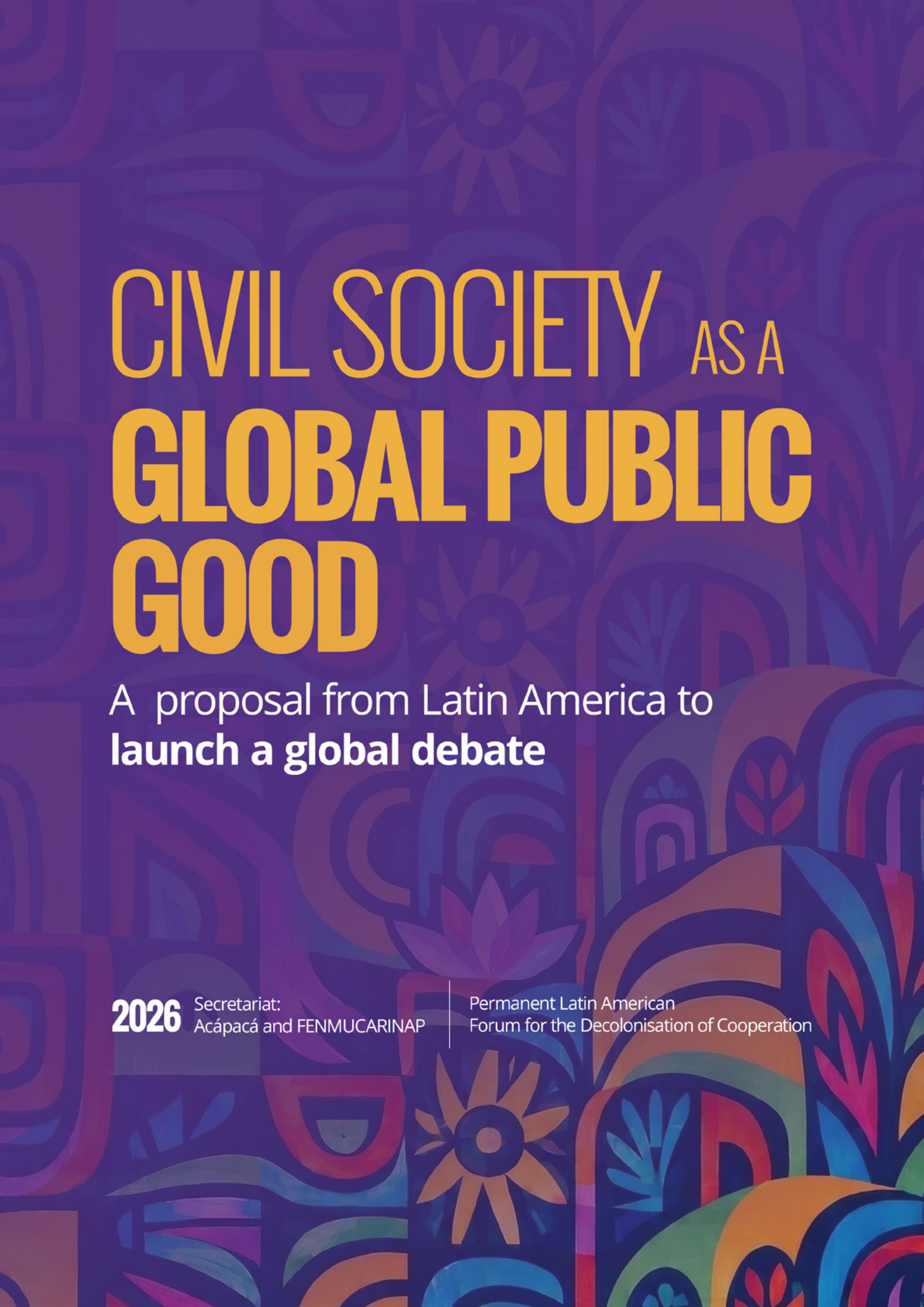




CIVIL SOCIETY AS A GLOBAL PUBLIC GOOD

A proposal from Latin America to
launch a global debate

2026 Secretariat:
Acápacá and FENMUCARINAP

Permanent Latin American
Forum for the Decolonisation of Cooperation

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About the promoting entities

The Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonization of International Cooperation is a space for coordination, reflection, and the development of proposals, driven by organizations and social movements in Latin America. Its Secretariat is jointly managed by FENMUCARINAP and ACÁPACÁ.

ACÁPACÁ is a Latin American organization based in Peru that promotes processes of reflection, coordination, and advocacy regarding the future of international cooperation and civil society.

Note on geographic scope. In this report, the term “Latin America and the Caribbean” is used when proposals have a regional scope. The term “Latin America” is retained when referring to the origin of the proposal, the official name of the Permanent Forum, and the cases analyzed.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

OHCHR

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

ODA

Official Development Assistance

BRICS+

expanded group of BRICS countries

DAC

Development Assistance Committee

CARICOM

Caribbean Community

CELAC

Community of Latin American and Caribbean States

ECLAC

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

CIVICUS

Global Alliance for Citizen Participation

CLACSO

Latin American Council of Social Sciences

ECOSOC

United Nations Economic and Social Council

FAO

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FENMUCARINAP

National Federation of Rural, Artisan, Indigenous, Native, and Wage-Earning Women of Peru

FILAC

Fund for the Development of Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean

G77+China

Group of 77 and China

IMS

Irene M. Staehelin Foundation

MCLD

Movement for Community-Led Development

MERCOSUR

Southern Common Market

NEAR

Network for Empowered Aid Response

OCDE

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

NGOS

nongovernmental organizations

CSOs

civil society organizations

PDET

Territorially-Focused Development Programs

UNDP

United Nations Development Program

PRIO

Peace Research Institute Oslo

RACI

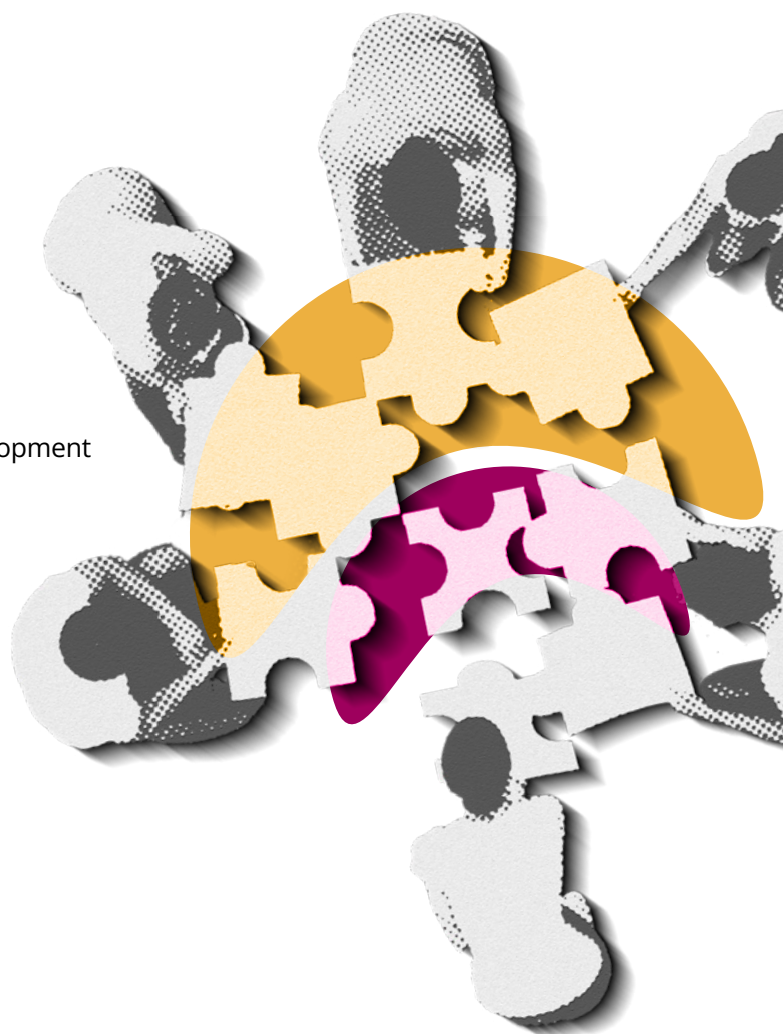
Argentine Network for International Cooperation

SICA

Central American Integration System

WACSI

West Africa Civil Society Institute



Preface

For a long time, we have acted as if the existence of civil society were a given. We expect it to be present whenever a community needs to organize, whenever a right is violated, or whenever power lacks checks and balances. At the same time, we accept that many of the organizations and movements that make such collective action possible survive under conditions of extreme fragility. This contradiction has become unsustainable.

The capacities that sustain an autonomous and pluralistic civil society are built up over years. They require knowledge, relationships of trust, a local presence, experience, and people willing to organize around shared concerns. When an organization or movement disappears, a society may also lose a part of those capacities. Recovering them is difficult and, at times, impossible.

Recognizing civil society as a global public good shifts the scale of the discussion. The immediate concern for the survival of each organization must be accompanied by a broader reflection on our responsibility to preserve the fabric of organizations, movements, networks, and capacities that enable societies to organize, imagine alternatives, and act collectively. This perspective requires resources, but also autonomy, voice, and the ability to set one's own priorities. From a feminist perspective, this implies recognizing and supporting the care, time, and labor—so often rendered invisible—that make collective action possible.

The primary responsibility lies with States, which must guarantee the freedoms and material conditions necessary for the existence of an independent civil society. It also involves multilateral and regional institutions, international cooperation and philanthropy, whose decisions can either strengthen that autonomy or exacerbate its fragility. Civil society must be involved in defining the policies and mechanisms designed to sustain it.

For me, this proposal forms part of the decolonial reflection promoted by the Permanent Forum, because it challenges the relationships of dependency that have characterised much of international cooperation and proposes moving towards an architecture based on solidarity and shared responsibility. Its scope, however, is broader. Protecting people's ability to organise themselves, make their voices heard and transform their societies is a responsibility that concerns us all. At the Permanent Forum, we are committed to fostering this dialogue and building it together with organisations, movements and institutions from other regions.

Sofía Sprechmann Sineiro

*General Coordinator of the Latin American Permanent Forum
for the Decolonisation of International Cooperation*



Introduction

Civil society fulfils essential functions for democratic life and collective well-being and makes concrete contributions to the economy. Organisations, movements, communities and networks defend rights, articulate the interests of those who would otherwise find it difficult to gain access to institutions, generate knowledge, monitor the exercise of power, build peace and help to protect common goods. A significant proportion of these benefits reaches people who never participate directly in the organisations that generate them and, in areas such as human rights, environmental protection or tax justice, can transcend borders and generations.¹

This document proposes recognising the existence of an autonomous, pluralistic civil society, capable of sustaining its action over time, as a global public good. The proposal draws on the concept developed in the literature on global public goods and extends it to encompass a social and democratic infrastructure whose existence enables the production and protection of other public goods.²

The report is set against a backdrop of democratic decline, polarisation and a contraction in international cooperation. In many countries, the freedoms that enable civic organisation and participation are being curtailed, whilst the resources available to sustain the work of many organisations are dwindling. The convergence of these trends has consequences that go beyond their individual impact.³

The proposal emerged in Colombia in 2025, where an alliance of twenty-eight national and regional organisations, led by Corporación Región and Transparencia por Colombia, promoted a collective reflection on the consequences for democracy of the weakening or disappearance of part of civil society. The Initiative for the Sustainability of Civil Society Organisations developed this approach and framed their political, social and financial sustainability as a matter of public interest linked to the quality of democracy.

In May 2026, it proposed, amongst other measures, moving towards a national public policy that would recognise civil society organisations as political actors serving the public good and establish an enabling environment, with accessible and non-discriminatory funding resources and instruments, to sustain their work and strengthen their autonomy.⁴

“Civil society organisations are an indicator of the depth and strength of democracy. We have fought to deepen their meaning and principles, broaden their frameworks for understanding and action, bring in new actors and secure new rights. For this reason, the current crisis facing civil society organisations poses a threat to democracy and the rights we have secured. Our approach to the problem must move beyond a focus on individual capacities to access resources and instead address the challenge of protecting and continuing to expand the common goods of humanity.”

Fernando Herrera

Corporación Región, Colombia

The Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonisation of International Cooperation is a space for coordination and reflection involving organisations, movements and individuals from various countries across the region. Since its creation in 2024, more than 350 people have become involved in its activities and areas of work, some as individuals and others representing organisations, movements, academia and other civil society groups. The Forum analyses the power relations that underpin cooperation and develops proposals from a Latin American perspective. Its Secretariat is jointly run by FENMUCARINAP and ACÁPACÁ.⁵

The Forum has continued to develop the reflection initiated in Colombia and proposes to take it to the international stage. Through its Secretariat, it has linked this to the construction of a paradigm based on solidarity, decolonisation and feminism, grounded in greater autonomy, the redistribution of power and resources, and the capacity of organisations and movements to define their own priorities.⁶

This report forms part of that process and aims to provide one of the foundations upon which the new paradigm of cooperation will continue to be built. The proposal was discussed during 2026 at an international meeting convened by the Argentine Network for International Cooperation (RACI) and in discussions with the OECD, organisations, networks and individuals from different regions working on the future of cooperation and civil society.⁷

For review, the draft was shared with the entire governing body of the Permanent Forum and with those who participated in the committee responsible for its preparation. It was also sent to those involved in the case studies and to the organisations mentioned in the report, with the aim of verifying the accuracy of the references and gathering comments on the arguments and recommendations.

In addition, comments were sought from international experts and partners involved in this discussion from various regions. Their contributions enabled the proposal to be contextualised within broader debates on democracy, civic space, sustainability and international cooperation. Time and resource constraints prevented a wider consultation, which would have made it difficult to finalise the document within a reasonable timeframe. The process was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Permanent Forum and the procedures set out in its governing documents. The report is therefore presented as a proposal that should continue to be enriched through further discussions.

In the next stage, the proposal should also be discussed within regional and sub-regional integration mechanisms and in South-South cooperation forums, drawing on the experiences and debates that exist in each region regarding the sustainability and autonomy of civil society.

The first chapter examines the transformations that make this discussion particularly necessary, whilst the second chapter sets out the arguments underpinning the proposal. At the end of the second chapter, a summary presents the four concepts that underpin the approach. Four Latin American case studies then illustrate concrete contributions made by collective organisation to the protection of ecosystems, the monitoring of public resources, the expansion of rights and territorial peace-building.

The fourth chapter analyses the material conditions necessary to sustain autonomy, whilst the fifth examines the responsibilities that might fall to states, international cooperation, philanthropy, multilateral institutions and civil society itself. The sixth chapter brings together the main tensions and questions that remain open, whilst the seventh identifies some steps to take the discussion forward. The first annex sets out the conceptual foundations of the proposal, and the second documents its Colombian origins and acknowledges the organisations involved in that process.

The proposal forms part of a much broader conversation. Stakeholders from different regions are developing assessments and alternatives regarding the future of civil society and international cooperation, drawing on experiences as relevant as those that inform this document.⁸ The proposal we present has its roots in Latin America and joins existing initiatives with a global scope, seeking to contribute to greater dialogue between conversations that maintain their own languages, experiences and trajectories.

The report represents an initial effort to formulate a systemic and long-term response, open to discussion, criticism and new contributions.

Recognising an autonomous and pluralistic civil society as a global public good may seem like a utopian aspiration today, at a time when numerous governments are moving in the opposite direction through restrictions, attacks and forms of criminalisation. The history of Latin America is marked by ideas that seemed unlikely but ultimately transformed rights and institutions, alongside others that helped to restrict them.

Keeping that horizon open enables us to reject the notion that precariousness, criminalisation and a 'every man for himself' mentality might come to be accepted as normal conditions for civil society.



Case study

Colombia: the door to Casa Morada

When Esperanza arrived at Casa Morada in Ocaña, having suffered violence, she asked a question that sums up the significance of this place better than any statistic: “Is my body still mine?” There, she found legal support and a space where she could begin to heal.

Ocaña is situated near Catatumbo, one of the regions hardest hit by the Colombian conflict. Since January 2025, clashes and the control exerted by armed groups have led to the displacement of more than 114,000 people. The violence is compounded by a weak institutional presence and has a particularly severe impact on women.

La Casa Morada is a project run by the Mujer y Futuro Foundation and, according to the organisation itself, the only centre offering comprehensive support for women and girls in the Catatumbo region. Every year, it assists more than 2,000 people by providing psychosocial support, legal assistance and health advice. During the 2025 emergency, the Foundation reached 3,404 people across thirteen areas in the region and managed to respond to the most serious cases within 72 hours.

The Foundation has been working for women’s rights in Santander and Norte de Santander for 36 years. It began by supporting domestic workers and has helped to transform policies and institutions. The ‘For a dignified and just Sandra’ campaign, for example, was instrumental in bringing about Constitutional Court ruling T-453 of 2005, which strengthened the protection of the privacy of victims of sexual violence during legal proceedings.

The Colombian State is aware of this work and considers it necessary. In December 2025, the Fundación Mujer y Futuro was chosen as the regional representative of women’s organisations before the Monitoring Committee for Law 1257, which is responsible for overseeing compliance with measures to prevent and punish violence against women. The process was supported by the Office of the Attorney General, the Ombudsman’s Office and the Ministry of Equality and Equity.

However, the Mujer y Futuro Foundation has not received any Colombian public funding to sustain Casa Morada, although, as the organisation explains, police stations, local council offices and healthcare staff refer women to it when the existing institutional support networks lack the capacity to respond. As of June 2025, 96.93 per cent of its income came from projects funded predominantly by international aid. Since 2024, several sources of support have begun to be withdrawn and the organisation has had to reduce its geographical reach.

The current cost of maintaining Casa Morada's comprehensive care for one year, with a target of 2,000 women, is 1,010,123,932 Colombian pesos. Without these resources, it would have to cut back on specialist staff, services, supplies and its capacity to respond.

The figure may seem high for a single organisation. It represents approximately 0.00018 per cent of the National General Budget approved for 2026. This comparison does not imply that the national government should bear the entire cost of Casa Morada on its own, but it does help to put the economic scale of the problem into perspective. Colombia has both the resources and the legal instruments to fund activities in the public interest carried out by non-profit organisations. Article 355 of the Constitution and Decree 092 of 2017 allow this to be done by the national government, as well as by departments and municipalities.

Some Colombian local authorities have already begun to set up and fund public support centres for women. In 2025, the Copacabana Borough Council opened a Casa Morada designed to provide comprehensive support to women in vulnerable situations. This precedent demonstrates that such services can form part of public policy and receive public funding.

Other Latin American countries have moved in the same direction. Uruguay has a public support network for women experiencing violence, operating across its 19 departments. The Ministry of Social Development is responsible for policy, and some of the services are managed jointly with civil society organisations. The state funds the capacity it deems necessary and draws on the expertise developed by specialist organisations.

The Uruguayan experience demonstrates that public funding for civil society does not depend solely on a country's level of income. It also depends on states recognising their contribution and translating that recognition into institutions and budgets. In Colombia, the Fundación Mujer y Futuro forms part of the national mechanism that oversees policy on gender-based violence, whilst the service it provides in one of the territories most affected by the conflict depends almost entirely on decisions taken outside the country.

The OECD, of which Colombia has been a member since 2020, considers predictable and sustainable public funding to be one of the necessary conditions for civil society to be able to work independently. In 27 of the 29 OECD countries for which data is available, organisations receive some form of funding from central or federal governments.

The review carried out by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee in 2026 also highlights a concern that is particularly relevant to this case. The organisations consulted called for civil society to be protected and funded as a public good. They also called for the 'do no harm' principle to be applied to funding cuts and the withdrawal of donors, given the consequences this may have for people and regions. This is a demand made by the organisations participating in the consultation – not yet a position agreed by the Committee as a whole – but it demonstrates how far this discussion has progressed.

International cooperation will continue to be necessary in Catatumbo and elsewhere where conflict, displacement and inequality require a response that goes beyond existing capacities. Fragility arises when the ability to exercise a right within a country depends almost entirely on foreign resources and can disappear when a government or agency changes its priorities.

An organisation such as the Fundación Mujer y Futuro builds up knowledge, community relationships and trust. If Casa Morada closes, no institution automatically inherits these capacities. Women lose the place they could turn to, and Colombia loses part of the infrastructure that for years has made it possible for their rights to reach territories where the State is still unable to fully guarantee them.

Nor can public funding become a mechanism for controlling organisations. It requires transparent rules and resources that do not depend on proximity to the government in power. The challenge lies in the state assuming its responsibility whilst, at the same time, protecting the autonomy that enables civil society to support people, highlight institutional failings and drive change. Colombian law had already answered Esperanza's question. Her body belongs to her, and the state must protect her. However, for that answer to have any meaning, the door to Casa Morada had to be kept open. The gap between a recognised right and a right that can be exercised explains why civil society constitutes a public capacity that countries need to preserve.

Sources for this case study:

Fundación Mujer y Futuro, communication and data provided for the review of this case study, September 2026; UNHCR Colombia, 'Sowing Peace in the Catatumbo: One Year After the Emergency'; Colombian Ministry of Equality and Equity, results of the election of the Monitoring Committee for Law 1257; National Public Procurement Agency, Decree 092 of 2017; Uruguayan Ministry of Social Development, Network of Services for a Life Free from Gender-Based Violence; OECD, Government at a Glance 2025; and OECD-DAC, Implementation of the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society (2026).

01

What a society loses when its capacity to organise is weakened

A society's capacity to organise itself is built up over many years through organisations, movements, communities and networks that accumulate experience, knowledge, relationships of trust, local presence and forms of care. When these spaces disappear, collective processes can be disrupted and capacities lost that are not automatically rebuilt through the creation of a new organisation or the approval of another project. The effects also extend to individuals and communities that never participated directly in those organisations.

These capacities are currently under increasing pressure. Restrictions on the freedoms of association, expression and assembly, and on civic participation, have become widespread in many countries. An assessment of 198 countries and territories estimated that, in 2025, 73 per cent of the world's population lived in places where civic space was classified as obstructed, repressed or closed, whilst only 39 per cent lived in places with an open civic space. The report on the state of civil society published by CIVICUS in 2026 places these restrictions within the context of a broader concentration of power, whilst also documenting the capacity for collective action to resist setbacks and achieve progress.⁹

Added to this political pressure is a profound transformation of international cooperation. In 2025, ODA from members and associates of the OECD's DAC fell by 23.1 per cent in real terms compared with the previous year, the largest annual contraction recorded to date.¹⁰ The effects on civil society may be particularly significant because a significant proportion of its international resources comes from just a few funding sources. Between 2020 and 2024, CSOs received an annual average of US\$26.6 billion in ODA from DAC members. During that period, the United States, the institutions of the European Union and Germany together accounted for 56 per cent of these resources.¹¹

"Civil society needs to move beyond talk of precariousness and recognise its potential for change. When we view ourselves solely in terms of what we lack, we undermine our own self-perception and may end up reinforcing power imbalances. Moving towards its recognition as a global public good also requires us to recognise our own power, the social fabric we have built, and our ability to bring together different actors, sectors and regions."

Natalia Velásquez

PODION Corporation, Colombia

International funding remains essential for many organisations and can become even more important in regions where governments restrict civic space or hinder access to domestic resources. At the same time, heavy reliance on a small number of external sources creates significant vulnerability to political and budgetary decisions taken outside the countries where these organisations operate. Recent experiences of Latin American organisations show that diversifying funding sources and reducing certain dependencies can increase their scope for political autonomy.¹²

The current crisis highlights a fragility that predates it. For years, the survival of many organisations has depended on projects, calls for proposals and decisions made by those who provide the resources. When these sources dry up, each organisation must diversify its income, scale back its work or find new funders. These responses may enable it to survive, though they do not guarantee the continuity of the social fabric, the knowledge and the collective capacities that the organisation helped to build.

Organisations have been trying to address this fragility for years. They have sought new funders, diversified their income, streamlined their structures and generated their own resources. Many have managed to sustain themselves in this way. However, these responses have limited scope when, at the same time, freedoms are restricted, spaces for participation are closed off, and sources of funding are concentrated or reduced.

The ability to organise autonomously enables societies to tackle problems that individuals would struggle to resolve on their own. Through civil society, this collective action allows diverse interests to be represented and rights to be defended, whilst contributing to economic and social well-being. When this capacity is weakened, a society also loses the means to resolve its common problems and shape its own development.



02

Civil society as a global public good

We propose recognising the existence of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society as a global public good. A civil society capable of organising itself and acting independently contributes to the functioning of democracy and institutions, can generate tangible economic benefits, and plays a part in the production and protection of public goods – ranging from rights and peace-building to environmental protection. Some of these benefits transcend national borders. Preserving this capacity for organisation and the conditions that make it possible constitutes a public good in itself and requires responsibilities that complement the actions of each state, especially when governments themselves restrict it.

The contribution to democracy and institutions is one of the best-documented aspects of this proposal. Civil society forms part of the democratic infrastructure because it enables interests and demands that face difficulties in gaining access to institutions to become part of the public debate. Organisations and movements broaden the scope for participation, monitor the exercise of power and help to ensure accountability and the recognition and exercise of rights. These functions take on particular importance when institutions are weak, certain sectors are under-represented or channels for participation are restricted.¹³

The proposal also has an economic dimension. The evidence reviewed is still insufficient to establish a general link between the existence of a strong civil society and higher economic growth, and this relationship requires further research. The specific economic benefits are better documented. Citizen oversight can improve the use of public resources; social organisations generate employment, economic activity and services; and collective organisation strengthens resilience in the face of crises and protects livelihoods, territories and natural resources.¹⁴ The Peruvian case study presented in the following chapter illustrates one of these mechanisms through measurable economic outcomes.

"Organised civil society brings together voices, communities and causes that often find no place within institutions. Its capacity for dialogue makes it possible to give a voice to those who have been excluded, to create checks and balances against various forms of power, and to transform local demands into causes capable of benefiting entire societies."

Sonia J. Romero Huesca

Researcher at the Dr José María Luis Mora Research Institute, Mexico

Civil society also plays a part in the production and protection of public goods. Organisations and movements are involved in peace-building, the defence of rights, the generation and dissemination of knowledge, and the protection of the environment.¹⁵ In some cases, the benefits are felt primarily within a community or a country; in others, they extend to much wider populations and generations. The protection of forests and ecosystems essential for climate regulation and biodiversity illustrates particularly well how forms of organisation and collective action developed within a given territory can help to preserve assets of global importance.

These arguments are firmly grounded in research on civil society. There is also literature that recognises organisations and movements as actors involved in the production and governance of global public goods.¹⁶ Building on this background, our proposal identifies the existence of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society as a global public good, understood as the possibility for people to organise themselves collectively, express diverse interests and positions, and participate autonomously in public life. Freedoms, civic space, resources and protection mechanisms constitute necessary conditions for preserving this possibility.

The global nature of the proposal also has a second dimension. The primary responsibility for guaranteeing these conditions lies with States. The freedoms of association, expression and assembly, and the right to participate in public affairs are recognised under international law, and access to resources forms part of the effective exercise of freedom of association.¹⁷ However, the State itself may restrict these freedoms, limit access to resources or reduce the space available for independent organisation.

International and regional human rights systems provide a relevant precedent. They establish complementary protection mechanisms precisely because the fulfilment of certain rights cannot rest exclusively on national institutions when states fail to meet their obligations. With regard to freedom of association, international standards also recognise the possibility of seeking and receiving domestic, foreign and international remedies.¹⁸

The global nature of our proposal is underpinned by two related arguments. Part of the public value generated by an autonomous civil society transcends national borders, and its protection requires complementary mechanisms when domestic options prove insufficient or are being deliberately restricted. Primary responsibility lies with States, accompanied by additional responsibilities designed to preserve the conditions necessary for an autonomous and pluralistic civil society.

Recognising this shared responsibility raises issues that will need to be resolved as the proposal is developed. International funding can protect independence from governments that restrict civic space, but it can also create new dependencies on those who provide the resources.¹⁹

The following chapters explore these issues in greater detail. Chapter 3 examines evidence from Latin America on the public value of civil society; Chapter 4 addresses the material conditions necessary to sustain its autonomy; and Chapter 5 analyses the responsibilities that might arise from this recognition.

The literature identified to date focuses primarily on civil society's contribution to the production and governance of global public goods.²⁰ Against this background, this paper proposes discussing the recognition of the existence of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society as a global public good.

Summary

Four concepts underpinning the proposal

Civil society

Civil society encompasses the various ways in which people organise themselves and act collectively, independently of the state and the market, around shared interests, needs, rights, values or causes. It includes formally constituted organisations, social movements, community organisations, trade unions, networks and other forms of collective action. Autonomy is compatible with relations with the state, the market and international cooperation, provided that organisations retain the capacity to define their own priorities and positions.

Democratic infrastructure

Democratic infrastructure comprises the institutions, organisations, relationships and capacities that enable people to participate in public life, express diverse views, resolve conflicts, monitor the exercise of power and demand the fulfilment of rights. Civil society forms part of this infrastructure because it incorporates interests and experiences that face difficulties in gaining access to institutions, generates knowledge, maintains links between communities and institutions, and broadens the scope for participation.

Global public good

Global public goods produce benefits or effects that extend across different countries, populations and generations, and raise issues of collective action. In this proposal, the unit of analysis is the existence of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society and the effective possibility for people to organise and act collectively independently. Preserving this capacity has public value and may require complementary mechanisms when national protection proves insufficient.

Decolonial perspective

A decolonial perspective enables an analysis of how hierarchies of power, knowledge and representation influence decisions regarding international cooperation. It guides a redistribution of power, resources and decision-making capacity, recognises diverse forms of knowledge and preserves the autonomy of organisations, movements and communities. Governance, knowledge production and the distribution of resources form part of the development of the proposal.

Annex 1 elaborates on these conceptual foundations and clarifies the scope within which they are used in this document.

03

The public value of civil society in Latin America

The previous chapter argues that a civil society capable of organising itself and acting independently can contribute to the functioning of democracy and institutions, generate tangible economic benefits, and play a part in the production and protection of public goods. The following four case studies allow us to observe these mechanisms in specific examples from Latin America. They are illustrative in nature, and their selection reflects the diversity of the contributions analysed and the existence of sufficient evidence to distinguish the role of civil society from other factors influencing the outcomes.

3.1 The Amazon. Collective organisation and protection of global public goods

The available evidence links the recognition of collective rights and forms of territorial governance to better conservation outcomes. A review of more than 300 studies carried out by the FAO and FILAC found that deforestation rates are generally lower in indigenous and tribal territories where collective rights have been formally recognised. In titled indigenous territories in the Amazon regions

of Bolivia, Brazil and Colombia, deforestation rates between 2000 and 2012 were between half and a third of those observed in other forests with similar ecological characteristics. Favourable results have also been found in the Peruvian Amazon when comparing indigenous territories with protected areas of similar characteristics.²²

These results can also be explained by the collective action of indigenous peoples, who hold collective rights and have their own institutions and forms of governance. Their representative organisations play a fundamental role in defending territories, natural resources and forests, as well as in preserving traditional knowledge and practices. For these organisations, the territory embodies identity, memory, community life, spirituality, health and self-governance. This perspective is reflected, amongst other documents, in the roadmap drawn up by AIDESEP and its member organisations for the implementation of Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework.²²

The benefits of collective action also extend to populations far removed from the territories where it takes place. The forests of indigenous territories store approximately one-third of the forest carbon in Latin America and the Caribbean and around 14 per cent of the carbon stored in the world's tropical forests.²³ Their conservation contributes to climate regulation and the protection of biodiversity. This case demonstrates how locally developed forms of organisation and governance can preserve assets whose benefits extend far beyond national borders.

“For our indigenous and native peoples, territory is a multidimensional space where identity, memory, community life, production, learning and self-governance converge. When it is destroyed, polluted or dispossessed, its defence becomes a priority. This defence requires collaboration with civil society organisations that recognise indigenous peoples as holders of collective rights, respect their self-determination and their rights to consultation and consent, and contribute technical, legal and communication expertise to the development of ‘Buen Vivir’.”

Romel Rodríguez

Indigenous Co-ordinator of Abya Yala

3.2 Peru. Citizen oversight and public resources

Between 2015 and 2017, Proética, the Peruvian chapter of Transparency International, and the Comptroller General's Office took part in an experiment designed to analyse the effects of citizen oversight on the implementation of public works. The study used a sample of 200 urban and peri-urban district councils from different parts of Peru that were carrying out small-scale projects, such as roads, pavements, sports facilities and municipal markets. One hundred were randomly assigned to the intervention group and another hundred to the control group.²⁴

The intervention involved informing the authorities in the selected municipalities that certain public works projects under their responsibility would be monitored by Proética, with the backing of the Comptroller's Office. The organisation carried out the monitoring, and the institutional support from the supervisory authority reinforced the credibility of that monitoring. The experiment spotlights the effects of a higher likelihood of independent scrutiny on decisions relating to public resources.²⁴

The projects subject to monitoring progressed at a similar rate to those in the comparison group, whilst their costs were substantially lower. The increased scrutiny maintained the pace of implementation, and Proética estimated aggregate savings of over 24 million soles on the monitored projects.²⁵

The study relates to specific municipal projects, and its findings must be interpreted within that context. Its main contribution lies in identifying a concrete mechanism through which an organisation capable of independent monitoring—with sufficient information, technical capacity and institutional backing—can alter the incentives surrounding the use of public resources and produce measurable economic benefits. In this case, the benefit extended to society as a whole through public resources that were no longer spent on cost overruns.

3.3 Argentina. Feminist organisation and the expansion of rights

The passing of Law 27,610 on Access to Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy, enacted on 30 December 2020, was the result of a political and social process that was far longer than the parliamentary debate which ultimately led to its adoption. The National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion had been launched in 2005 following years of coordination within the women's movement. Over the following years, it kept the issue on the public agenda, brought together organisations from different parts of the country and developed political, legal and health-related arguments in favour of legalisation.²⁶

From 2015 onwards, the 'Ni Una Menos' movement significantly expanded the scale of feminist mobilisation and engaged new generations. This process built on a history of previous organising, including the National (and later Plurinational) Meetings of Women and Diversities, the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion, and a culture of social mobilisation also shaped by the struggle of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. These experiences made it possible to sustain the campaign for years and to link the struggle for legal abortion to a broader discussion on democracy, autonomy and rights.²⁷

The 'green tide' brought forward that accumulated collective capacity. The green scarf, inspired by the white scarves of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, became a shared symbol that subsequently spread to other Latin American countries. The demonstrations, vigils, the participation of younger women and the coverage of the debate in the media and on popular television programmes brought abortion into the public conversation on an unprecedented scale. This process maintained a significant degree of autonomy from international agendas. Cooperation and other forms of external support contributed through research, data and exchanges, but the agenda, the forms of organisation and the mobilisation were primarily shaped by the Argentine and Latin American feminist movement.

In 2018, the Chamber of Deputies passed an initial bill to legalise abortion, which was subsequently rejected by the Senate. During that debate, a cross-party coalition of female legislators from different parties, known as 'las sororas', was formed, enabling the campaign to transcend political divisions. Mobilisation continued after the parliamentary defeat and kept the issue on the public agenda. The creation of the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity in December 2019 altered the institutional landscape against which the 2020 debate took place. The law's passage was also made possible by the work of feminist MPs, senators and civil servants who were part of that same movement. Among them, Vilma Ibarra, from the Legal and Technical Secretariat of the Presidency, played a key role in ensuring the bill could move forward.

In December 2020, Congress passed Law 27,610, which recognises the right to access voluntary termination of pregnancy up to and including the 14th week and establishes comprehensive, free coverage within the health system. Public hearings, vigils and widespread monitoring of parliamentary debates broadened public participation in relation to this decision.²⁸

This case demonstrates how an autonomous civil society can sustain a campaign for years, generate knowledge, build shared symbols, broaden its alliances and forge links with people working within institutions. This capacity helped to change the conditions under which the political system debated abortion and to broaden democratic participation around the recognition of a new right. The subsequent spread of the green scarf and the feminist movement to other countries also demonstrates how an experience built from within civil society can generate lessons and models that transcend national borders.

3.4 Colombia. Social participation and peace-building

The 2016 Final Peace Agreement granted social participation a prominent role in various aspects of its implementation. One of its most ambitious manifestations was the Territorially-Focused Development Programmes (PDETs), conceived as long-term planning instruments for 170 municipalities particularly affected by the armed conflict, poverty and institutional weakness. These territories account for approximately 36 per cent of Colombia's territory and are home to nearly seven million people.²⁹

Community participation formed part of the process of establishing territorial priorities. Social organisations, victims, rural communities, local leaders and authorities took part in forums designed to identify needs and define transformations for territories that, for decades, had maintained a particularly weak or conflictual relationship with the State. These forums made it possible to incorporate local knowledge and territorial priorities into public policy directly linked to the implementation of the Agreement.

This experience also highlights the limits of participation. 'Listening to Peace', a research project carried out jointly by the UNDP, PRIO and the University of the Andes, conducted two rounds of surveys in 2019 and 2021, gathering the views of more than 11,000 people across 72 municipalities in the 16 PET sub-regions. In 2021, for example, overall satisfaction with the implementation of the Agreement had risen from 36 per cent to 48 per cent, but the responses revealed significant differences between support for specific components of the Agreement and assessments of its actual implementation.³⁰

The participatory forums were also characterised by polarisation and power imbalances. The participating organisations and communities did not share a common position, nor did they have the same capacity to influence outcomes. Added to this were tensions between the national, regional and local levels of government, which shaped the translation of territorial priorities into public decisions. These internal and institutional differences form part of the limitations that must be taken into account when assessing the scope of participation.

Experience also shows that translating the priorities expressed by communities into decisions, investments and territorial transformations requires institutional capacity, resources and political will. When these conditions are lacking, the expectations generated by participation can lead to frustration. Evidence on the PDETs allows civil society actors to assess the contributions of collective organisation to the available information, the incorporation of territorial knowledge and the legitimacy of decisions, bearing in mind that their outcomes also depend on the capacity and willingness of public institutions to respond.³¹

The Colombian case presents a different dimension from the previous ones. The implementation of the Agreement and the peace-building process are central responsibilities of the State. In this process, organisations and communities contribute territorial knowledge, articulate demands, represent experiences that are scarcely visible to central institutions, and maintain open spaces for dialogue in territories affected by the conflict. The quality of peace-building depends, amongst other factors, on whether this social capacity finds institutions capable of listening to it and translating some of these priorities into public decisions.



"This has to work for us"

Pancha Rodríguez and Lourdes Huanca discuss the power, dignity and autonomy of civil society

This text compiles and edits a conversation held in June 2026 between Francisca "Pancha" Rodríguez and Lourdes Huanca, at Pancha Rodríguez's home on the outskirts of Castro, Chiloé. The concluding reflections link that conversation to the proposal set out in this document

One evening in June 2026, with the winter chill settling over Chiloé, Francisca "Pancha" Rodríguez and Lourdes Huanca continued their conversation after dinner. They were at Pancha's house, in an almost bucolic setting on the outskirts of Castro. The plates remained on the table, and over the following hours, the conversation turned to the organisations they had both helped to build, the causes to which they had dedicated much of their lives, and the difficulties they had encountered in sustaining them.

We call Pancha 'La Sabia' (The Wise One). She is 82 years old, the founder of ANAMURI, and was involved in the creation of CLOC-Vía Campesina, one of the world's most important peasant movements. Through this work, she helped to place food sovereignty at the centre of the international debate and to defend the role of peasant agriculture in food security, seed protection, the care of the land and the future of the planet. A proposal put forward by peasant movements three decades ago now occupies a prominent place in global discussions on food and the environment.

Lourdes is the founder and president of FENMUCARINAP, an organisation with a presence across the different regions of Peru that represents peasant women, artisan women, indigenous women, native women and women of African descent. Through this organisation, she has brought their proposals to national and international decision-making forums and has participated in discussions on women's access to land, their representation in peasant communities, family farming, the protection of territories and gender-based violence. Many of these demands have subsequently been incorporated into public policies and programmes aimed at rural women.

The histories of both organisations help us understand what a society gains when its organisations are able to operate over decades. ANAMURI and FENMUCARINAP have trained leaders, defended rights, supported their communities, safeguarded traditional knowledge and helped to bring about policy change. They have also faced harassment, attempts to discredit them and enormous difficulties in sustaining their work. Part of the conversation that evening centred on this contradiction.

Pancha spoke of the dependency that for many years characterised the relationship between the organisations and those who held the resources. When an organisation depends on a project to survive, it may end up adapting its priorities, its language and its working methods to the needs of its funder. It continues to function, although it gradually loses the power to decide on its own agenda. Some demands, she recalls, become “so demeaning” that they reflect a constant mistrust and, little by little, “they wear you down”.

On one occasion, whilst they were preparing a project, a colleague from a funding organisation told her that the proposal was of no use to her. Pancha replied: ‘It’s not meant to be of use to you. It has to be of use to us.’ That statement encapsulates a debate that runs through much of the recent history of civil society. Funding should enable an organisation to advance its cause and be accountable to the people and communities that make it up. When priorities are decided from outside, the project can end up taking over the space of the cause.

Lourdes recalled an experience with FENMUCARINAP. The organisation had drawn up a project with its leaders to work in four macro-regions of Peru. When they received considerably less than they had requested, they were asked to concentrate their activities in just one region. Lourdes called a meeting of the leaders and the assembly decided to stick with all four. They would divide the resources, organise communal meals, seek out solidarity-based accommodation and knock on other doors to secure travel tickets.

“It’s not just that they give to us; we contribute too,” she explains. Alongside the money received, the organisation mobilises the work of its members, knowledge built up over the years, community relationships and its own forms of solidarity. All of this makes it possible to broaden a project’s reach and sustain processes that continue long after the funding has ended. The decision to work in all four macro-regions also demonstrated who should retain the power to make decisions.

Both spoke of relationships that were at times humiliating. Pancha recalled checkups based on suspicion. Lourdes recounted that on one occasion they were required to have everyone attending a lunch sign the back of the invoice. They decided to return the money. Both consider accountability to be necessary, although they insist that this responsibility should be reciprocal and that the contributions made by organisations, the results they achieve and the conditions imposed on them should also be recognised.

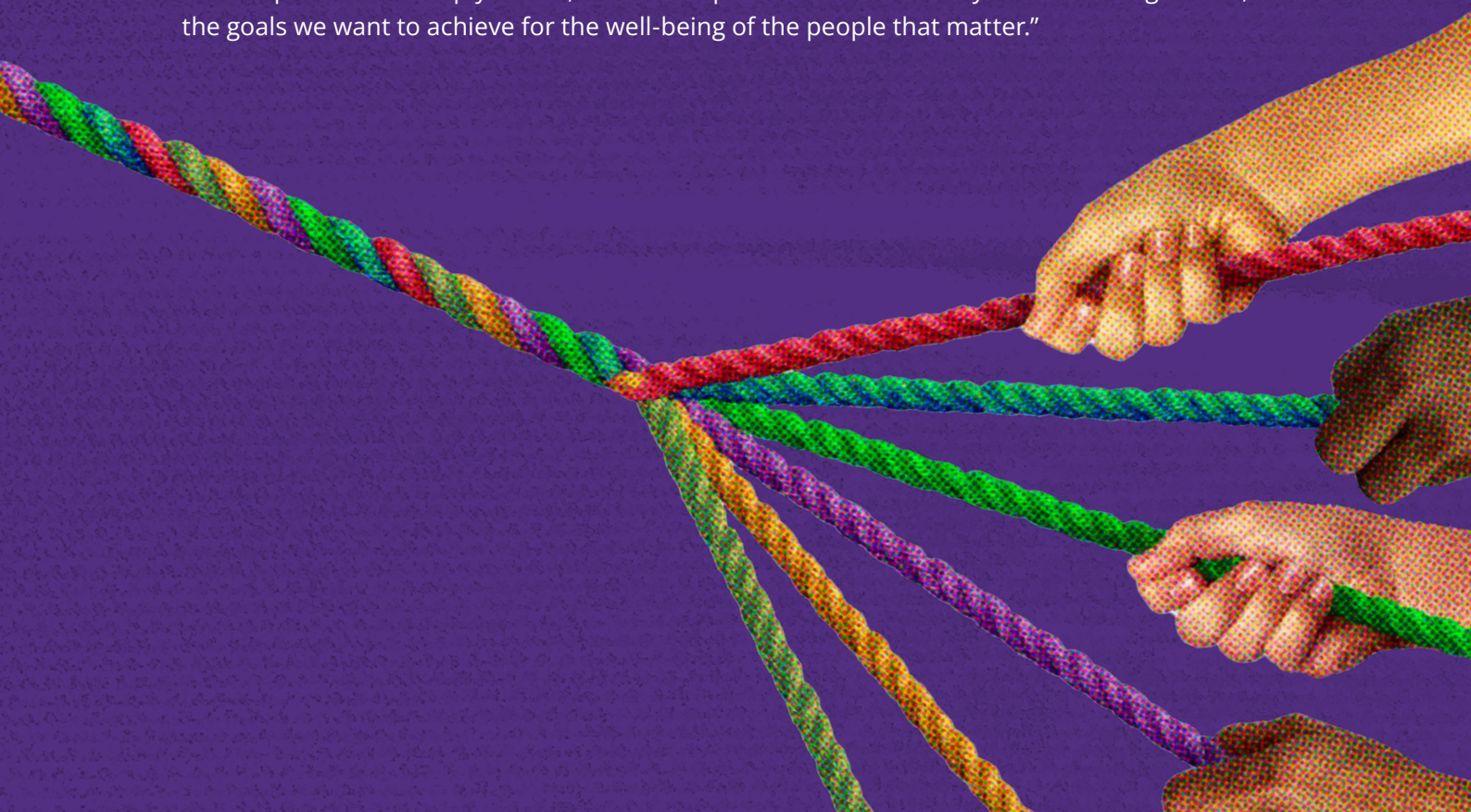
What they describe highlights some of the issues with the model that has funded much of civil society over recent decades. International cooperation has made countless advances possible and supported fundamental causes. It has also established relationships characterised by profound power imbalances. Resources, decision-making and the ability to determine what should be done have often remained in the hands of other institutions and other countries. Economic dependence has reduced organisations' autonomy and, in some cases, has ultimately silenced their voice.

The proposal to recognise civil society as a global public good must address these issues. If organisations contribute to democracies, economies, rights and environmental protection, the conditions necessary for them to exist and operate are part of a public responsibility. Their sustainability cannot be left solely to temporary calls for proposals or to the shifting priorities of those who control the resources.

States bear primary responsibility for creating these conditions. International cooperation, philanthropy and other actors can also contribute to sustaining a pluralistic and independent civil society. How this is done will be decisive. Funding mechanisms must be developed with the participation of the organisations themselves, respect their decisions and allow them to focus on the causes for which they were established.

A civil society with greater autonomy will be better able to defend rights, challenge those in power, strengthen the economies of its territories and protect natural resources. This proposal aims to empower communities to make their own decisions and put an end to the relationships of dependency and humiliation that Pancha and Lourdes described that evening.

Pancha put it more simply: "Here, it's not the person with the money who's in charge. Here, it's the goals we want to achieve for the well-being of the people that matter."



04

Material conditions for sustaining autonomy

Whilst the existence of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society has public value, its sustainability requires a broader material basis than the resources each organisation can secure on its own. For decades, international cooperation has made it possible to sustain organisations, movements and processes that would have struggled to find sufficient funding in their own countries, and it remains essential, particularly in contexts of inequality, institutional weakness or restrictions on civic space.

A significant proportion of this funding is concentrated in a few sources. In 2022 and 2023, the United States, the institutions of the European Union and Germany together accounted for 57 per cent of DAC ODA received or implemented by civil society organisations.³² The current crisis highlights the vulnerability inherent in relying on resources subject to political and budgetary decisions taken outside the countries where these organisations operate. The proposal must therefore address the expansion and diversification of civil society's material foundations, whilst preserving its autonomy.

4.1 Public accountability already takes concrete forms

There are already examples that recognise the public interest in sustaining an autonomous civil society. Various countries have established mechanisms through which the state helps to fund organisations and activities of public interest. These examples arise from different contexts and demonstrate that the sustainability of civil society can be addressed through public decisions, institutions and resources.

In Brazil, Law 13,019 of 2014 established a specific legal framework for collaborative relationships between the public administration and civil society organisations. The law recognises, amongst its founding principles, democratic public governance, social participation, the strengthening of civil society and transparency, and regulates the mechanisms through which public administrations can establish partnerships with organisations to achieve objectives in the public interest. Its implementation, however, imposes particularly demanding accountability requirements on many organisations. Although these obligations are justified by the use of public funds and some efforts have been made to simplify them, the procedures are still far from providing adequate conditions for organisations with very different capacities.³³

“In Brazil, social participation is a dimension of democracy recognised by the Constitution, alongside the representative dimension and mechanisms for direct participation. Numerous public policies involve councils in which the government, civil society organisations, social movements, trade unions and academia participate. This institutional framework helps to incorporate the voices of local communities, improve the effectiveness of public spending, strengthen the legitimacy of state action and enable social oversight.

However, risks remain, including co-optation, insufficient support to participate on an equal footing, resistance within governments and a lack of transparency. For organised civil society to establish itself as a public good, it must have adequate funding, as is the case with other institutions of democracy, and be recognised by the state authorities. In Brazil we have made great strides, but there is still a long way to go.”

Nathalie Beghin

Director of INESC, Brazil

In Chile, amongst other measures, Act 20,500 on Associations and Citizen Participation in Public Administration established the Fund for the Strengthening of Public Interest Organisations, intended to finance initiatives by organisations whose aims relate to citizens' rights, social welfare, education, health, the environment or other areas of common interest.³⁴ In Croatia, the National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society has been operating since 2003 as a public institution specialising in supporting the development and sustainability of civil society. The Republic of Korea also has specific legislation establishing mechanisms to support non-profit non-governmental organisations.³⁵

These experiences illustrate different ways of translating the recognition of civil society's public value into concrete mechanisms and confirm that autonomy depends on the rules governing its operation. Key factors include the conditions of access, the transparency of the criteria, the diversity of beneficiary organisations, the independence of decision-makers, and the possibility for organisations critical of the government to receive funding. A mechanism designed to sustain civil society can also become an instrument of dependence or political control.

4.2 India. Regulation of resources and autonomy

The relationship between funding and autonomy can be viewed from the opposite perspective. In India, the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act regulates the receipt and use of contributions from abroad by organisations and other entities. The reforms introduced in 2020 strengthened various requirements and restrictions relating to the receipt, transfer and use of these resources.³⁶

The Indian experience shows that the availability of resources is insufficient when regulatory decisions reduce the ability of certain organisations to access international sources and increase their dependence on resources permitted within the country. In contexts where civic space is restricted, the ability to receive international funding may be one of the necessary conditions for maintaining the autonomy of organisations and movements.³⁷

4.3 Diversifying sources of funding

Diversification can take very specific forms. An organisation may, for example, combine public funding obtained through a fund with independent rules, long-term international cooperation, contributions from national foundations, and contributions from its members or the community. Other organisations may generate part of their income through services, productive activities or membership fees. In Latin America, there are also examples of community philanthropy and regional funds that mobilise local resources and make them available to organisations and movements.³⁸

These combinations can reduce exposure to the withdrawal of a single source of funding and broaden the scope for decision-making, although their potential varies greatly. A community organisation working in an impoverished area is unlikely to be able to fund itself primarily through local contributions, just as an organisation that challenges the government may find its access to public funds blocked. Diversification broadens the available options and must be tailored to each context, whilst international cooperation will remain indispensable for many organisations and movements.

Autonomy depends as much on the source of resources as on the conditions attached to their use. Public resources may be subject to government priorities; international cooperation may shift priorities towards those providing the funds; philanthropy concentrates decision-making power; and generating their own income may push organisations towards activities that stray from their mission. It also matters who defines the priorities, the funding conditions and the expected outcomes.³⁹

This also necessitates a review of the quality and forms of funding. Short funding cycles, funding that is excessively project-based, difficulties in covering institutional costs, and accountability primarily directed towards funding bodies can weaken organisations' capacity to develop their own strategies and sustain long-term processes. A feminist perspective must also take into account the time, care, safety and unpaid work that sustain organisations and movements on a day-to-day basis, as well as the unequal way in which these responsibilities fall on women.⁴⁰ Predictability, flexibility and the possibility of funding institutional capacities are therefore integral to any serious discussion of sustainability and autonomy.

The above examples show that this discussion can be translated into laws regulating collaboration with the state, specialised public funds, institutions with specific support mandates, and mechanisms that combine different sources of funding. They also help to identify the risks, as the very same state that helps to sustain an autonomous civil society may use regulation and funding to impose conditions on it. Any future framework will need to preserve diverse sources and alternatives so that organisations and movements can sustain themselves should any of these sources—including funding from their own governments—be cut off.

05

Responsibilities arising from recognition

Recognising the existence of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society as a global public good means treating its sustainability as a matter of public interest. Until now, this responsibility has largely fallen on the organisations and movements themselves, which must seek the necessary resources to sustain their work.

Our proposal suggests broadening this responsibility and exploring the role that states, international cooperation, philanthropy, multilateral organisations and civil society itself should play.

The proposal leaves open the question of the institutional form that this responsibility might take. There are examples from different parts of the world relating to public funding, changes in cooperation practices, funds managed at local level and international protection mechanisms. These examples help to advance the discussion on the institutions and responsibilities that the global nature of the proposal would require.

“The way in which resources are distributed also reflects power relations. If we recognise that civil society and its networks form part of the infrastructure that underpins democracy, the reduction of inequalities and collective action, their sustainability must be taken into account in public decisions on funding. This requires stable, transparent national and international mechanisms, developed with the participation of the organisations and movements themselves. When funding conditions autonomy, restricts critical capacity or centralises decision-making, it ultimately undermines the very pluralism, innovation and participation that it is intended to strengthen”

Carlos Bedoya

President of ACÁPACÁ and coordinator of Latindadd

5.1 The responsibility of states

States have the primary responsibility for guaranteeing freedom of association, expression, assembly and participation. This responsibility may also include public policies and mechanisms that contribute to the sustainability of civil society. The experiences examined in the previous chapter show that funding, collaborative frameworks and specialised institutions can provide stable support, provided there are transparent rules, pluralistic access and safeguards for organisations critical of governments.

They also show that the regulation of funding can be used to restrict independent action. Public accountability must encompass support mechanisms and safeguards capable of preserving autonomy.⁴¹

5.2 International cooperation

International cooperation remains essential for a significant part of civil society, and particularly for organisations working in countries where there are few domestic resources or severe political restrictions. At the same time, various agencies and organisations are reviewing the way in which these resources are distributed and the power relations they generate.

The OECD, for example, recommends moving towards more flexible, predictable and multi-annual funding, and increasing the decision-making capacity of national and local organisations in partner countries receiving aid.⁴² Some cooperation initiatives are developing mechanisms that can move in this direction.⁴³ Similar processes are emerging from within international civil society itself. Pledge for Change proposes increasing core and flexible funding, sharing institutional costs more fairly, and transferring greater decision-making power to national and local organisations.⁴⁴ Networks such as NEAR have developed funds managed by organisations from the Global South, whilst the Movement for Community-Led Development (MCLD) is experimenting with mechanisms in which its own networks participate in the management of resources and the setting of priorities.⁴⁵

The Latin American Permanent Forum for the Decolonisation of International Cooperation is developing a new paradigm for international cooperation, which will be presented in Chiloé in November 2026. The recognition of civil society as a global public good is one of the core ideas of this process, linking the transformation of cooperation to the need to preserve the autonomy and sustainability of the organisations and movements that participate in public life. Among the principles of the paradigm are the redistribution of power and resources and a greater capacity for organisations and movements to set their own priorities.⁴⁶

The paradigm will explore funding alternatives, the power relations associated with them, and the conditions necessary for a form of cooperation that is more solidary, decolonial and feminist. The work carried out so far by the Forum already places these elements at the heart of its proposal. The changes currently being trialled by networks and organisations allow us to envisage funding with longer-term horizons, greater decision-making capacity and less dependent relationships. They also force us to pay attention to what happens to capacities built up over many years when cooperation priorities shift or resources rapidly disappear.

“The new cooperation relationships that our peoples are calling for inevitably require the incorporation of decolonial perspectives on life. Solidarity, mutual support, dialogue and inclusion must form the basis for rebuilding a world characterised by justice, peace, equity and sustainability.”

Henry Morales

Tzuk Kim-Pop Movement, Guatemala

5.3 Philanthropy

Philanthropy can broaden the available sources of funding and reach organisations and movements that find it difficult to access public funds or official development assistance. The Global Fund for Community Foundations, for example, works with community foundations that combine local and external resources and strengthen communities' capacity to decide how these resources are used.⁴⁷ In Africa, TrustAfrica and the Urgent Action Fund–Africa have launched Harambee ~ Ubuntu, an initiative to build a pan-African and feminist philanthropic infrastructure funded and governed from within the region itself.⁴⁸

These initiatives broaden the range of actors who can mobilise and manage resources and bring certain decisions closer to the communities and organisations that use them. The distribution of power continues to depend on who sets the priorities, decides on the allocation of resources and defines the conditions for funding. Philanthropy needs to address these issues with the same seriousness as international cooperation and public funding.

5.4 A global public institutional framework

The current international framework facilitates the participation of organisations and protects some of their rights, although it still lacks a comprehensive response to guarantee the sustainability, autonomy and pluralism of civil society as a shared public responsibility. The proposal to recognise it as a global public good seeks to address this institutional gap.

The United Nations provides the main starting point for advancing this discussion. The formal relationship between the organisation and non-governmental organisations is recognised under Article 71 of the Charter. ECOSOC has an NGO Committee which processes applications for consultative status, through which thousands of organisations participate in various forums within the system. The international human rights system also has mechanisms that can be invoked when states violate the freedoms necessary for the organisation and participation of civil society.⁴⁹

These mechanisms focus on facilitating the participation of organisations within the multilateral system and on protecting rights such as freedom of association, expression and assembly. The Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has further established that organisations have the right to seek, receive and use domestic, foreign and international resources. This recognition safeguards access to funding, whilst an international public responsibility to actively contribute to the sustainability of a pluralistic and independent civil society remains pending.⁵⁰

Recognising civil society as a global public good would enable progress towards this new level of responsibility. The United Nations could provide a forum for agreeing on common principles and commitments, periodically assessing compliance with them, and developing responses to systematic restrictions on civic space or on opportunities for independent funding. Organisations and movements from different regions would need to participate directly in the design, implementation and governance of this framework.

“In Latin America, Africa and Asia, we continue to be plagued by extractivist policies and various forms of economic and cultural exploitation. We pay more in debt interest than we receive in development cooperation, whilst interventions and conditionalities continue to limit our sovereign capacity to determine our own destinies. And yet, our peoples continue to organise themselves and build alternatives based on solidarity and the defence of dignity.

In this context, regional organisations and institutions promoting South-South cooperation take on fundamental importance. CELAC and CARICOM in Latin America and the Caribbean, together with the African Union and ASEAN, can help to shape their own agendas within their respective regions. The BRICS countries and the new development banks are also part of this process. The strengthening of these forums must go hand in hand with respect for human rights and the autonomous participation of civil society.”

Cecilia Milesi
Global Change Centre

This process will require determining which responsibilities fall within the global sphere, which should be assumed by States, and what roles regional systems can play. It will also be necessary to examine the most appropriate instruments for ensuring that commitments are honoured, including incentives, protection mechanisms, peer review systems, international funds and measures to address serious or persistent breaches. Developing such an architecture could involve the creation of new institutions, the expansion of the mandate of existing ones, or a combination of both.

Regional and sub-regional mechanisms must also be part of this discussion. CELAC brings together the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and can help to forge a regional political position. SICA has a civil society advisory committee, and CARICOM has a Civil Society Charter.⁵¹ MERCOSUR has advisory bodies and forums for participation linked to its social and human rights agenda. ECLAC can contribute evidence, technical expertise and experience in regional consultations.⁵²

The possibilities offered by each forum differ. CELAC can promote agreements between governments, whilst SICA, CARICOM and MERCOSUR allow for work with smaller groups of countries, the comparison of national policies and the implementation of pilot projects. Their participatory mechanisms are generally consultative in nature and their influence depends on the response of governments, but they offer established channels for involving organisations and movements in the discussion.

South-South cooperation must also address these issues. The G77+China has the Pérez-Guerrero Trust Fund for South-South Cooperation, whilst the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation administers funds and programmes that could incorporate the sustainability of civil society.⁵³ BRICS+ brings together countries with growing influence outside the DAC system and includes the New Development Bank, established to mobilise resources for infrastructure and sustainable development in emerging economies and developing countries.⁵⁴ The origin of resources or institutions does not guarantee more equitable relationships. Some of the governments participating in these forums impose significant restrictions on civic space. Their participation in this agenda will need to be underpinned by clear commitments to the autonomy, pluralism and rights of civil society.⁵⁵

The report proposes opening up this discussion and keeping the definition of its institutional mechanisms open. The recognition of other global goods and interests has led states to establish agreements, funds, specialised agencies and international monitoring systems. The sustainability and autonomy of civil society deserve consideration on the same scale, particularly in contexts where national institutions lack the capacity or the will to guarantee the conditions necessary for its existence.

The OECD can play a strategic role in shaping this agenda. The DAC Recommendation on the Empowerment of Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Aid provides a direct precedent, although its non-binding commitments relate primarily to the actions of its signatories as providers of development cooperation and humanitarian aid. The proposal set out in this report broadens the discussion to encompass a wider public responsibility, which also involves states, multilateral institutions and other actors.

Its expertise in cooperation policies, civil society funding, civic space and locally led development enables it to provide evidence, promote standards and progressively translate the proposal into concrete practices in international funding and cooperation. Its capacity to bring together governments, donors and organisations can help to test this approach, foster commitments amongst its members and periodically review its implementation. Progress made in this area could fuel a political discussion of universal scope within the United Nations. Both institutions can fulfil complementary roles in the development of a global public responsibility towards civil society.⁵⁶

5.5 Responsibilities of civil society

Shared responsibility also extends to the organisations and movements themselves. It is their responsibility to work actively towards their financial sustainability, to better demonstrate and communicate the value they bring to society, and to strengthen their transparency, internal governance and accountability. These responsibilities must be applied whilst taking into account the profound inequalities within civil society and the very different conditions under which its organisations operate.

Financial sustainability requires particular attention. Organisations need to reduce, as far as possible, their financial vulnerability by diversifying their resources, building up reserves, developing their own income streams consistent with their mission, and broadening their national and community support bases. In many countries, and for many organisations and movements, international cooperation will remain indispensable. Where conditions allow, it can be integrated into broader financial strategies that reduce dependence on a single institution, funding mechanism or source of funding.

There are examples that demonstrate the potential of this approach. A recent study on civil society organisations in Mexico identifies organisations that combine international cooperation with income from services, membership fees, reserves, endowment funds and local philanthropy. In Latin America, community philanthropy initiatives are exploring ways to mobilise resources and build supportive relationships within their own territories. In Africa, WACSI promotes more diverse and alternative strategies for resource mobilisation and reduced dependence on international aid.⁵⁷

Experience also reveals the limits of diversification. Income from services can divert organisations from their mission; national philanthropy can reproduce concentrations of economic power; and the constant search for new sources can shift more risks and responsibilities onto organisations that are already operating under precarious conditions. Furthermore, the possibilities for building up reserves, attracting donations or developing economic activities are highly unequal.

Organisations' efforts to expand and diversify their resources must form part of a broader, shared responsibility. The obligations of states and the commitments of international cooperation remain necessary to prevent each organisation from having to bear the burden of a structural problem on its own. Recognising civil society as a global public good entails building a system that combines the efforts of the organisations themselves with stable national and international public commitments.



06

Tensions and open questions

The recognition of civil society as a global public good raises political and institutional issues that this proposal cannot yet resolve. Its development will require addressing the relationship between pluralism and public value, the funding of autonomy, the distribution of power, the institutional spaces from which it can advance, the scope of national and international responsibilities, and the implications that might arise from this recognition. This chapter brings together the main tensions that must form part of the discussion.

6.1 Plurality and public value

The first tension stems from the very diversity of civil society. An autonomous and plural civil society includes organisations and movements with different interests, values and political agendas. This plurality is part of its value, but it prevents us from assuming that any organisation or form of collective action necessarily produces public benefits. Organisations can broaden participation, represent interests that are under-represented in institutions, hold those in power to account or defend rights, but they can also perpetuate exclusion and inequality or promote agendas incompatible with fundamental rights and democratic principles.⁵⁸

Recognising the existence of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society as a global public good requires a deeper focus on safeguarding the general conditions that make collective organisation possible, and on the criteria that would prevent this recognition from being used to determine which organisations or positions are legitimate. An overly restrictive definition could, in fact, undermine the very plurality we seek to preserve.

6.2 The challenge of funding autonomy

Sustainability requires a material basis, and each source of funding imposes specific political conditions. Public resources may be subject to government decisions; international cooperation may shift priorities towards the funding bodies; philanthropy concentrates decision-making power; and strategies for generating own revenue may push organisations towards activities that stray from their mission.⁵⁹

These differences make it difficult to identify a universal funding model. The appropriate combination will depend on each context, although the evidence reviewed points to common criteria relating to the diversity of sources, predictability, flexibility, the funding of institutional costs, and a governance structure that allows organisations to retain a genuine capacity to decide their own priorities.⁶⁰

6.3 Power and governance

The redistribution of power depends on the conditions surrounding the transfer of resources to national or local organisations. Eligibility criteria, the definition of outcomes, knowledge systems and accountability mechanisms can keep decision-making power concentrated in the hands of those providing the funding.⁶¹

This tension also affects our proposal. Recognising an international responsibility for the sustainability of civil society could mobilise new resources and protection mechanisms, as well as create institutions with the capacity to determine which organisations receive support and under what conditions. Any such development must examine where the resources are coming from, who participates in their governance, and how capacity is distributed to set priorities and make decisions.⁶²

6.4 Where should the proposal be discussed?

The choice of forums in which this proposal is discussed will have implications for its legitimacy, the organisations that will be able to participate, and the responsibilities that are ultimately agreed upon. The United Nations provides a universal framework of rights and brings together virtually all states, although civil society's participation remains limited in many of its processes.

The OECD has the information, instruments and capacity to influence the policies of a significant proportion of aid providers, but it represents a specific group of countries. Regional mechanisms can bring the discussion closer to the experiences and priorities of each region, although their capacities and openness to civil society vary greatly.

South-South cooperation forums and groupings such as BRICS+ make it possible to include countries that have had less influence in shaping the rules of international cooperation and whose political and financial importance is growing. Some of the governments participating in these forums, however, maintain severe restrictions on freedom of association, expression and assembly, limit organisations' access to resources, or reject international scrutiny of their internal situation.

A proposal centred on the autonomy of civil society would lose its coherence if its development were subject to agreements between states that exclude independent organisations, or if the principles of sovereignty and non-interference were used to prevent scrutiny of restrictions on civic space.⁵⁵

Any institutional framework should be guided by international human rights standards and democratic principles, ensure the direct and autonomous participation of organisations and movements, and establish mechanisms for reporting restrictions on civic space. These conditions must apply to the United Nations, the OECD, regional bodies and South-South cooperation forums.

Different institutions can fulfil complementary roles. The United Nations can provide the universal framework of rights; the OECD can review the policies of the main providers of development cooperation; regional organisations can facilitate agreements tailored to the realities of each region; and South-South cooperation forums can bring in new political and financial actors. The progress of the proposal will also depend on coordination between these forums and on civil society's ability to participate in them independently of governments.

6.5 Scope of global responsibility

States have legal obligations to respect and guarantee the freedoms of association, expression and assembly, and participation in public affairs. International standards also recognise the right of organisations to seek and receive domestic, foreign and international resources.⁶³

Our proposal broadens the existing framework by arguing that preserving an autonomous and pluralistic civil society should also be understood as a shared public responsibility. This dimension takes on particular relevance when a state deliberately restricts civic space or when national economic conditions make it extremely difficult to sustain independent organisations. Recognising this leaves open the question of who should assume that responsibility, through which institutions and with what resources.⁶⁴

6.6 From the proposal to its implications

The recognition of civil society as a global public good leaves the definition of its institutional model open. National public funding mechanisms, tax incentives, independent funds and international protection systems demonstrate different ways of assuming responsibility for the conditions in which civil society operates and provide a basis for discussion.⁶⁵

The debate must analyse which combinations allow for the simultaneous protection of sustainability, autonomy and pluralism; how to prevent the political appropriation of resources; and what responsibilities should fall to the various actors. It will also need to take into account the enormous differences that exist between countries and organisations. A system designed primarily for formalised and professionalised organisations could, in fact, exclude precisely those social movements, community organisations and other forms of collective action whose presence we wish to preserve.⁶⁶

07

Recommendations for taking the discussion forward

This proposal is at an early stage and needs to be tested against further evidence, experiences and perspectives. The following recommendations focus on the steps required to develop the idea, put it up for discussion and clarify its potential implications. They build on existing institutions and instruments and recognise that many organisations and networks are already developing responses to the shrinking of civic space and the funding crisis.



1. Launching a discussion at the United Nations.

A group of States, together with organisations and movements from different regions, could promote an international consultation within ECOSOC or the General Assembly. A first concrete outcome would be to request a report from the Secretary-General examining the implications of recognising an autonomous and pluralistic civil society as a global public good. OHCHR and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of association could contribute to this process within their respective mandates.⁶⁷ These initiatives should proceed in a coordinated manner and involve the direct participation of organisations and movements in defining them from the outset.



2. Fostering discussion within regional and South-South cooperation mechanisms.

CELAC could promote an initial political dialogue on the implications of recognising the sustainability of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society as a public responsibility. This process could benefit from the technical support of ECLAC and be linked to existing participatory mechanisms within SICA, CARICOM and MERCOSUR. An initial joint effort would enable a comparison of national frameworks, the identification of potential regional commitments and the selection of specific examples to develop the proposal. The Latin American discussion could then be shared with the African Union and with networks and mechanisms in other regions, as well as with the G77+China, the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation and BRICS+.



3. Explore the proposal within the OECD.

The 2026 Report on the implementation of the DAC Recommendation on the empowerment of civil society highlights the need to strengthen the strategic narrative surrounding civil society as an independent development actor. Collaboration with DAC members, civil society organisations and the OECD could provide evidence and link this discussion to the policies and practices of donor countries. A working paper and a dedicated dialogue would enable the proposal to be explored within the DAC framework.⁶⁸



4. Submit the proposal for a multi-regional civil society discussion.

Organisations, movements and networks from Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and other regions should analyse the proposal in the light of their own experiences, identify its limitations and put forward alternatives. The Permanent Forum can help to convene this process from Latin America. The consultations could link up with existing participation mechanisms in the various regions and publish their conclusions to inform national, regional, multilateral and South-South cooperation discussions.⁶⁹



5. Generate more evidence and reports on the value and sustainability of civil society.

Universities, research centres, international organisations, foundations and organisations should promote new studies on the consequences of the weakening of civil society for democracies, economies, institutions and communities. There is also a need to compare national support mechanisms, analyse their effects on autonomy and gain a better understanding of the situation of community movements and organisations that are often excluded from official statistics. A shared research agenda and an open repository of experiences would enable knowledge to be accumulated and prevent the discussion from relying on a single report.



6. Explore the proposal through national and regional experiences.

Governments, parliaments and regional bodies can examine what it would entail to recognise the sustainability of civil society as a public responsibility. Some countries already have funds, legal frameworks and institutions that offer starting points. A group of interested governments could review these mechanisms alongside civil society, introduce pilot schemes and independently evaluate their outcomes, paying particular attention to autonomy, pluralism and the distribution of resources.



7. Revise the proposal based on lessons learnt.

Within two years, the organisations and institutions participating in this process could collate the evidence, critiques and experiences gathered and draw up a new version of the proposal. This revision would make it possible to clarify which responsibilities can be met through existing mechanisms, which gaps remain, and whether it is necessary to move towards new international agreements, funds or institutions.

Final Reflection

For far too long, we have accepted as normal the fact that a large part of civil society operates under precarious conditions and with little capacity to sustain its work over time, whilst we expect it to defend rights, hold those in power to account, protect territories, support communities, provide services and keep spaces for participation open.

Its weakening can also result in the loss of jobs, knowledge and monitoring capacities that help to improve the use of public resources. Civil society is part of the democratic infrastructure, and its sustainability cannot continue to depend solely on the ability of each organisation to secure resources and ensure its own survival.

This report opens up a discussion that must continue in other forums and with many more voices. Recognising civil society as a global public good will require time, evidence and agreements that have yet to be built. In the current context, the long-term ambition is to ensure that societies retain the effective ability to organise and act collectively with autonomy, and to progressively translate that aspiration into concrete decisions. This proposal aims to contribute to that collective effort.

ANNEX 1

Conceptual foundations of the proposal

This annex sets out the four concepts underpinning the proposal and defines the sense in which they are used in the report. It clarifies what we mean by civil society, why we consider it to be part of the democratic infrastructure, how we apply the category of global public good, and how a decolonial perspective shapes the responsibilities and mechanisms that might arise from this recognition.

1. Civil society

Civil society encompasses the diverse range of ways in which people organise themselves and act collectively, independently of the state and the market, around shared interests, needs, rights, values or causes. This definition includes formally constituted organisations, social movements, community organisations, trade unions, networks and other forms of collective action.⁷⁰

Autonomy is central to this concept and is compatible with organisations' relationships with the state, the market and international cooperation. Organisations may receive public funding, participate in state policies, provide services or engage with economic actors, whilst retaining their capacity to define their own priorities and positions. Autonomy also has a material basis, as the source of resources, the conditions attached to their use and the concentration of funding can either expand or restrict the scope for decision-making.⁷¹

This definition recognises the political diversity of civil society. Organisations and movements may expand rights and participation, perpetuate exclusions, represent particular interests or promote positions incompatible with democratic principles and fundamental rights. Pluralism must coexist with the frameworks of rights, transparency and accountability necessary for democratic life.⁷²

The proposal refers to the collective capacity that enables the existence of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society. In the case of indigenous peoples, this category requires particular caution because they are peoples and collective holders of rights, with their own institutions and forms of government. Their representative organisations may participate in civil society, and such participation ensures that their collective rights and right to self-determination remain fully in force.⁷³

2. Democratic infrastructure

Democratic infrastructure comprises the institutions, organisations, relationships and capacities that enable a society to participate in public life, express diverse viewpoints, resolve conflicts, monitor the exercise of power and demand the fulfilment of rights. It includes state institutions, systems of representation, independent media, social organisations, movements, community networks and other spaces through which people can collectively engage in matters that affect them.

Civil society forms part of this democratic infrastructure because it enables interests and experiences that face difficulties in accessing institutions to be part of the public debate. It also generates knowledge, maintains links between communities and institutions, broadens opportunities for participation and helps ensure that those in power are held to account for their decisions. These functions take on particular importance when certain sectors are under-represented, institutions lose legitimacy, or the channels available for expressing demands and resolving conflicts are reduced.⁷⁴

The State retains its functions and responsibilities within the democratic infrastructure. Civil society's contribution depends to a large extent on the relationship it manages to establish with institutions capable of listening, responding and translating social demands into decisions. The experience of the PDETs in Colombia shows that participation can incorporate local knowledge and priorities, although their outcomes continue to depend on institutional capacity and the political will to address them.

The term refers to the collective capacity that enables autonomous organisation and the expression of diverse viewpoints, and recognises that organisations may hold different political positions. When that capacity is weakened, organisations, projects, knowledge, relationships of trust, monitoring mechanisms and forms of participation built up over many years may disappear. The phrase 'civil society is part of the democratic infrastructure' helps to highlight this value and understand why its sustainability has implications for society as a whole.⁷⁵

3. Global public good

Global public goods are those whose benefits or effects extend to different countries, populations and generations, and whose provision or protection raises problems of collective action that require the cooperation of several states and other actors. The definition draws on the economic tradition of public goods—characterised by non-rivalry and non-excludability—and on its subsequent development to analyse problems requiring international responses.⁷⁶

The concept has been applied to areas such as climate, peace, health, knowledge and financial stability. Its application requires criteria that enable the social or transnational benefits of a global public good to be distinguished. Recognition of this concept also leaves open decisions regarding its funding, protection and governance, as well as the legitimacy of the institutions that would act on its behalf.⁷⁷

The unit of analysis in this proposal is the existence of an autonomous and pluralistic civil society and the effective possibility for people to self-organise and act collectively and independently. Many of the activities carried out by organisations have a specific territorial scope, and some of their benefits are concentrated in specific communities or groups. The literature has examined civil society's participation in the production and governance of global public goods, and this report broadens that analysis by arguing that preserving the capacity for organisation has a public value in itself.⁷⁸

The concepts of democratic infrastructure and global public good fulfil different functions within the argument. The former helps to explain civil society's contribution to the functioning of a society, whilst the latter enables an analysis of the scope of some of its benefits and the responsibilities that may arise when national protection proves insufficient. The global nature of the proposal stems from the fact that part of the value produced transcends borders and that the protection of an autonomous civil society may require international mechanisms when the state itself restricts civic space or limits access to independent resources.

We thus use the category of global public good in a political and institutional sense informed by its economic tradition. The concept allows us to open a discussion on shared responsibilities without predetermining a single funding or governance mechanism. The argument developed in Chapter 2 examines in greater depth the evidence underpinning this application and distinguishes between existing legal obligations and the new public responsibility that the report proposes to put forward for debate.

4. A decolonial perspective on cooperation

The notion of coloniality enables us to analyse how certain hierarchies of power, knowledge and representation established during colonialism can persist after its formal demise. From a Latin American perspective, this approach has shown that these relationships influence which forms of knowledge are recognised, who has the authority to define problems, and which actors occupy central or subordinate positions within institutions.⁷⁹

Applied to international cooperation, this perspective draws attention to the distribution of power within the system. A significant proportion of resources continues to be controlled by governments, foundations and international organisations located outside the countries where the activities take place. Those providing the funds often retain considerable influence over priorities, eligibility criteria, expected outcomes and forms of accountability. Hierarchies also persist which accord greater legitimacy to technical knowledge produced in certain countries and institutions than to the knowledge developed by organisations, communities and movements within their own territories.⁸⁰

In this report, decolonial cooperation is defined as cooperation that works consciously and consistently to redistribute power, resources and decision-making capacity, to recognise diverse forms of knowledge, and to preserve the autonomy of those involved. This implies that organisations and communities are able to have a say in defining priorities, allocating budgets, producing knowledge and evaluating outcomes. It also requires more reciprocal accountability relationships, in which funders explain their decisions and are held to account for their effects by the societies and organisations with which they work.⁸¹ The decolonisation of cooperation is understood here as an open-ended process subject to review. The transfer of resources, the language of localisation and the inclusion of representatives from national organisations are partial steps, the scope of which depends on the changes they bring about in power relations. More equitable relations also require addressing the inequalities of gender, class, ethnic origin, territory, language and international access that permeate civil society and determine who participates and who has the capacity to influence decisions.

This perspective has direct implications for the proposal. An international framework designed to support civil society could reproduce existing hierarchies if its priorities and resources were controlled by donor states, international organisations or a small group of organisations. Its design would need to incorporate, from the outset, organisations, movements and communities from different regions, including those with limited administrative capacity or international access. Governance, knowledge production and the distribution of resources are part of the problem that the proposal seeks to address. The Latin American origin of this reflection draws on experiences and knowledge developed in a region shaped by historical relations of dependency and offers a situated perspective. The proposal must engage with debates and experiences from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and other regions, and remain open to their critiques. The decolonial approach guides both the content of the proposal and the process through which it must continue to be developed.

ANNEX 2

Organisations that spearheaded the initial discussion on civil society as a public good in Colombia

This annex lists the organisations that took part in the Initiative for the Sustainability of Civil Society Organisations in Colombia, where the initial discussion that gave rise to this proposal was formulated. The document *The Sustainability of Civil Society Organisations in Colombia: A Public and Democratic Issue*, published in May 2026, details the process undertaken by the initiative. The following list is reproduced from that document to acknowledge the collective nature of that discussion and to preserve the record of the process, which was subsequently taken up and developed by the Permanent Forum.

CINEP, Comfama, Corporación Casa de la Mujer, Corporación Conciudadanía, Corporación Educativa Combos, Corporación Mujeres que Crean, Corporación Otraparte, Corporación Podion, Corporación Región, Corporación Vamos Mujer, Corporación Viva la Ciudadanía, Dejusticia, Federación Antioqueña de ONG, Fondo Noruego para los derechos humanos, Foro Nacional por Colombia, Foro Sur-Occidente, Fundación Bien Humano, Fundación Casa de las Estrategias, Fundación Corona, Fundación Sura, Innpactia, Instituto Popular de Capacitación-IPC, Makaia, Misereor, Open Society Foundations, Terre des Hommes Suisse, Transparencia por Colombia, Planeta Paz.

The names of the organisations are reproduced as they appear in the original document. Their inclusion acknowledges their participation in that process and does not necessarily imply their endorsement of all the conclusions and recommendations of this report.

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The views and analysis presented in this report reflect the position of the Latin American Permanent Forum for the Decolonisation of International Cooperation. The author is solely responsible for the content. Affiliations are stated for identification purposes only. Participation in the discussions that contributed to the report’s preparation, as well as inclusion in the acknowledgements, does not necessarily imply individual or institutional endorsement of all its conclusions and recommendations.

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