

EU Civil Society Strategy - Open Public Consultation

Fields marked with * are mandatory.

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Introduction

Civil society organisations, which are frequently referred to as non-State, not-for-profit, non-partisan and non-violent structures, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals[1], play diverse roles across our society and are active in several sectors, ranging from awareness-raising, education, providing support or services, policy monitoring and advocacy. The implementation of EU law and policies on the ground is often entrusted to these actors.

Civil society organisations strengthen social cohesion and preparedness, enhance policy effectiveness, and ensure that the voices of affected communities are heard. The engagement of such organisations is also a crucial element in the system of democratic checks and balances and the promotion and defence of EU values.

The Commission uses a comprehensive toolbox to support and involve civil society organisations. In addition to dialogues in a wide range of policy areas and the Better Regulation channels of consultation, there is regular involvement in a high number of our Commission expert groups, providing extensive tools and opportunities for all interested stakeholders to contribute throughout the policy-making cycle. The European Economic and Social Committee plays a key role in the engagement with civil society.

An enabling environment, which fosters meaningful engagement and participation and provides further support, is essential for all civil society organisations to carry out their work and contribute to EU policies. A safe and enabling environment for civil society organisations means a space where their fundamental rights and those of their members are protected. They should be able to pursue their activities without interference, and with sufficient and transparent access to financial resources, and steps at EU level should be taken to promote and protect the civic space and those active within it.

The need for stepping up engagement with and protection of civil society at EU level was stressed in the Commission President's Political Guidelines for 2024-2029, and reiterated in the mission letter to the Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection. The EU Civil Society Strategy builds on this

political commitment and on Recommendation 2023/2836 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes, adopted as part of the Defence of Democracy Package.

Acknowledging the importance of the work done by civil society organisations for the success of EU policies, the EU Civil Society Strategy would establish a framework for action, both at EU and national level; its key objectives would be to foster dialogue with civil society actors and provide them with the necessary support and protection so that they can carry out their work.

The Commission would like to consult the general public and stakeholders on the key issues that the Strategy should address, structured around:

- The role of civil society organisations in the European Union;
- Challenges and risks faced by civil society organisations in the European Union;
- Measures currently in place at national and EU level to engage with, support and protect civil society organisations;
- Further steps to be taken at EU level to engage with civil society organisations and to support and protect them in their work.

Stakeholders likely to be interested in this initiative include:

- individual citizens
- Member States' national authorities
- EU institutions and bodies, including the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions, EU Agencies
- international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, OSCE-ODHIR, the OECD and the United Nations
- relevant EU-level networks
- civil society organisations (including youth organisations) and their networks/umbrella organisations
- national human rights institutions, equality bodies and their networks
- representatives of academia and researchers
- donors at national, EU and international level

[1] For the purpose of this public consultation, any reference to 'civil society organisations' should be understood as referring also to 'human rights defenders'. See also the term used in Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023 /2836 of 12 December 2023 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes.

About you/your organisation

* I am giving my contribution as:

- Individual
- Civil society organisation
- Network/umbrella organisation for civil society organisations
- Academic or research institute
- Business association
- Company/business
- Consumer organisation, including passenger rights' organisations
- National human rights institution or equality body
- Network of national human rights institutions or equality bodies
- Public authority in EU Member State (municipal, local, regional or national level)
- Public authority (EU level)
- Public authority non-EU Member State
- International organisation
- Trade union

* At which level do you primarily work?

- International level
- EU level
- Transnational level
- National level
- Regional or interregional level

The role of civil society organisations in the European Union

In your view, what are the main areas in which civil society organisations contribute to society in the EU and at national level? (Please rank each option according to the importance, from 1-5, **1 =most important**)

	1	2	3	4	5
* Representing and giving voice to different communities and interest groups	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Advocating for policy change and defending fundamental rights and other common values, such as democracy and the rule of law	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Delivering services and support to communities and individuals, including victim assistance and support	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* Acting as watchdogs and promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Strengthening social cohesion	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Strengthening societal resilience and crisis preparedness	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Strengthening democratic participation, and civic engagement	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Accompanying the implementation of EU policies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If Other, please specify

1500 character(s) maximum

Solidarity and connection people for the common good around common challenges.

In your view, what role do civil society organisations play in your Member State?

1500 character(s) maximum

As international development and humanitarian organisations, our members sustain public engagement for solidarity, address poverty, alleviate suffering in crises and foster peace. As faith-based NGOs, they draw on long-standing national supporter networks and convene spaces to connect people across perspectives to tackle societal challenges. CSOs are vital to democracies, holding governments and the EU accountable to human rights, humanitarian law, Treaty obligations and international commitments. They also complement EU and Member States by mobilising public resources for solidarity, supporting marginalised people, and ensuring accessible, quality public services through policy engagement and institutional accountability. Many CSOs are rooted in community-led models, with staff often coming from the communities they serve, many voluntarily. Independence and accountability to these communities remain essential, even when CSOs benefit from public finance. We additionally highlight the role of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and disability-focused NGOs. They advise policymakers with evidence and recommendations, amplify marginalised voices, engage in dialogue and debate, combat stigma through awareness campaigns, and build the capacities of employers, teachers, and health professionals. They also provide direct support, especially to the most marginalised, such as refugees. Their action ensures disability rights are embedded throughout the programme cycle.

Challenges and risks faced by civil society organisations in the European Union

Please indicate your perception of the challenges and risks faced by civil society organisations in the European Union. You can provide examples in the field below.

	Very high	High	Neutral	Low	Very low	Do not know
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* Restrictive legal framework/legal barriers (disproportionate legislative restrictions concerning the freedom of association, access to information, loss of charitable/public benefit status etc.)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Legal action / strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Criminalisation of the work of civil society organisations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Subjection to disproportionate or burdensome fines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Administrative barriers (burdensome registration processes, excessive administrative requirements or controls)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Suspected surveillance (e.g. by law enforcement)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
* Verbal threats and attacks against civil society organisations offline and online (e.g. online threats or harassment, disinformation)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Negative media reports/campaigns	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Physical threats and attacks (e.g. vandalism of premises or property, physical attacks against employees/volunteers)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Limits on access to information	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Censorship (e.g. the suppression of public communication, other information by public authorities)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Limited or inflexible funding, funding cuts	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Operational challenges (e.g. staffing, use of digital tools, cybersecurity, lack of specialised knowledge /training)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Legal fragmentation within the EU and difficulties to operate in other EU Member States (e.g. due to lack of recognition, administrative burden, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Other types of challenges (if aware, please provide examples below)	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If relevant, please provide an example in accordance with the above identified challenges

1500 character(s) maximum

Recent developments are narrowing the civic space in which our members operate. The European Court of Auditors' Special Report 11/2025 was accompanied by a press release implying NGO misuse despite finding no evidence, fuelling negative media campaigns that weaken trust in civil society, including faith-based and disability organisations. Access to information has become more restricted with the removal of EU directories, fewer replies from officials and decision-making shifted to central Commission services, reducing clarity on issues such as certification, templates and audits. Rising administrative burdens also limit engagement: public reporting requirements discourage contact with CSOs, while new European Parliament rules obliging every visitor to register in the Transparency Register are unworkable for grassroots actors and OPDs. The 2024 Commission guidance excluding advocacy from EU-funded projects frames legitimate watchdog and policy work as undue influence, undermining CSOs' democratic role in holding institutions to account. This is reinforced by targeted questioning of NGOs in programmes such as LIFE and by disproportionate scrutiny during debates such as Qatargate. At the same time, key MFF decisions are increasingly centralised, sidelining thematic DGs that traditionally provided entry points for consultation. Opportunities for meaningful dialogue and scrutiny are shrinking. Some positive signals remain, such as DG JUST's commitment to a Civil Society Strategy

If other types of challenges, please provide examples

1500 character(s) maximum

Why do you think it is important to protect civil society organisations?

1500 character(s) maximum

Protecting CSOs is both a legal and political obligation for the EU. Article 11(2) TEU, the NDICI Regulation and the Samoa Agreement require meaningful engagement with civil society, reinforced by the OECD DAC Recommendation and the EU's 2012 Democracy Communication. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) mandates the participation of persons with disabilities and their organisations, echoed in the EU Disability Rights Strategy 2021–2030 and DG ECHO's 2019 guidelines. Yet the CRPD Committee has highlighted persistent gaps in OPD involvement in EU external action, calling for urgent improvement. Faith-based organisations play a distinctive role within civil society. They draw on deep-rooted national supporter networks, mobilise public solidarity across borders and bring moral conviction to the fight against poverty, exclusion, injustice and in social service delivery. Grounded in community life, they link local realities with European policy debates, convening diverse actors to seek common solutions. Alongside other CSOs, they provide direct support in crises, promote inclusion, and serve as watchdogs to hold governments and institutions accountable for human rights, humanitarian law and democratic principles. Defending civic space is therefore a democratic necessity. By safeguarding civil society, including its faith-based and OPDs, the EU strengthens its credibility as a global actor.

In your view, are some civil society organisation facing particular challenges/more at risk than other civil society organisations (e.g. working on different topics or providing different services)?

- Yes
- No

If YES, in which areas are these civil society organisations active? And which particular challenges / risks are they facing?

1500 character(s) maximum

What is your overall assessment of how these challenges for civil society organisations have evolved over the last 5 years?

- Significantly improved
- Somewhat improved
- Stayed the same
- Somewhat worse
- Much worse

(Optional follow-up): Please briefly describe how the situation has worsened/improved.

1500 character(s) maximum

The space for civil society engagement with the EU has narrowed sharply in recent years. CSOs face restrictive laws, smear campaigns, disinformation and extreme narratives targeting human rights, gender equality and civic space. The Court of Auditors' 2025 press release, Commission guidance excluding advocacy from EU-funded projects, and proposals such as a Foreign Agents Directive have fuelled mistrust and added stigma. New European Parliament rules requiring NGO visitors to register in the Transparency Register create obstacles for smaller or foreign organisations, while political scandals such as Qatargate have been used to conflate legitimate CSOs with corruption. At the same time, access to information has been restricted through the removal of directories, fewer replies from officials, and centralisation of decision-making in Commission services. Together with disproportionate scrutiny of humanitarian, faith-based and environmental NGOs compared with larger actors, these trends have created a negative effect. Compliance rules and registration demands exclude grassroots organisations from dialogue and funding, undermining Article 11 TEU's guarantee of open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society. A systemic gap remains in consulting OPDs. Despite clear obligations under the UN CRPD and the EU Disability Rights Strategy, OPDs are rarely involved systematically in EU external action, whether in Brussels or through Delegations.

Existing measures to support and create an enabling environment for civil society organisations

In your view, how effectively does your country support an enabling environment for civil society organisations to operate freely and independently?

- Very effectively
- Somewhat effectively
- Not very effectively
- Not at all effectively
- Do not know

Which of the following measures do you think are most important to ensure a safe and supportive environment for civil society organisations in your country?

Maximum 3 selection(s)

- Legal protections for freedom of association, assembly and expression
- Access to predictable, transparent and sustainable funding
- Clear rules and transparent criteria for participation in policymaking and public consultations, and effective mechanisms to enable such participation (e.g. access to information, regular feedback cycles)
- Protection from threats, harassment or attacks
- Public recognition and awareness of civil society organisation's work
- Impact assessments on the impact of laws on civil society organisations
- National policies or strategies on civil society
- Other

Dialogue / Participation

Are you aware of existing rules or structure in **your country** (EU Member State(s)) concerning how public authorities engage with civil society organisations, in particular to allow them to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process? If so, please provide examples, in particular of any relevant best practices.

1500 character(s) maximum

Are you aware of existing measures **at EU level** to engage with civil society organisations, in particular to allow them to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process? If so, please provide examples, in particular of any relevant best practices.

1500 character(s) maximum

Mechanisms have been put in place by INTPA and ECHO to facilitate dialogue with civil society at both headquarters and EU Delegations. The forthcoming Civil Society Strategy should set clear standards to maintain and improve these spaces. Examples include the CSO roadmaps adopted by EU Delegations, the Policy Forum for Development (FPD), and TED Network, structured dialogues on the Gender Action Plan and on Social Protection. ECHO's regular exchanges with partners through the FPA process and the VOICE Watch Group. Information-sharing meetings on multi-annual indicative programmes and action plans, as well as ad hoc forums linked to EU-AU, EU-CELAC and DG Trade processes, have also offered structured entry points. However, weaknesses persist. Consultations are often launched at times that limit meaningful participation, and civil society has little clarity on how inputs are considered. Mechanisms such as the PFD and the Global Gateway Civil Society Platform remain Commission-driven, with restricted membership and agendas set from above, while business stakeholders enjoy stronger influence. In practice, access and inclusiveness are uneven. Disability-specific gaps are striking. EU Delegations' disability coordinators function unevenly, and OPDs are not systematically included in human rights dialogues or in EU external action consultations despite EU Disability Rights Strategy commitments and CRPD obligations. The concern is that this space will further narrow if not addressed.

* What further measures could be considered by the EU to engage with civil society organisations to ensure they can meaningfully participate in the decision-making process at EU level?

1500 character(s) maximum

While existing mechanisms offer dialogue and exchange, they rarely ensure meaningful participation in decision-making. The forthcoming Civil Society Strategy must apply to all EU institutions and Member States and be anchored in a formal interinstitutional agreement on civil dialogue, grounded in Article 11 TEU. It should establish minimum standards for participation, including:

- Ensuring regular and constructive dialogue with CSOs throughout policy development, from impact assessment to evaluation.
- Involving a wide range of actors, including informal groups, grassroots movements and organisations representing people facing discrimination (LGBTQIA+ people, ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, persons with disabilities).
- Supporting networking while safeguarding civil society's autonomy and self-organisation.
- Co-creating spaces, processes and agendas with CSOs, providing sufficient time and information for them to involve their constituencies and prepare joint evidence-based inputs.
- Favouring bottom-up and decentralised models of consultation, and making EU policy information, responsibilities and contacts more accessible – including reinstating the public EC Directory.
- Institutionalising inclusive engagement in bi-regional agreements, ensuring OPDs and other marginalised groups are systematically involved.

In your view, in which policy areas should civil society participation be further strengthened?

1500 character(s) maximum

CS participation must be strengthened across EU institutions and policy areas. We regret the lack of structured dialogue between the Council Presidency, the Secretariat General and civil society on issues of major concern to EU citizens. Engagement must improve on overarching matters (MFF, Strategic Agenda) and on thematic issues (EU directives, Council Conclusions, international negotiations). CS participation is essential wherever rights and dignity are at stake, including rule of law, human rights and humanitarian law, poverty reduction, social protection, migration, inequality, gender, disability rights, climate and environmental justice, defence and security, etc.. It must also be embedded in budgetary processes, trade and investment, the Global Gateway, and green and digital transitions. In Global Gateway projects, CSOs must have a strong voice to uphold environmental, social and human rights safeguards. CSOs should engage in decision-making on an equal footing with corporate stakeholders. We endorse the 2025 CRPD Committee call for legally entrenched OPD participation across EU legislation, policy and programming, backed by financial support. Over half the world's poorest people live in conflict-affected areas, with conflicts almost doubling in five years and compounded by climate change. Civil society in fragile contexts faces rising pressures; EU policy must deliver new solutions and dedicated funding support.

Protection

Are you aware of existing measures **in your country** to protect civil society organisations that are at risk? If so, please provide examples, in particular of any relevant best practices.

1500 character(s) maximum

Are you aware of existing measures **at EU level** to protect civil society organisations that are at risk? If so, please provide examples, in particular of any relevant best practices.

1500 character(s) maximum

The EU Anti-SLAPP Directive, which covers cross-border cases and will allow judges to grant early dismissal of manifestly unfounded claims, often against HRDs and journalists. The European Media Freedom Act, aiming to protect editorial independence, media pluralism, ensure transparency and fairness. The EU Artificial Intelligence Act, although it fails to adequately protect from surveillance and biometric technologies, particularly in policing and migration contexts.

Please indicate which of the following measures, to be taken at EU level, would in your view be most important to protect civil society organisations in the EU (ranking from 1 to 5, 1=most important)

	1	2	3	4	5
* Gather, consolidate and report information on the situation of civil society organisations across the EU	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Introduce specific protection measures for civil society organisations facing threats and attacks at national level (e.g. hotlines, dedicated complaint mechanisms within police structures, psychological support, safe housing, relocation, etc.)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Strengthen the role of National Human Rights Institutions to protect civil society organisations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Specific protection measures for civil society organisations facing threats at EU level	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Funding for civil society organisations promoting democracy and common values	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Funding for civil society for protection measures, including legal, cyber, physical and psychological protection	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Funding for capacity building and training of civil society organisations, including on holistic protection	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Work with international organisations to strengthen the protection for civil society organisations	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Reinforce regular dialogue with civil society organisations at national level	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Support to EU Member States to put in place participation frameworks for civil society organisations	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Reinforce regular dialogue with civil society organisations at EU level	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Facilitate cross-border activities of civil society organisations in the EU	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What further measures could be considered by the EU to better protect civil society organisations that are at risk?

1500 character(s) maximum

The platform ProtectDefenders.eu and the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders are key instruments of EU external action. A parallel mechanism should be established within the EU. At international level, the EU should counter the spread of restrictive legislation (including foreign agent laws, anti-money laundering and surveillance measures), and support enabling legal frameworks through bilateral diplomacy and cooperation with the UN and regional bodies. Civic space protection must be systematically integrated in political and policy dialogues, trade and partnership agreements, and in Delegations' CSO roadmaps, with an intersectional lens to ensure inclusion of marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities. EU Delegations must be resourced—particularly disability coordinators—and trained in human rights and disability inclusion. Finally, the Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan must be renewed and adequately funded in the next Global Europe Instrument with clear allocations for CSOs within the geographic pillars, as a cornerstone for protecting civic space and enabling environments.

Funding

* How important do you think it is to provide public funding at EU and national level for civil society organisations' activities to support them in the various roles they play in society (e.g. advocacy, support services, watchdog function, awareness raising, etc.)

- Very important
- Important
- Moderately important
- Slightly important
- Not important
- Do not know / no opinion

Do you think that public funding provided in your country for the work of civil society organisations is sufficiently accessible and transparent?

- Yes, it is generally transparent and accessible
- It is somewhat transparent and accessible, but improvements are needed
- No, it lacks sufficient transparency and accessibility
- I am not aware of how funding is managed
- Do not know / No opinion

What are the main obstacles preventing civil society organisations from fully benefiting from public funds at national or EU level?

1500 character(s) maximum

“Good stewardship of taxpayers’ money” is often misused to justify overly strict compliance. These disproportionate burdens drive out diversity by making it too resource-intensive for smaller CSOs to access funding. Counter-terrorism measures), the shift towards results-oriented frameworks, and large framework agreements further restrict access in international cooperation, where smaller and local CSOs—including many women’s organisations and OPDs—are most affected. EU processes and forms remain inaccessible to local CSOs and cascading grants increasingly shift risks to lead partners. Cuts to Member State aid also disrupt civil society ecosystems and weaken local actors. Decisions on CS funding are increasingly centralised in the EC Secretariat General and DG Budget, often under pressure from critical MEPs and the Court of Auditors, without consistent engagement with CSOs. Guidance from DG Budget in 2024 restricted advocacy and independent monitoring, contradicting the CRPD Committee’s recommendation that CSO advocacy be recognised as a legitimate use of EU funds. The proposed MFF 2028–2034 risks worsening the situation: results-based funding could tie disbursement to objectives rather than costs, flexible indicative budgets replacing thematic envelopes, and the removal of spending targets will dilute commitments to gender equality, disability inclusion and human development. Transparency and predictable funding for civil society must be safeguarded.

* Do you think that the current legal frameworks in the EU sufficiently allow for cross-border funding (e.g. donations made from a donor in one Member State to a civil society organisation based in another Member State)?

- Yes
- Improvements are needed
- No, there are barriers
- Do not know / No opinion

Are smaller, grassroots or marginalised community-based civil society organisations adequately supported by existing funding mechanisms?

1500 character(s) maximum

Not sufficiently. While INTP A and the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments open part of their funding to community-level actors through EU Delegations—and in some contexts encourage inclusion of marginalised groups and informal CSOs—this represents only a small share of the EU external action budget. Across departments, CBOs face disproportionate compliance and procedural burdens, and there is a lack of operating grants that would enable their sustainability. Small, local and grassroots organisations bring irreplaceable assets: legitimacy within their communities, access to people most at risk, trust built over years, and the ability to innovate and adapt. Yet too often the EU’s entry point for engaging them is framed in terms of “fear”—concerns about fraud, misuse or remote management—rather than as partners in shaping development and humanitarian outcomes. This fear-driven approach, reinforced for example in the recent ECA report on remote management in humanitarian aid, leads to more regulation and administration that exclude the very actors who make interventions sustainable and accountable. Challenges are particularly acute under DG ECHO: the Humanitarian Regulation prevents direct funding to local actors, while strict compliance and counter-terrorism measures make it extremely difficult to work with informal, grassroots or community-led groups as partners. The EU must also ensure that all its external funding is inline with its CRPD obligations.

