of civic groups including NGOs, charities, voluntary groups, trusts, foundations and associations, trade unions, social enterprises, care providers and welfare agencies - must be seen as a vital force in bringing the world out of the crisis in a way that marks a break from the economic, political and social policies that were already failing so many. *This is the time when governments need to act on [international obligations](#) and invest in a sustained civic effort for reconstruction.*

This document serves as a practical guide for actions that governments can and should be taking to sustain and strengthen civil society as part of COVID-19 recovery and rebuilding efforts. It draws on evidence of initiatives that have been introduced across the world and offers further suggestions to bolster these efforts based on insights provided by civil society networks in 80+ countries, including assessments undertaken by the [Affinity Group of National Associations](#) (AGNA), the [Charities Aid Foundation](#) (CAF) and [CIVICUS](#). For policy makers and government agencies, we trust that this resource will serve as an invitation to review and enhance measures for civil society. For civil society groups, we anticipate that this will strengthen efforts to secure the supportive measures we need across countries.

We recommend the following measures to support and strengthen civil society as part of COVID-19 response and recovery plans:

- 1. Remove restrictions; amplify the value of and contributions from civil society*
- 2. Support civil society to meet and reduce operating costs*
- 3. Provide flexibility in regulatory requirements*
- 4. Include civil society in COVID-19 stimulus funds and subsidies*
- 5. Develop the infrastructure needed to upscale civil society efforts*
- 6. Empower civil society to develop sustainable alternatives*

1. Remove restrictions; amplify the value of and contributions from civil society

Civil society has been at the forefront of the global response to the pandemic. They have provided life-saving services, shared information and coordinated the actions needed to reinforce accountability and pursue responsive policy outcomes. And yet across countries

the pandemic has been used to legitimise a wide range of unjustified restrictions on civic freedoms and/or deliberately keep civil society out of planning and implementation efforts. This includes unprecedented levels of censorship, attacks on journalists and human rights defenders, the use of state-sponsored violence to curb criticism and sweeping violations of the right to privacy.

It is important for governments to ***acknowledge that a diverse, vibrant and resilient civil society is needed more than ever before*** to ensure emergency measures stand the test of proportionality and necessity. Even where an official proclamation of emergency has been made, fundamental rights such as the right to life and freedom from torture and degrading treatment must be upheld, as is the right to express democratic dissent. In this context, governments can and must do more to underscore the role that civil society has in response and recovery efforts. Working with civil society enables governments and businesses to understand ground realities better, and develop interventions that respond meaningfully to drivers of inequality and social unrest. In Ecuador, for instance, [an official website](#) provides information about the efforts being undertaken by civil society across the country and similar platforms have also been set up in Italy, France and Ukraine. Initiatives to broadcast civil society efforts through television has also been reported in Ethiopia.

Local governments can be especially effective in inviting civil society to share their work through available platforms and providing ways for other sections of society to support and expand these efforts. This includes removing restrictions on local media and enabling them to work with other civil society groups to strengthen public trust and engagement. Limited understanding of civil society organisations directly affects [local ownership](#) of causes and limits the sector in being strategic and sustainable.

2. Support civil society to meet and reduce operating costs

Support to operating expenses is a direct way to strengthen civil society, particularly groups working on the frontlines. Flexible and unrestricted support to operating costs enables organisations to invest in the infrastructure and functions that will help scale impact and sustainability. The availability of ***operational support*** also allows them to adapt and respond quickly during crisis situations.

In Lithuania, for example, associations and foundations that lease their property from the municipality or municipality-controlled entities have been entitled to a waiver of or reduction in rent payments and penalties imposed on delayed payments. Similar measures have been reported in Latvia and Lebanon. In Zimbabwe, government regulations instructed landlords and banks to give a lockdown calibrated grace period on the payments of rentals and mortgages, and a waiver on COVID-19 related imports such as PPEs, test kits. The

provision of essential supplies and physical assets has also been reported in Malawi and Namibia. The availability of such measures however needs to be accompanied by **timely and transparent information** on such initiatives. Creating relief measures but failing to communicate them effectively prevents groups that are most in need from learning about and accessing these benefits.

This is also an important time for governments to go further and develop **new and innovative financial mechanisms** to support civil society at this time. Reviewing VAT regimes, providing tax waivers and improving tax incentives for giving - not just specific to crisis related interventions, but across causes - are initiatives that need to be better supported at this time. Repurposing levies, funds and investment vehicles to support civil society interventions are further options. The allocation of indirect taxes such as the use of VAT payments on personal protective equipment towards efforts to support frontline health workers in the UK is an example of such a move. In the Middle East, some governments are reported to have offered loans rather than direct assistance to civil society. Across locations, a toolbox of funding, both financial and non-financial, that is demand-driven and helps civil society increase their financial resilience is essential.

3. Provide flexibility in regulatory requirements

Measures to provide registered associations and foundations increased **flexibility in administrative procedures**, including changes in relation to procurement, spending, reporting, grant-making and contracting, have been reported in a range of countries. The adjustment of project and administrative reporting requirements, for instance, can be a quick but effective way to provide respite to civil society groups. Examples include steps to update project financing, cooperation and delegation arrangements in Malawi and Mexico.

Provisions to enable **flexibility in accounting and tax requirements** have also been effected in some countries. Germany, for instance, has provided flexibility in the management of donations as well as in the accounting of losses and capital decreases. In other locations, partial exemptions on taxes payable by NGOs have been implemented.

4. Include civil society in COVID-19 stimulus funds and subsidies

Civil society is painfully absent from measures designed to systematically support social and economic recovery from the pandemic. In most contexts, such measures appear to have been developed solely with businesses in mind, although civil society across every country is in **urgent need for tailored fiscal support**, including income support measures and subsidies. Existing measures aimed at business recovery must be extended to include civil

society, and accompanied by interventions that respond to the special needs of small and large, formal and informal groups that exist across the wider spectrum of civil society.

Available examples of *recovery measures for civil society* are limited to the UK government's GBP 750m [stimulus package](#) and the EUR 700m [support package](#) for civil society, arts and the cultural sector in Austria. At a smaller scale, a [Stability Fund](#) of EUR 35m to support urgent funding needs has been introduced in Ireland and a Presidential Grants Fund in Russia includes 3bn rubles (approx. EUR 39m) for NGOs. In addition to this, *wage subsidy and credit access schemes* have been introduced in Argentina, Australia, France and the Netherlands. Special allocations for services to vulnerable groups such as women and seniors have been made in Canada, while Ireland has initiated a fund for social innovation in recovery projects.

Reports from South Africa indicate a range of measures to support civil society initiated by the government, private foundations and businesses. Agencies such as [CAF Southern Africa](#), the [Mergon Group](#) and the [Western Cape Province](#) (Department of Social Development) have launched funds for NGOs that include opportunities for the public to support funding objectives. The [National Lotteries Commission \(NLC\)](#) released R150 million as a relief measure for NGOs, while the President's Solidarity Fund is expected to assist NGOs that are implementing services aligned with the fund's objectives of prevent, detect, care and support. Overall, a wider range of actions aimed at encouraging businesses, philanthropic institutions and the public at large to support civil society efforts are both possible and necessary.

5. Develop the infrastructure needed to upscale civil society efforts

This is precisely the time when governments must ***create broader mechanisms to sustain and strengthen civil society***, including medium to long term funding for networks or umbrella organisations and the development of platforms to share knowledge, strategies and resources in ways that promote cohesion and collaboration, rather than competition. Trans-national companies can support civil society efforts through giving platforms and payroll contributions, just as philanthropic institutions can (and are) [leveraging assets and endowments](#) to create new streams of core and flexible resourcing for civil society.

To this effect, in Portugal and Italy, national volunteer and youth services have been leveraged to harness support to civil society efforts. In Belgium, a COVID-19 Solidarity Fund enables EU employees to contribute to civil society organisations. In several countries, including Latvia and the Netherlands, tax exemptions on donations made to civil society have been introduced. In Sierra Leone, a government-led platform enabled civil society to

interact with the President and relevant ministers
COVID-19 efforts, allowing civil society representatives direct access to and coordination with Ministries of Health, Finance and the Emergency Response Team on COVID-19. In Malawi, the national taskforce on COVID-19 has included representatives from NGOs, academia, government and religious bodies, among others, thereby harnessing the expertise and networks that different parts of civil society can bring to the effort.

Across more countries, we need governments to **develop stronger incentives for societies to invest in civil society**. Governments must be an active partner in building public engagement with civil society by championing the impact it is achieving and sharing information on how public funds are being allocated and utilised. More broadly, we need this to be a catalytic moment for cross-sectoral partnerships and campaigns aimed at developing [local generosity movements](#) within and across countries.

6. Empower civil society to develop sustainable alternatives

Civil society is critical to people-centered approaches to reconstruction that satisfy the demand for positive change. Genuine partnerships between government and civil society allow better coordinated responses in critical times, allowing both actors to work together to assess and mitigate the risks of a crisis on different populations. For this to happen, we need civil society to be an integral part of the multi-stakeholder consultations and decision making spaces that are designing social and economic alternatives for a post-COVID world. An **enabled, networked and properly resourced civil society** must be celebrated as a force for good.

Rebalancing power and building solidarity will be key to the structural reforms that we need to achieve in the global economy. This includes a systematic push to de-emphasise GDP growth as a key indicator of performance and instead prioritise well-being as an essential metric. Long-awaited transformative changes, such as ending the net outflows of finances and other resources from Global South to Global North countries so that the former can have more aggregate resources to realize the right to sustainable development of their peoples, requires a groundswell of public and political support. The **strengthening of civil society and expansion of civic freedoms** must be part of the comprehensive global recovery that we need coming out of the pandemic.

For more information:

AGNA: <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/strengthen/agna>

Charities Aid Foundation: <https://www.cafonline.org>

CIVICUS: <https://www.civicus.org>