

HEKS/EPER thematic factsheet 2023



# Strengthening Civil Society And Civic Space

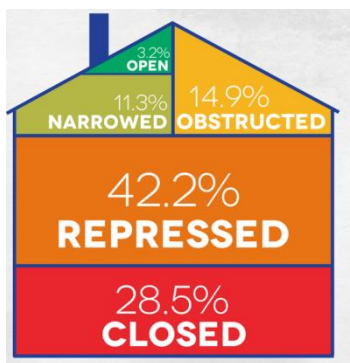
HEKS/EPER Global Cooperation's strategy, promising practices, achievements and perspectives on how to protect and expand an enabling environment for civil society actors fostering participation and ownership.

Zürich/Lausanne/Bern, May 2023

## Why Strengthening Civil Society Matters

### Global Challenges - context

In 2022, many developments in our partner countries have constrained the ability of civil society to operate. For instance, some governments have proposed new laws that view NGOs as foreign agents, like in Georgia, where civil society protests made the ruling party withdraw a law that shrinks the space of CSOs. Or laws shall prohibit NGOs from working with certain groups in civil society, as in Myanmar. In addition, some of our partners and human rights organisations have been designated as terrorist organisations. Any collaboration with them could be considered terrorism under the law, as in Israel. These are just a few examples of how the space and opportunities for NGOs to carry out their work should be improved. Furthermore, Covid-19 restrictions have been used as an excuse to curtail civil society rights in 2022, along with alleged terrorism and anti-money laundering initiatives.



Civicus Civic Space Monitor, based on World Bank Data 2021.

Today only 3.2 % of the world's population lives in countries with an open civil society. In contrast, two-thirds live in authoritarian states or dictatorships<sup>1</sup> with repression or being completely closed to civil action. Major emerging economies such as China and India have provided blueprints for 'top-down' approaches to economic development that fail to take the people on board and display little regard for the environment. In some cases, legitimating norms have shifted from liberal and human rights values to values emphasising economic progress and sovereignty or even towards attitudes of neoliberalism, characterised by a high tolerance for rapacious economic investment in the pursuit of profit.

The landscape of civic space has undergone significant changes in recent years, affecting who can participate and how. While it has been narrowing for actors in the liberal human rights tradition, it has expanded for right-wing, extremist, and conservative groups. The advent of digital space has further transformed civic space, providing opportunities for populist movements to mobilise. Digitalisation presents both opportunities and challenges. While modern communication can facilitate better information sharing and mobilisation within civil society, it is also be misused to spread misinformation, fuel smear campaigns and promote hate crimes. Last, but not least, it is used by governments to control its people as a tool for surveillance.

The war in Ukraine demonstrates the importance of democratic structures and vibrant civil society. On the one hand, the Russian civil society, which has been massively suppressed for decades, is weak. During times of war, with massive propaganda and (threats of) violence by the autocratic regime against civilian peace activists, it can hardly contribute to peace promotion and independent, critical information for the population. However, internal pressure from independent media and a critical Russian civil society would be necessary to push the government to end the war. On the other hand, an active

#### Development needs a strong civil society – key findings

- The shrinking civil society space hinders social and economic development and therefore the achievements of Agenda 2030's SDGs.
- Restrictions on civic space prevent civil society organizations (CSO) and other civil actors from engaging in policy formulation, monitoring, raising awareness, championing the voices of vulnerable groups, and from building partnerships.
- When civic space is limited, development risks to exclude voices and to increase social distrust. Ultimately, this increases inequalities and makes development less sustainable.
- Civic space is essential to provide transparent and verifiable information. If fact-based data is absent due to shrinking space, trust in official data and political performance will decrease.
- Weakening of civil society may increase a permissive culture of corruption without sufficient checks and balances. This erodes trust in governance and triggers significant economic, social and political crises.
- Over-emphasis on prestigious huge infrastructure projects and unregulated economic growth competes with equality and inclusion and therefore puts the Agenda 2030's main pledge of 'leaving no one behind' at risk.

<sup>1</sup> Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft, Freiheitsrechte unter Druck Schwerpunkt Digitalisierung Zahlen, Analysen, Interviews Weltweit. Brot für die Welt, Civius, 2022

Ukrainian civil society has already organised itself in the Orange Revolution of 2004 and on the Maidan in 2014. This has made civil society resilient. This may not end the cruel war, but it enables the Ukrainian civil society to cooperate within the country and with European allies, resist civilly, and support the Ukrainian population during the war.

Russia is not the only country in which a suppressed or closed civil society prepares the ground for a society that can hardly resist the contempt for humanity, human rights violations, and possible warmongering of the ruling elite. Therefore, democratic governments and NGOs like HEKS/EPER must actively advocate for an open and vibrant civil society worldwide.

Even though the trend is, unfortunately, clearly moving in a direction where the civil society space is becoming narrower and narrower globally, there are always windows of opportunity and improvements. A good example is Honduras, where new hopes are just beginning to emerge (see the case study below).

### **How HEKS/EPER responds – strategy**

HEKS firmly believes, as supported by the study commissioned with our partners from ACT Alliance (see below), that a proactive and open civil society founded on democratic values and the rule of law is essential for the development towards justice. Thus, HEKS supports measures aimed at strengthening civil society's freedom of assembly, as well as the ability to organise, express themselves, and protest peacefully.

HEKS/EPER takes different approaches to promote civil society action depending on the context but recognises the importance of not separating service delivery from the element of rights-based advocacy, as all of the above functions (see box) will be needed in the long term. HEKS/EPER distinguishes between two perspectives on strengthening civil society: as a means to achieve specific goals in line with our vision, such as access to land and resources or overcoming discrimination, and as a development actor in its own right. A free and open civil society is a means to achieve other goals and a value in itself.

At the local level, HEKS/EPER strengthens civil society by bringing together different civil society groups and providing opportunities for networking and strengthening advocacy. Local partners are supported in producing good analyses and bringing facts about human rights violations to the relevant national and international bodies. HEKS/EPER's engagement includes facilitation within and between civil society networks and creating missing links to increase strength at the national level and international lobbying. HEKS/EPER carries local representatives and voices into national and/or international policy development to ensure that partner organisations and supported alliances are legitimate advocates working in a rights-based and non-violent manner. Links to national and international human rights monitoring bodies or international accompaniment are means to protect courageous civil society representatives as human rights defenders and fundamental civic rights.

Strengthening civil and civil society space is a cross-cutting issue, thus, mandatory for all programs. The guidance in the perspectives sections outlines the strategy and HEKS commitments in more detail.

## **Promising Practices Worldwide**

### **Honduras – cooperation and protection of civil society actors**

In 2022, Honduras began with the inauguration of Xiomara Castro as President of the Republic and the installation of a new National Congress, which remains in a political crisis due to the election of a new board of directors, keeping the different branches of the legislative body in constant confrontation when making decisions on matters of interest. In terms of human rights, some improvements were observed in 2022. However, the fact remains that human rights defenders and vulnerable groups continue to face violations as the structure of the justice and security sectors and other institutions remains intact. There is evidence that civil society organisations' scope of action and the exercise of rights have improved. An example is that despite multiple mobilisations throughout



30 November 2022: Accompanying the Municipal Committee in defence of the commons of Guapinol to a press conference in the centre of Tegucigalpa.

the country, including the abuse of the right to social protest by certain organised sectors, security forces suppressed no public demonstration, and there is no knowledge of restrictions or threats to civil society organisations working to defend human rights. The demilitarisation of society began with the military's return to their barracks, which were tasked with protecting and preserving natural resources. Meanwhile, the civilian police regained their place. They assumed their primary responsibility to ensure citizens' security, with timely support from the military police in the fight against drug trafficking, organised crime, extortion, hired assassins, and other pathologies that continue to affect Honduran society.

With its human rights programme co-financed by the European Union, HEKS/EPER aims to foster the collaboration of several local, national and international institutions working to protect human rights on different levels. Facilitating exchange between communities and social movements leads to coordinated and mutually agreed actions. The intention is to strengthen the impact of activities done separately until now.

Achievements: There were some significant achievements in the field of human rights in 2022. The project was expanded to 10 departments of the country, focusing on disadvantaged and discriminated groups such as people with disabilities, LGTBIQ++, indigenous peoples, and women. Approximately 128 grassroots organisations, networks, and social movements, as well as 7,289 people (3,134 women and 4,155 men), including human rights defenders, local leaders, journalists, and social communicators, as well as members of the LGTBIQ++ community and disabled persons, directly benefited from the actions of ProdeHonduras and PRODEHSUR.

During the reporting period, 272 human rights defenders (102 women and 170 men) were also accompanied or legally represented, mainly organised farmers who were criminalised for their fight for land rights, journalists, and social communicators. In addition, 110 actions of international physical accompaniment were developed for more than 2,490 human rights defenders in intervention areas, helping to deter threats and harm to them. Furthermore, 532 people received psychosocial collective and individual therapy to stabilise their emotional and physical balance and strengthen the cognitive and behavioural capacity of human rights defenders who have violated their rights.

During the year, the ProdeHonduras project, through the partner International Platform Against Impunity (PICl), supported the systematisation of updated EPU, a report entitled "Systematisation of the process of drafting joint alternative EPU reports" of the Coalition Against Impunity for the 3rd Cycle and a list of recommendations made to the State of Honduras during the 3rd UPR Cycle, completed in March 2022, will be useful for coordinated follow-up.

Based on the immediate needs of the target population, ProdeHonduras identified 18 EPU recommendations that are of interest for follow-up, grouped into five thematic areas: Impunity, Human Rights Defenders, Social Protest, Enforced Disappearance and Regulations. These will be worked on permanently within the Coalition Against Impunity.

## Cambodia: Improved relationships between government and civil society

After the CNRP, the opposition party was banned from political activity, the CPP, the government party, won the 2018 national elections and formed a one-party government. Human rights NGOs have reported worsening conditions for their operations since 2017. Local government authorities in some areas have made it difficult for them to carry out their work, including refusing to allow meetings and workshops and ordering the police to keep venues under surveillance. Citizen participation in public meetings has also declined. Human rights defenders protecting peasants' land and resource rights face intimidation, harassment, and criminalisation.<sup>2</sup> The UN Human Rights Committee noted serious restrictions on political participation, speech, association, and assembly freedoms. Cooperation between NGOs and ministries at the national level has also been weakened over the last five years, particularly with the Ministry of Lands. The technical working group that allowed civil society to contribute its views has been disbanded, weakening NGO coordination. This lack of good cooperation between NGOs and between like-minded groups defending their rights leads to a fragmented and weak voice vis-à-vis the government. It hinders access to policy development processes and allows violations to be ignored.



Community members discussing land and water rights.

By publicly disseminating information to citizens (through social media and community mobilisers), our partners SK and BCV empower communities to exercise their rights, including access to natural resources (land, water, soil) and demand them. This includes connecting and strengthening existing civil society networks and holding public officials accountable. Monitoring committees comprised of civil society representatives and authorities observe the law's implementation and report any conflicts to relevant mediation bodies, such as the provincial advisory group established by our partners and consisting of civil society and government representatives. Furthermore, the

project mobilises communities to participate in local planning processes to build trust between citizens and authorities through constructive dialogue.

The project closely follows the **degree of cooperation** of specific relationships between government duty-bearers and civil society. There has been some progress although some goals still need to be fully achieved, positive developments were observed in the main areas of cooperation.

As for the regularity of exchanges between government representatives and civil society, and transparency, the objectives still needed to be met. However, rights holders reported that duty bearers exchanged information, responded promptly, and took action to address various citizen concerns. On the other hand, institutionalisation exceeded the set goal, as rights holders actively involved local authorities and worked with them to solve problems together.

Although equality and accountability lagged behind the target, duty bearers confirmed that rights holders better understood the role of civil society, their right to participate, and their duties after participating in the project activities. This is a positive sign of improved awareness and understanding among rights holders and duty-bearers.

Regarding respect and trust, rights holders reported that local authorities respected their ideas, particularly during the implementation of social accountability framework (ISAF)-supported activities. This is an encouraging development that can promote mutual respect and trust between local government and civil society. In addition, rights holders reported that local authorities were open-minded and had included trained community mobilisers (CAFs) in official community structures, where they can permanently represent the voice of civil society. This is a significant step in recognising the important role that CAFs play in resolving land disputes and other community problems. Apart from progress in cooperation between duty bearers and rights holders, community participation

<sup>2</sup> Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, OMCT and FIDH, "We are not afraid". *Land Rights Defenders: Attacked for Confronting Unbridled Development*, Annual Report 2014, [https://www.omct.org/files/2014/12/22918/obs\\_2014\\_uk\\_web2.pdf](https://www.omct.org/files/2014/12/22918/obs_2014_uk_web2.pdf)

in decision-making in Kampong Chhnang, Pursat, and Tbong Khmum has also slightly increased. 72.60% of rights holders confirmed that they actively participated in the meetings and contributed their ideas. In comparison, 57.60% of them stated that they advocated for their ideas to be considered by other meeting participants. These positive developments demonstrate that both parties are determined to work towards common goals. Overall, the progress in cooperation between rights holders and duty bearers when the civil society space is shrinking shows that constructive cooperation at the local level can make a difference, especially in less sensitive cases. However, the idea is that this local-level cooperation can become an example of best practices and contribute to understanding the important role and function of civil societies in Cambodia, which can also be transferred to higher political levels.

## Protecting civil society space in Israel and Palestine

In 2022, the civic space in Israel/Palestine faced serious challenges, mainly due to the Israeli government's finalisation of the designation process of six Palestinian CSOs. The Israeli army raided and closed the offices of these organisations in August 2022, officially making their operations illegal from the Israeli occupation perspective. This severely limited the space for civil society to operate, advocate for their constituencies, and contribute to democratic processes.

In contrast, bearing in mind all the administrative and security challenges of civil society in Gaza, civil society organisations in Gaza enjoyed close cooperation with certain ministries of the de-facto government of Hamas on certain topics. Reports from HEKS/EPER partners indicate that they established close relations and influence over ministries' service provision and policy-making on behalf of their constituencies, even managing to sign an MoU with some ministries."

However, the situation in Israel was different, with a major shift in governments during 2022, resulting in a centre-left government losing its power in mid-year and being replaced by an elected right-wing government in November 2022. This significantly impacted the voice of HEKS's Israeli partners, their ability to access decision-makers and the space they had previously enjoyed, putting them at greater risk of losing funding and potential influence.

To address these challenges, HEKS operated its Open Forum Civil Society safe-space project to enable its civil society partners to strategise and mitigate their risks in Israel and Palestine by exchanging knowledge and information and devising potential policy messages and campaigns regarding the loss of civic voice and space with a focus on East Jerusalem.

HEKS supported civil society in two ways: funding projects that align with their country program's outputs, such as supporting the anticipatory and absorptive capacities of communities and voicing alternatives to the mainstream public discourse in both societies and implementing the Open Forum Project directly to allow space for civil society engagement.

**Achievements:** Through implementing three Open Forum meetings, safe space and trust between Israeli and Palestinian CSOs deepened, allowing an exchange on risks, threats, and operational priorities that would not have happened otherwise. Israeli CSOs initiated and engaged in discussions about the designation of Palestinian CSOs, and campaign plans in East Jerusalem involved Gazan and Jewish Israeli CSOs who were not directly involved in East Jerusalem.

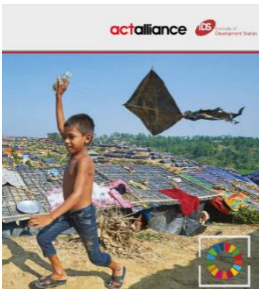
Based on the funding of projects, an increase in adaptive and absorptive capacities was witnessed in all communities and partner CSOs. However, there needed to be more progress in anticipatory and transformative capacities. The Open Forum project provided an opportunity to address these gaps by fostering learning, sharing experiences, and developing joint strategies to enhance the capacities of civil society in Israel and Palestine.

Overall, the challenges faced by civil society in the region require continued engagement and support to ensure that the voices of all constituencies are heard and their rights are respected. HEKS/EPER remains committed to supporting civil society in Israel and Palestine and promoting the space for civic voice and participation in democratic processes.

## Strengthening civil society and civic space globally

Since 2009, HEKS/EPER and other members of the 'Act Alliance Community of Practise on Rights and Development' have been exploring shrinking civil society space. The first study in 2011<sup>3</sup> revealed that the phenomena's common pattern usually starts with ridiculing and delegitimisation, cutting off finance opportunities, criminalisation, and finally, threatening and physical violence, including murder. Another study in 2015<sup>3</sup> measured the space for civil society. It looked at how civil society responded to increasing restrictions and concluded with good practice recommendations for civil society, states, and multilateral institutions. The latest study of Act Alliance in 2019, drawing on 12 desk studies and four country case studies, provides evidence of the role and function of civil society in achieving the SDGs. The study provides evidence that: **'development without civil society is bound to fail'**. Furthermore, it suggests enhancing and protecting civil society space if the international community wants to take the SDGs and the 'leaving no one behind' agenda seriously. Accordingly, HEKS/EPER and its act alliance partners have been using the newly generated evidence to influence the development discourse and motivate the donor community to take action to keep civil society on board in implementing the sustainable development agenda. Several workshops and plenary sessions have discussed examples of how civil society concretely contributes to specific development goals and how shrinking space has halted or reversed achievement (see box).

### The success of joint advocacy



Together with other international organisations that advocate for the civil society space, various institutions such as the OECD and UN organisations now take the issue of "shrinking space" seriously and have developed guidelines and recommendations for the international community, development experts, and donors to protect and strengthen civil society space in international development. Furthermore, the international donor community, including HEKS/EPER, entered a serious dialogue on the localisation and decolonisation of aid and the triple nexus. All three concepts underscore the importance of a vibrant and independent civil society. In 2021, the OECD DAC Recommendations on

Enabling Civil Society were adopted (see details below), building a good and comprehensive guiding framework for bilateral donors as well as for NGOs. The focus now is on monitoring the implementation of the OECD DAC recommendations and using them as a benchmark to hold donors accountable for turning promises into action. To achieve this, we propose multi-stakeholder meetings in countries to explore how national-level collaboration can be achieved to make the recommendations a practical reality, even if or especially because the trend from many governments is moving in a different direction.

## Achievements & Perspectives

HEKS/EPER has been active towards implementing strengthening civil society space in its development cooperation efforts as well as in Humanitarian aid. Starting point to promote an inclusive, active and vibrant civil society is to take rights-holders from the ground seriously and empower them to take the lead in designing and implementing programmes.

**In 2022** – in Niger, for example, involving the rights-holders in project design has led to more sustainable interventions. In Ukraine, for example, it has been possible to integrate strengthening civic space into Humanitarian Aid work with the survivor community-led response that resulted in a more responsive and empowering approach to addressing humanitarian needs.

Empowering right-holders is key to increasing civic engagement in many countries. This starts with the ability to create evidence for the arguments to claim rights. Efforts in Ethiopia have led to a promising institutional dialogue. The work in Bangladesh has shown similar results, but a need for improvement in strengthening the capacity for evidence-based advocacy has also been identified.

<sup>3</sup> Act Alliance (2011); Shrinking political space of civil society action. Geneva. Van der Borgh and Terwindt.



Youth peace camps played in the South Caucasus programme a key role in promoting peaceful collaboration and minority rights.

To promote ethnic minority rights and gender mainstreaming in Georgia, training has been organised for representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists and local authorities. These training sessions aimed towards developing knowledge in various fields, including ethnic minorities' rights, non-discrimination, advocacy campaigns, gender mainstreaming, and policy assessment. The sessions also focus on developing gender-sensitive and minority-needs-oriented inclusive budgeting processes. As part of the training, multi-stakeholder municipal working meetings and regional workshops were held with the participation of CSOs, activists, and

local authorities. Participants worked together to develop population needs-based mutual action plans that will be implemented in 2023. These trainings and workshops are important for promoting minority rights and gender mainstreaming. By building the capacity of CSOs and activists and promoting collaboration with local authorities, we can ensure that policies and practices are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of all members of society. Inclusive budgeting processes are particularly important as they ensure that the specific needs of minority groups are considered and addressed in allocating resources. Furthermore, the project includes a call for applications aimed at CSOs to implement advocacy campaigns and public participation mechanisms for municipal budgeting and decision-making processes that are tailored to the needs of gender and ethnic minorities.

Improved relationships with government officials are another important factor in strengthening the scope of action of civil society – see the example of Cambodia above and our global achievements below.

Civil society cooperation with local duty-bearers has been successfully promoted in even very fragile contexts, such as Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Syria, with positive results for project implementation. Similarly, working with and strengthening local and regional civic networks has yielded positive results in Senegal, Cambodia, Honduras, Israel/Palestine, and Bangladesh. Investing in leadership is also critical to ensuring effective humanitarian aid and development programs. When civil society representatives hold positions in policy-making committees and are elected to local government, as has happened in Cambodia and Bangladesh, they can better advocate for the needs of right holders and ensure that interventions are responsive and sustainable.

Beyond the severe clam-downs on civil society globally, the experiences show promising practices in order to protect and enhance civic space for policy influence towards justice, even in fragile contexts.

## Data on Achievements 2022

Having successfully applied the HRBA for over ten years, HEKS/EPER and its partner organisation have achieved significant results in fostering civil society and civil rights.

### Increased quality of cooperation between civil society actors and duty-bearers in 2022

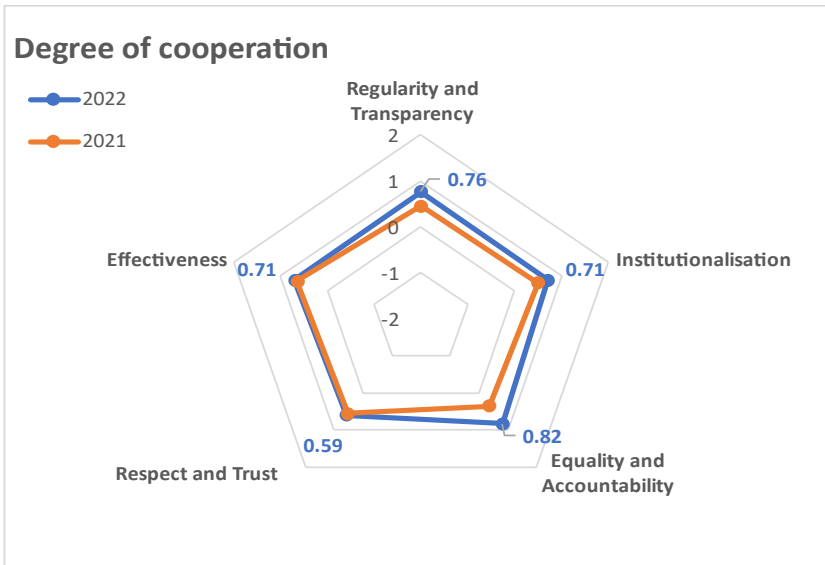
HEKS/EPER invests in **building quality relationships** between state actors with members of civil society. The starting point is to create an exchange on a par that builds on rights-holders' capacities to understand their rights and make them heard. And it needs duty-bearers to understand the benefit of cooperation and joint planning. HEKS/EPER experience capitalisation showed that country offices and partners work increasingly systematically with duty-bearers. HEKS/EPER measures the ability of its people and communities to claim its rights and their degree of relationship towards duty-bearers. Improving horizontal and vertical relationships builds on enhancing attitudes, values, behaviours/practices of individuals, groups, rights-holders and duty-bearers towards peace and justice.

The key indicator of the '**degree of cooperation between rights-holders and duty-bearers**' provides insights into HEKS/EPER's engagement in enhancing constructive relationships. HEKS/EPER analyses five categories of



cooperation between duty-bearers and rights-holders: effectiveness, respect, equality/accountability, institutionalisation, transparency/regularity.

In 2022, interviewed civil society actors reported – on average – the cooperation in all five components was slightly positive. On a scale of -2 until +2, the interviewed persons gave ratios from 0.59 to 0.82 points. The highest average score got the ‘Equality and Accountability’ component with 0.82, showing the positive impact of cooperation between duty-bearers and civil society in acknowledging their right to participate and influence policy/practice development and implementation.



**Quality of cooperation**

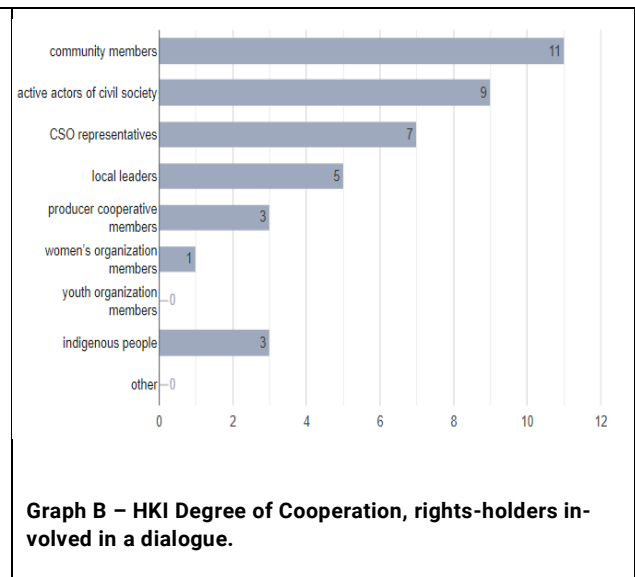
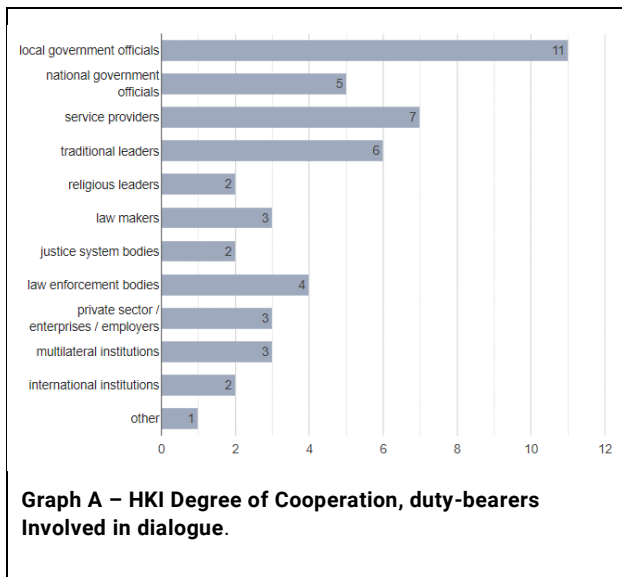
Project participants of 8 projects in 3 countries rated the degree of collaboration along 5 components.

This, on a scale from -2 (cooperation blocked) to +2 (full cooperation).

The interviewed civil society actors reported slightly positive cooperation in all 5 components.

Compared to the year 2021 (in orange), the ratings for 2022 (in blue) improved. This indicates a success of the policy dialogue made by HEKS/EPER and its partners.

Out of the monitored relationships, 12% (2021: 0%) of the dialogue happened in the context of authoritarian or repressive states. 47% are operated in a context where civic space is narrowed/obstructed, and the government is weak, while 35% state that the civic space is more or less open.



**Graph A** (left) shows that in 2022 the most addressed group of **duty-bearers** involved in policy dialogue were local duty-bearers: 65% (2021: 75%) of all relationships. 41% (2021: 45%) were service providers – often through HEKS/EPER projects active in inclusive markets and business. 35% (2021: 50%) involve traditional leaders demonstrating their relevance in countries with a weak state. And 29% (2021: 30%) of duty-bearers involved were national government officials.

**Graph B** demonstrates that, from the side of **rights-holders**, 65% (2021 70%) involve community members. About 53% (2021 60%) of the relationships see active civil actors and local leaders engaging. And 41% (2021 75%) of relationships involve representatives of civil society organisations. The shift towards ‘common’ community members may signify their empowerment to speak up directly.

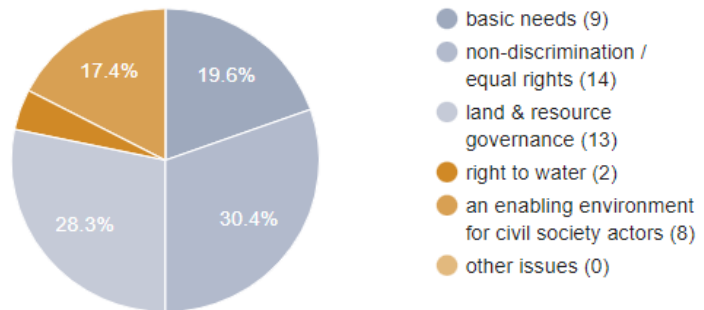
The progress made in 2022 compared to 2021 seems to prove the success of policy dialogue made by HEKS/EPER and its partners.

### People claiming their rights and launching initiatives for equality

In 2022, HEKS/EPER enabled claims towards equal rights for **56'217 people benefiting directly and indirectly**. 2021 with claims addressing 2.636 million people, was exceptional, with a huge claim in Brazil at the time aiming for the rights of 2.6 million Brazilian indigenous.

In 2022, **46 group applications** were submitted by 5 projects in 4 countries; **45 claims (98%) have already been accepted** by duty-bearers in the reporting period. The proportion of accepted claims increased from 46% in 2020 to 98% in 2022.

No individual claims were registered in 2022. So, 46 **group claims** make 100% in 2022 (18% in 2021) and address the interests of 56'217 people. 13 *group claims* relate to land and resource governance (28%), and 14 relate to non-discrimination / equal rights (30%) (see *graph*). 45% of all people addressed by group claims are women. 1 followed up and noticeably big group claim aiming for the rights of 27000 people in Senegal: The ACCES project provided support in communication, capacity building, and advocacy for the group claim concerning the delimitation of lands impacted by the Dagga Kholpa urban project.



Type of **group claims** in 2022. Most claims are asking for rights linked to non-discrimination and land & resources.

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Interestingly, the number of claims has been relatively stable, with many claims accepted. However, we might have expected a decline in the pandemic (due to the absorption of governments and communities and due to the restrictions on freedom of assembly and movement). The solid results can be interpreted as good adaptability to the new circumstances the pandemic put on programming. In total, about 670 thousand households have benefitted directly and indirectly in the different project regions.

The number of **own initiatives taken for equality and non-violence** is essential to follow up the success of capacity building in how far the own initiatives of communities are following. These own initiatives show commitment and behavioural change and are thus an indicator of a project's possible sustainability. Data gathered from 2 projects in 2 countries show that **161 activities** have been traced. 42.9% were taken up independently, HEKS/EPER facilitated 40.4%, and 36.6% were collective initiatives.

Moreover, HEKS/EPER facilitated in 2022 overall 90 **training workshops and learning/sensitisation events** in 7 countries, where 7000 people took part in 83 learning events that addressed the human-rights-based approach, conflict sensitivity, and conflict transformation topics, and 20 initiatives addressed gender equality topics. Such training sessions or events of mutual exchange are key to fostering people's abilities to speak up, claim rights or enter a (policy) dialogue with duty-bearers. And they have scale-up effects as they share their learnings and experiences and motivate others to engage for their own needs and rights.

### Perspectives promoting space for civil society

Because civil society's scope for action is a foundation of our work, HEKS/EPER has decided to introduce 'strengthening civil society as a binding cross-cutting issue in each project with its international programme 2021–24. The core tasks for future engagement can be summarised into the following components:

- HEKS/EPER is committed to investing in civil society through **trust-building** in long-term partnerships based on mutual respect and equality. HEKS/EPERS strengthens **CSO's capacity to operate independently**.
- HEKS/EPER appraises means of using the **creativity, flexibility, and engagement of smaller/informal civil society organisations**. This may require innovative funding mechanisms to bridge the gap between reporting needs and using the potential of informal civil society momentum.

- HEKS/EPER examines power relations, actors, structures, institutions, and norms from the visible formal to the invisible informal and engages in continuous dialogue with a representative range of CSO actors.
- HEKS/EPER **strengthens CSOs' capacity to gather and analyse information** relevant to their programmes and the communities with whom they work. This enables them to contribute to national planning and policymaking processes more effectively and to challenge government policies and actions. Expand programs on evidence-based advocacy and rights-based development. Support alliances of CSOs with different competencies, including grassroots organisations, and avoid fragmentation.
- HEKS/EPER strengthens the collaboration between civil society groups towards a joint voice for space. HEKS/EPER aims at enhancing collaboration between disenfranchised groups and like-minded CSOs and civil movements to build a joint voice for civil society space and justice, i.e., bridging the gap between those who work on 'development' and those who work on human rights and social justice and build alliances between CSOs and faith-based organisations to protect space for civil society. Therefore, HEKS/EPER will elaborate in the next phase of its international programme with other broadly shared theories of change, including civil society actors and other donors and adapt expectations to analysis.
- HEKS/EPER is committed to supporting civil society by enhancing diplomatic and strategic connections. This includes using our contacts and positioning in the national and international networks to enable our constituencies to **direct meaningful participation in multi-stakeholder initiatives**.
- HEKS/EPER **protects the space of civil society representatives**: Starting from stigmatisation to threats and physical attacks. Permanent monitoring and follow-up are meant to prevent individuals and groups from acting with impunity and encourage CSO to step into its space. In this regard, HEKS/EPER will cooperate with governments and multilateral institutions, and NGOs to protect human rights defenders. Support civil society representatives and defenders to protect themselves and their organisations and manage the accompanying stress. Facilitate cooperation to strengthen security and protection mechanisms for CSO leaders and HRDs at risk, including those advocating for women's rights, indigenous groups, and others.
- HEKS/EPER provides local and international linkages to make the **voices of excluded groups heard**.



Engaging in public for their rights – women organisation in Columbia at Labour Day.

- HEKS/EPER supports the amendment of **laws, policies, and administrative hurdles** that create barriers to CSOs taking on their roles and functions in development: HEKS/EPER aims at a dialogue with duty-bearers to assess the policies, guidelines, and practices to enhance the space of CSOs. This dialogue and assessment are the foundation for enhancing the quality of multi-stakeholder initiatives or targeted advocacy for political space for CSOs.
- HEKS/EPER **enhances funding and support structures** that avoid competition but foster collaboration and accountability to vulnerable groups: Make sure cooperation allows flexibility and improves accountability towards constituencies. Different assessments provide evidence on how financing structures and models that predominantly stress deliverables create competition and fragmentation. HEKS/EPER wants to draw up a new range of support options beyond the traditional paths. This support should link new forms of civic movements with other actors – moving both upwards into the political sphere and downwards to individual citizens. HEKS/EPER aims to revisit its own support mechanisms and is involved in advocacy work on bilateral and multilateral institutions.
- HEKS/EPER **collecting evidence** on the **added value of CSOs towards enhancing SDGs**: More effort should also be invested in demonstrating and communicating the benefits to the general public of a robust civil society and to help CSOs bolster their domestic support. This is meant to make businesses, policymakers, and the public understand the important role of CSOs and support them accordingly.
- HEKS/EPER facilitates action towards **relationships between CSOs and government**: The space of political action by civil society is determined by the relationship between civil society, elites, and the government. Building relationships that favour transparency, participation, mutual recognition, and respect is the key to developing policies and action toward equality and justice. It is, at the same time, a key indicator of space for civil society.
- HEKS/EPER **strengthens faith-based actors in speaking out for space for civil society**: HEKS/EPER, as a faith-based organisation, has explored means to strengthen faith-based actors in resisting instrumentalisation and protecting and enhancing space for civil society. Being anchored in their communities, faith-based actors can play a vital role in overcoming social, political, and economic discrimination and speaking out for space for civil society and peace and justice in general.
- HEKS/EPER supports **local, national, and international advocacy** disseminating a robust, collective counter-narrative to visions of economic growth neglecting human rights and ecological sustainability.
- HEKS/EPER **supports learning across countries** about the experiences of formal mechanisms for civil society dialogue and other means to influence change.

## This is HEKS/EPER



HEKS/EPER is the aid organisation of the Swiss protestant churches. It operates towards a more equitable and peaceful world (and Switzerland) with resilient communities, focusing on four topics: **Climate Justice, Inclusion, Right to Land & Food, and Refuge & Migration.**

In 2022, HEKS/EPER supported more than 60 projects in Switzerland, the inclusion of 98'000 people, and with 232 projects in 30 countries, 2.5 million people directly in economic, social or humanitarian need. The operating income of the whole organisation has risen to 114 M CHF and expenditure to 108.13 M CHF – of which 54.54 M CHF were net costs spent for the international programme.

In the Global Cooperation division, HEKS/EPER ameliorated with 17.8 M CHF (net costs) spent on 96 **development projects** for the life of 946'267 people focusing on access to land and resources, securing basic services, fostering sustainable production and inclusive market systems. It also promoted the social inclusion of marginalised, inclusive governance structures and conflict transformation. 23.4 M benefitted indirectly – e.g., through successful advocacy for new rights or policies (e.g., right to land, water, education, health, market access).

HEKS/EPER's **humanitarian aid** spent more than 29 M CHF (net costs) in 72 projects in 18 countries reaching directly 1.522 M people affected by conflicts and disasters; another 2.4 M were indirectly reached with health prevention campaigns or rebuilt public sanitation, road or health infrastructures.

In the frame of **Church Cooperation**, HEKS/EPER enabled with 2.26 M CHF social work of Reformed Churches in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, reaching out to almost 35'000 people through 29 projects; another 30'500 were reached indirectly.

HEKS/EPER sensitises on the needs and rights of people and communities worldwide, addressing causes of global inequalities. To **influence the public, media, politics and other stakeholders in Switzerland** to achieve a transition to a more equitable, peaceful world, preserving the limited natural resources, HEKS/EPER spent 4.5 M CHF on advocacy and policy work.

HEKS/EPER Global Cooperation strives towards systemic change with its human rights-based approach, promoting ownership, innovation, and the nexus between humanitarian aid and development activities. Together with competent partners and well-interconnected alliances, HEKS/EPER fosters constant dialogue between civil society, the private sector, and Government actors enabling people and communities to advocate for their needs and rights. The international divisions' conflict- and gender-sensitive programming is risk-informed and evidence-based. A proficient institutional governance framework allows effectiveness and transparency.

In Switzerland, HEKS/EPER supported with 34.2 M CHF net costs of more than 60 projects in 15 cantons disadvantaged people in becoming socially and economically integrated by promoting equal opportunity and assisting jobless people, refugees, and other individuals by providing day structures, legal advice, vocational training, language courses, dialogue platforms, etc.


**The nine core values of HEKS/EPER:** Justice / Self-Determination / Participation / Respect / Solidarity / Support without Borders / Close to People / Effectiveness, / Accountability.

Strategies, policies, guidelines, and reports published on ID's Governance Website: [https://en.heks.ch/Institutional\\_Governance](https://en.heks.ch/Institutional_Governance)

Published by HEKS/EPER thematic advisory and MEAL units, May 2023, Zürich (Switzerland)

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