

Strengthening Civil Society

Our work

- ✦ [Food Security and Nutrition](#)
- ✦ [Climate Adaptation and Resilience](#)
- ✦ [Biological Diversity in Agriculture](#)
- ✦ [Management of Natural Resources](#)
- ✦ [Green Credits and Savings and Loan Groups](#)
- ✦ [Women's Rights and Equality](#)
- ✦ [Strengthening Civil Society](#)



Farmers dancing in Malawi. Photo: Tine Poppe

What is a civil society?

The concept of civil society is often understood as the space outside the state, the market and the family. It involves a wide range of different organised groups, such as grassroots organisations, social movements, trade unions, non-governmental organisations and faith groups. Civil society organisations vary in size, structure and level of organisation – from large international non-governmental organisations to local groups with an informal structure. Forming or joining an organisation, as well as organising public meetings, is not just a privilege – it is a universal human right.

Why is a strong civil society important?

Civil society plays a crucial role in sustainable development and is vital for building and strengthening democracy and good governance. An organised and robust civil society is essential for societal changes to occur democratically and for the rights of vulnerable and marginalised groups to be upheld. Over the past decades, civil society organisations have played a key role in empowering

marginalised rural communities in the Global South, including by providing essential services where government services are absent or weak. They also serve as watchdogs promoting human rights and giving a voice to vulnerable groups under pressure from poor governance or vested interests, whether public or private. For example, farmers' organisations have been crucial in enhancing farmers' opportunities to influence policies and provide services to their members, such as by increasing farmers' bargaining power in the market.

In countries where there is limited space for participation in democratic processes at the national level, it is especially important to strengthen local democracy. It is crucial that the local population has the opportunity to collaborate with the authorities. At the same time, it is essential that poor farmers, women, youth, and marginalised groups participate in national and international processes and influence decisions that affect their livelihoods.



Women's group in Ethiopia. Photo: Harald Herland

Civil society under pressure

Measuring democracy is a challenging exercise, and the actual state of democracy is constantly debated. Nevertheless, the general perception in major surveys is that democracy and civil society are under pressure. While democracy was making significant progress for a long time, according to Freedom House, it is now experiencing a global decline (Freedom House, 2023), resulting in a narrowing of civil society. Laws limiting the freedom to organise or express oneself have increased in number and scope (IDEA, 2023). An example is Nicaragua, where hundreds of civil society organisations have been criminalised in just a few years (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Many countries have imposed restrictions on funding for civil society, particularly international funding. Human rights activists and environmentalists face serious threats and violence. Despite civil society's shrinking space and negative trends, Freedom House reports that in 2022, it recorded the smallest degree of negative development in 17 years in their assessments (Freedom House, 2023).

How does The Development Fund work to strengthen civil society?

The Development Fund believes that local communities and local civil society are best placed to identify challenges and implement solutions for their communities. Therefore, we have our own partnership philosophy based on the belief that a



Savings and loans group in Ethiopia. Photo: Harald Herland

strong and inclusive civil society is a prerequisite for development and democracy. We work to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to manage and implement effective programmes and to influence development and decision-making processes at the local, national, and international levels. The Development Fund aims to collaborate with various types of partners. They often enjoy high trust from the local community and have valuable expertise in organising grassroots organisations, as well as specific thematic expertise in areas such as natural resource management and agriculture.

While capacity-building of our local partner organisations is important, The Development Fund's civil society work envelops more than that – it also includes the establishment and strengthening of grassroots organisations. These are some of the forms of grassroots organisations we support.

Cooperatives: A cooperative is a group of people who come together to meet common economic, social, and cultural needs. It is about solving problems collectively that would otherwise have to be dealt with individually. This is a system that can contribute to better economics for farmers by standing together and gaining better bargaining power, but can also provide members with counselling. Organising farmers plays a crucial role in reducing poverty, increasing food security, increasing incomes through better market access, and providing job opportunities. We also support cooperatives in political processes,



A village group meeting in Nepal. Photo: The Development Fund

raising awareness of rights and opportunities for influence, and advocating for improved local legislation.

Savings and loan groups: A savings and loan group (Village Savings and Loan Association – VSLA) is a group where members contribute deposits and manage loans themselves. Members can borrow from the group, for example, to invest in their production or start a business. When the loan with interest is repaid, the group's equity increases. In addition to providing access to financial resources, groups have a local democratic function. It is a forum where members can gather to discuss issues relevant to them, and they can give each other advice. Together as a group, they also have a greater chance of raising their needs with local authorities.

Youth groups: Similar to cooperatives and savings and loan groups, youth groups are a space where people can come together to solve problems collectively and a tool to influence the local community. It is also a community for learning, saving money, and investing in income-generating activities. This can increase self-esteem. Youth groups are, perhaps not surprisingly, groups organised for and by young people. The Development Fund believes it is important that young people are heard by local authorities and that awareness of their rights is raised. Youth groups enable this.



Female farmer in Ethiopia working to strengthen the local society. Photo: The Development Fund

Other groups and committees: The Development Fund, together with our partners, has developed a concept called Climate-Adaptive Villages. Here, the local population themselves identify challenges created by climate change for their village and also propose solutions to these challenges. The work is locally led by committees. We also organise other groups on other topics, such as forest conservation groups, water committees, seed bank committees, and more.

Supporting partners' participation in advocacy work in national and international processes: Through our projects, we contribute to strengthening partners' and civil society's capacity to use grassroots experiences to develop concrete proposals and input into national action plans, laws, and regulations, within themes such as climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and forest conservation. We also support partners' participation in international negotiations on the management of plant genetic diversity and climate, as part of the effort to build a strong civil society.

Would you like to support The Development Fund's work?

- ✎ [Here you can read about how you can get involved in our work against hunger and injustice](#)

References

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