

Exploring Structural Civil Society Engagement in UN Counterterrorism Efforts

Landscape | Shrinking Civic Space

Engagement and dialogue between civil society, governments, and multilateral bodies like the United Nations is a prerequisite to the successful development, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of violence prevention efforts. In UN counterterrorism efforts, civil society engagement at all stages of the policy and programming cycle is essential to ensure those policies and programs reflect local needs and the perspectives of individuals involved in and impacted by them.

Civil society actors are often better placed, more credible, and more knowledgeable than governmental and intergovernmental actors when it comes to finding community-driven solutions. They often have access to

local groups and leaders that governments and the United Nations do not, especially in fragile states and (post-) conflict zones. Consequently, civil society involvement is fundamental to addressing the violence perpetrated by terrorists as well as by governments in the name of counterterrorism.

Civil society has been adversely impacted by counterterrorism laws and policies. Globally, civic space has been shrinking steadily over the last decade, alongside a deterioration of other rights such as freedom of expression and association; the CIVICUS monitor indicates that only 3.2 percent of the world's population now lives in countries with open civic space.

Scoping Project Summary | Exploring Obstacles and Opportunities

The Scoping Project for Independent Civil Society-UN Counterterrorism Engagement convenes civil society actors engaged in or affected by measures to prevent and counter terrorism. Through a comprehensive consultation process, the Global Center on Cooperative Security and Rights & Security International (a member of the Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Counterterrorism) will facilitate civil society exchanges and discussions on the need and potential avenues for, viability of, and interest in, independent engagement with relevant UN bodies and mechanisms, including the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact.

2023	FEB - JUL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Regional consultation workshops: February MENA and Europe April Eastern and Southern Africa June Western Africa June Latin America July South and Southeast Asia● Virtual consultations● Survey● Ongoing engagement with Advisory Council, United Nations, and other stakeholders
	JUL - OCT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Scoping report finalization● Validation workshop● Launch event

The civil society consultations offer unique opportunities to exploring relevant and sustainable avenues of engagement while promoting and protecting human rights, building upon the needs of vulnerable communities and groups that are marginalized from decision-making processes. The project is aided by a diverse Advisory Committee of civil society representatives, which provides strategic input on the consultation and scoping process. The project will conclude with the release of a report that outlines the findings of the consultations and opportunities for the regularization and diversification of civil society engagement with the UN counterterrorism architecture. The report will include recommendations and sustainability strategies to realize these opportunities.



How Governments Can Support

Engagement with the UN counterterrorism architecture carries with it substantial dangers to civil society, including the risk of reprisals and targeted repression. In his 2022 report on reprisals against those seeking to cooperate or having cooperated with the United Nations, the Secretary-General found that of the nearly 350 individual cases of intimidation and reprisals, 60% concerned women victims and human rights defenders. The United Nations must ensure adequate preconditions for engagement are in place for civil society to partner safely. A set of recommendations put forward in August 2022 by over 90 civil society organizations from 43 countries, convened by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, is clear: “The United Nations must hold itself to greater levels of accountability to civil society, many of whom assume great risk, including threats of reprisal, to share their expertise and recommendations.” This is a necessary precondition to support more institutionalized civil society engagement with the United Nations.

In general, governments should:

1. Ensure civic space is protected and diverse civil society engagement promoted in multilateral counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism efforts, including UN meetings, policies, and programs
2. Invest in the UN’s human rights bodies and special procedures to ensure all UN counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts are human rights compliant, and the United Nations has enough dedicated capacity and resources to fulfill its responsibilities
3. Practice what they preach in their own domestic policies, actions, programming, and funding
4. Hold the United Nations accountable to do the same and to actively address the misuse and abuse of counterterrorism measures and intimidation and reprisals for cooperation with the United Nations

To support the outcomes of the Scoping Project, governments can:

1. Build a diverse coalition of governments and senior officials willing to invest political capital to support these efforts, including by promoting them during the eighth review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the UN Counter-Terrorism Week in June 2023, and the High-Level General Debate of the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2023
2. Identify and earmark funding to support the outcomes and follow-on activities of the Scoping Project
3. Ensure that the UN’s counterterrorism architecture is prepared to engage with the outcomes of this project and more broadly brings its civil society engagement in line with UN-wide standards, including the UN Guidance Note on the Protection and Promotion of Civic Space

Project Partners

Global Center on Cooperative Security is an independent nonprofit organization that works towards a more just and secure world. It has been a leading voice, partner, and implementer of global counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism efforts, with a specific emphasis on promoting human rights, safeguarding civic space, meaningfully engaging nongovernmental actors, and advancing rule-of-law based approaches to counterterrorism.

Rights & Security International works to halt human rights abuses committed in the name of national security. The organization documents inequalities – including religious, racial, and gender biases – in national security policies and programs, promotes justice and transparency, and ensures that the voices of communities facing discrimination are heard.

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