



PUB 03

Together for Justice: Our Collective Action on Human Rights and Civic Space

COVER NOTE

This statement has been developed by the members of the ACT's Community of Practice on Human Rights and Development, in consultation with the ACT Business and Human Rights CoP and with contributions from the ACT India Forum. The proposed commitments largely concern shrinking civic space and the role of faith actors in pushing back against this trend and promoting narratives of hope.

TOPIC

This statement addresses the shrinking of civic space, the role of faith actors in pushing back against this trend and promoting narratives of hope. As crucial voices and leaders in their communities, faith actors have a key role to play in promoting fundamental freedoms within their communities and in the public space. The scope is global, with a recognition that minorities are disproportionately affected, as a constrained civic space exacerbates systemic inequities, and shuts off avenues for participation. To address this, ACT members should see the promotion of civic space as a key aspect of their work, consistent with their faith values and human rights standards. We must engage as members of civil society and speak out against violations of fundamental freedoms.

STATEMENT

Together for Justice: Our Collective Action on Human Rights and Civic Space

The last decade has been marked by democratic backsliding and a shrinking of civic space across the globe. Beyond affecting civil society, this shrinking space has hindered the ability of communities to demand justice and accountability, silencing critical voices when they are most needed. As faith actors and civil society actors grounded in communities and at the grassroots, we as ACT Alliance members have a crucial role to play in pushing back against this trend, and in building new narratives of hope. Faith-based organizations and religious leaders have demonstrated their extensive experience and commitment towards working with partners to build a strong, autonomous, and vibrant civil society. As actors with considerable influence, we should not only advocate for long-term development and the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, but also to hold States accountable to human rights obligations.

The current state of the world calls for immediate and sustained action to build hope and to fight for justice. CIVICUS estimates that almost one third of the population now live in places where civic space is rated as being closed, the highest percentage since CIVICUS started monitoring civic space. 2023 also marked the lowest percentage of people living under an ‘open civic space’.¹ These results are echoed by the V-Dem Institute, which stated that in 2023 the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen deteriorated to levels not seen since 1985.²

Violations of human rights and the rise of authoritarian rule and fundamentalism(s) are contributing to the erosion of space for free and independent civil society, for gender justice, and the rule of law. The situation is further exacerbated by decreasing respect for human rights and multilateral cooperation while nationalism, authoritarianism, and polarization are increasing. The growing role and influence of corporations and the lack of transparency around these have contributed to the further erosion of democratic decision-making.

Civil society is increasingly experiencing multiple restrictions locally, nationally, and globally. These involve administrative hurdles in registration processes, restrictive legislation, barriers to receiving foreign funding, travel bans, surveillance, and smear campaigns. Human Rights Defenders, including those from religious and faith-based organizations, are exposed to attacks, such as sustained harassment, persecution, arbitrary detentions, and violence. While these impact society as a whole, those facing systemic barriers, or defending rights in the face of powerful vested interests are disproportionately at risk. Communities and individuals fighting for environmental and land rights, freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB),

¹ [In Numbers - Civicus Monitor](#).

² [v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf](#). See also **ACT EU publication on civil society**: Development needs civil society. The Implications of Civic Space for the Sustainable Development Goals (2019), <https://actalliance.eu/resources-directory/development-needs-civil-society/>.

the rights of women and girls, and the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons face increased and escalating attacks.

The silencing of these most critical voices has allowed impunity for human rights violations to become entrenched globally. Grave human rights violations continue to increase all over the world, as justice systems fail to cope. The shrinking civic space constrains the ability of civil society, as well as victims and affected communities to speak out and fight for their right to live with dignity. It challenges the very right of civil society to exist as a free and independent development actor and to be an integral and critical voice for change.

As faith- and rights-based actors working in over 120 countries, it is our responsibility to mobilize and strengthen our collective networks to promote civic space, counter the growing backlash on human rights, and advance gender justice. As a community grounded on faith values and human rights principles, we have a duty to live by the principles of inclusivity and community, despite the differences we may have. Coming from diverse backgrounds and mandates, we must commit to promoting dialogue with one another and with the wider public and ensuring that our work supports the marginalized to influence decisions that impact their lives.

The role of an enabling civic space is critical for sustainability, long-term development, and justice. CSOs are instrumental in promoting participatory governance and democracy by advocating for policies that benefit the public, implementing key government programs, and creating informal spaces for dialogue and volunteerism³ (Goswami et al., 2011). They act as vital support systems for the state, identifying and addressing crucial issues affecting various communities, conducting research, and driving policy changes to ensure equitable development.

Moreover, CSOs often enhance governance by promoting transparency and efficiency, ensuring that resources are utilized effectively for the benefit of all citizens. They also uphold democratic values by fostering active citizen participation and facilitating meaningful dialogue between the state and the public. This engagement is essential for addressing challenges across all the SDGs and for advancing social justice.

To maximise their impact, it is crucial to protect, strengthen, and nurture the democratic space that allows for such engagement. The work we do as a community to promote civic space, at a time of widespread polarisation and the dismantling of democracy, is as essential now as it has ever been.

Commitments & Recommendations

³ Goswami et al., 2011.

Challenges to civic space will only continue to impede the realisation of ACT’s mission. We have the responsibility to act in solidarity with our partners to push back against efforts that seek to silence our voices. We, as ACT Alliance, commit to:

- Strengthen our role as part of a progressive and diverse civil society, advocating for the respect for rights and fundamental freedoms, and emphasizing the value of civil society as a crucial part of democratic progress.
- Advocate for the repeal of laws and policies that restrict civic space such as laws and policies violating fundamental freedoms, facilitating surveillance, unwarranted interference, those that disproportionately impact minorities, or prioritise vested interests over human rights.
- Call for the passage of policies that protect human rights defenders and civil society actors, enable the participation of civil society actors, promote transparency of government and business practices, and the prevention of discrimination and all forms of violence and harassment and ill-treatment.

Furthermore, we call upon national governments and international community to:

- Support the active and meaningful participation of civil society actors in international organisations and decision making, in particular in international human rights and justice mechanisms.
- Condemn human rights abuses and promote the roles of diverse actors, including human rights organisations, states and the private sector in respecting and progressing human rights and sustainable and equitable development., and ensure the full, equal, effective, and meaningful participation and agency of human rights defenders, including youth activists, women human rights defenders as well as land and environmental defenders.
- Provide adequate and sustained resourcing of civil society actors, such as community, women and youth led organizations, including through access to adaptable, flexible, and multi-year funding.
- Recognise civil dialogue as an essential element of participatory democracy.
- Ensure that fundamental human rights are also protected and guaranteed in the digital space.
- Ensure legally binding standards for corporations involved in digital technologies are in line with international human rights law obligations, including principles of equality and non-discrimination.

A majority of the assembly has declared itself in agreement with the opinions expressed in this statement. While many ACT members agree with the public statement, there are members who have expressed differing perspectives on the content or tone. Their decision reflects the diverse viewpoints within our alliance, and we respect their choice to abstain or vote against. As always, we value the collective dialogue and encourage continued discussions on the matter at hand, recognizing the strength of our unity in diversity.