

VUKA'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIC SPACE

Addressing Civic Space Restrictions: The Role of the Vuka! Coalition

Over the years, the rise in civic space restrictions across all regions of the world—ranging from restrictive funding laws to attacks on human rights defenders—has led to significant introspection by civil society actors. While civil society groups at all levels have raised global awareness about these unprecedented challenges, the Vuka! Coalition for Action on Civic Space was established to coordinate efforts and develop strategies to guard against further clampdowns while reclaiming civic space.

Today's context is marked by societies being more divided than ever, with civil society actors and journalists bearing the brunt of shrinking civic space, conflict, geopolitics, and polarised governance. Despite this, signs of organizing and mobilizing innovatively are evident as individuals and groups fight for social justice and equality and push back against authoritarianism. Vuka! Connects and amplifies these efforts by providing tools and spaces that strengthen civil society's ability to defend and expand civic space.

The Vuka! Coalition: A Coordinated Response

Since 2017, the Secretariat for the Vuka! Coalition has worked under the direction of a 19-member Steering Group alongside three Action Teams and at least 200 Ally organizations. Together, they have built trust and promoted solidarity, achieving short- and long-term victories. These efforts have reclaimed civic space for human rights defenders and supported new forms of resistance and organization in countries where opportunities to push back against restrictions were identified.

Vuka! is hosted by CIVICUS but operates as a distinct initiative with two core features:

1. A platform for coordination and cooperation among regional and international civil society groups.
2. An initiative advancing sectoral strategies through partnerships between international and national actors aimed at expanding civic space at the national level while emphasizing learning, replicability, and innovation.

Targeted and Harmonized Approaches to Combating Civic Space Restrictions

Vuka! has created a trusted, efficient, and diverse space where international and regional civil society groups coordinate, strategize, and support national organizations. To address barriers such as capacity limitations, digital security concerns, and competitiveness, Vuka! has implemented accessible infrastructure and methodologies that facilitate efficient communication and collaboration. Interactions with diverse stakeholders, including the OHCHR, UN Special Rapporteurs, regional human rights commissions, and philanthropic groups, enable information flows on country-specific situations and thematic issues.

Through these interactions, Vuka! Allies have established relationships with intergovernmental actors and donors, influencing policies and practices on civic space. For instance, the Secretariat has hosted:

- More than 40 country-specific calls and 14 thematic conversations attended by over 1,200 participants from nearly 400 organizations, state bodies, multilateral institutions, and philanthropic groups.

These convenings have led to joint actions, campaigns, projects, and additional funding, resulting in sustained and strategic interventions on pressing civic space issues.



KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE VUKA! COALITION

Through its coordination mechanisms, Vuka! has:

1. Ensured timely responses to crises: Providing a secure space for diverse civil society groups to mobilize targeted support for human rights defenders and organizations under threat.
2. Curated cooperative strategies: Bringing together over 1,000 defenders and groups across 40 countries to develop sophisticated responses to civic space restrictions.
3. Mapped expertise and minimized duplication: Leveraging its diverse membership to efficiently allocate resources and expertise.
4. Facilitated direct engagement with decision-makers: Ensuring civil society's influence on multilateral and state policies.
5. Grounded ICSO actions in local needs: Reflecting recommendations from national and sub-national civil society groups in international engagements.

Advancing Innovation in Civic Space Tactics

Vuka! also focuses on evolving civic space strategies through its Action Teams, which examine and innovate on current practices. These efforts have nurtured enthusiasm for testing non-traditional tactics, from direct advocacy to narrative and research tools.

Thematic Focus Areas

Vuka!'s thematic work reflects Allies' priorities and is led by it's Action Teams addressing:

1. Climate defenders.
2. Freedom of association for migrants.
3. Prevention of human rights defender killings.
4. Civic space resourcing.
5. Supporting protest movements.
6. Litigation and emerging trends in freedom of association and assembly.

Through co-design and co-creation processes, Action Teams identify key gaps and opportunities, producing participant-owned recommendations to advance civic space. This has enabled the incorporation of best practices and innovation from across the sector.

Innovation Mechanisms: Vuka!'s Contributions

Vuka!'s innovation mechanisms include:

1. Co-creating joint strategies: Facilitating collaboration on underrepresented issues in the civic space discourse.
2. Challenging traditional tactics: Encouraging candid dialogues to evaluate and improve current approaches.
3. Testing and resourcing new practices: Providing platforms to experiment with innovative solutions to suppressive tactics.
4. Democratizing access to tools and resources: Ensuring all Vuka! Allies have access to Coalition resources.
5. Bridging expertise across sectors: Creating trusted spaces for collaboration between academia, intergovernmental bodies, private sector actors, and civil society.

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CONCLUSION

The Vuka! Coalition has proven itself as a critical platform for defending and advancing civic space through its coordinated, innovative, and inclusive approaches. By enabling diverse actors to come together, the Coalition ensures targeted, timely, and impactful responses to the global challenges facing civil society today. Moving forward, Vuka! remains committed to amplifying efforts, fostering solidarity, and driving transformative change to protect civic freedoms worldwide.

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