



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CIVIL SOCIETY AS A GLOBAL PUBLIC GOOD

People's ability to organise themselves and act collectively and autonomously constitutes a public value that societies need to preserve. This is the argument put forward in this publication: ***Civil Society as a Global Public Good***. Produced within the framework of the Permanent Latin American Forum for the Decolonisation of International Cooperation, it stems from a contradiction: organisations and movements are expected to defend rights and support communities, whilst it is accepted that they carry out these functions under precarious conditions. In response to this, we propose understanding their sustainability as a shared public responsibility, which primarily involves states, as well as international cooperation, philanthropy, and regional and multilateral institutions.

Our proposal stems from a collective reflection that began in Colombia and is set against a backdrop of democratic decline, polarisation and the contraction of 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. In this report, we argue that the weakening of civil society has consequences that go beyond the closure of organisations or the interruption of projects. When these spaces disappear, knowledge, relationships of trust, local presence and capacities for participation built up over decades may be lost. This loss affects society as a whole and limits its ability to defend rights, resolve common problems and hold those in power to account.

As a central argument, we maintain that **an autonomous and pluralistic civil society forms part of the infrastructure that underpins democracy**. Its contribution includes representing interests that are under-represented in institutions, generating knowledge, monitoring public resources and developing alternatives. Some of these contributions yield benefits that transcend borders and generations, such as the protection of ecosystems, the expansion of rights or the circulation of social learning. Furthermore, its protection may require international mechanisms when states themselves restrict freedoms or access to resources. Based on these two dimensions, **the Forum proposes that civil society be recognised as a global public good**. This is a political and institutional proposal open to debate, the aim of which is to preserve the capacity for autonomous and pluralistic organisation, without assuming that all organisations necessarily produce public benefits.

The experiences analysed from different civil society contexts in Colombia, Peru and Argentina reveal how this value is expressed in practice. These experiences support a cross-cutting conclusion: autonomy requires sustainable material conditions. We therefore propose



expanding and diversifying funding sources and moving towards predictable, flexible and multi-annual support that enables the sustainment of institutional capacities and long-term processes. From a feminist perspective, this also requires recognising the care, time, security and unpaid labour that make collective action possible. From a decolonial perspective, it requires redistributing the power to decide on priorities, resources and the evaluation of outcomes.

Organisations must be able to respond to their communities and uphold their causes without their agenda being subordinated to the preferences of their funders.

This understanding of civil society raises responsibilities and tensions that we leave open for discussion in this document. States must guarantee freedoms and create supportive conditions, but public funding can become an instrument of control. Development cooperation and philanthropy can expand the scope for action whilst, at the same time, perpetuating dependencies. Even generating their own income can divert organisations from their mission. For this reason, we do not propose a single funding model. The challenge lies in combining resources and safeguards that simultaneously protect sustainability, autonomy and pluralism, whilst ensuring transparency and accountability. The organisations themselves have responsibilities in these areas, although their capabilities vary greatly and they cannot individually take on the task of resolving a structural problem.

Our collective proposal emphasises the need to involve community movements and organisations from the outset, including those with limited administrative capacity or access to international forums. It also remains to be defined how national and international responsibilities would be allocated and who would participate in the governance of the support mechanisms. A new architecture could end up replicating the very hierarchies it seeks to transform if its decision-making were concentrated in the hands of governments, funders or large organisations. The discussion must be grounded in human rights and democratic principles, preserving diversity and ensuring that the recognition of public value does not allow voices to be selected or excluded on the basis of their proximity to power.

To move forward, the Forum proposes the following recommendations:

1. **Launch 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 to request a report from the Secretary-General examining the implications of recognising an autonomous and pluralistic civil society as a global public good.
2. **Foster 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.



3. **Explore the proposal within the OECD.** The 2026 Report on the implementation of the DAC Recommendation 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.
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 propose alternatives. The Permanent Forum can help to convene this process from Latin America.
5. **Generate further evidence 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.
6. **Explore the proposal through national and regional experiences.** 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. Such a 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 agreements, funds or international institutions.

We call for an end to the normalisation of the precariousness of a capacity that is essential to democratic life. Our aim with this report is for **societies to retain the effective ability to organise themselves, express diverse views and transform their living conditions autonomously.** Making this possible requires building a collective and enduring sense of responsibility, progressively translated into policies, resources and institutions that uphold that freedom.