

CIVIC ECOSYSTEMS INITIATIVE COLLABORATION

# AN ECOSYSTEM APPROACH TO PROTECTION OF CIVIC ACTORS AT RISK

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# RATIONALE

The landscape of civic actors that require protection in a variety of contexts and the risks and threats they face are becoming more complex. The protection systems currently in place are adapting to some extent but remain largely fragmented and outmoded, struggling to keep up with the pace and scale of change at a time when demand for protection is growing.

An ecosystem lens brings out the diversity and fluidity of civic actors and action at risk, which are rarely understood by funders and policymakers. Moreover, it draws attention to the nature of protection systems themselves by highlighting the interdependence of actors, ideas and practices – public and private, international and local – involved in providing protection. In other words, an ecosystem lens allows us to challenge prevailing ways of thinking about the subject and means of protection and to develop ideas and proposals that respond to the changing protection needs on the ground.

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# SCOPE

This collaboration explores the future of protection for civic actors at risk. It combines research and engagement to advance several interrelated lines of inquiry:

- **Conceptual and practical problems with the dominant models of civil society.** Civil society, or rather civil societies, are chaotic and creative mixes of activists, artists, academics, civil servants, indigenous groups, journalists, young protestors, and ordinary people who one day said ‘no’ to vested interests or powerful actors. Many of these ‘accidental defenders’ then face attacks and reprisals ranging from the legal to the fatal. The vehicles for their activism are collectives, social networks, communities, families – not just the NGOs and other formal structures that funders and policymakers are most comfortable engaging with.
- **The fluidity and dynamism of civic ecosystems.** In restricted and insecure environments, civic ecosystems adapt in dynamic ways to changing conditions, constraints and opportunities. Civic actors move back and forth between spaces in civil society, the state and the private sector in ways that call into question the utility of rigid distinctions. A crackdown or collapse in security may prompt civic actors to de-formalize, move underground or become dormant for a while. Positive changes in the environment may lead to rapid emergence of new forms of civic activism utilising the openings. Should the situation regress, though, these actors and actions become highly vulnerable as witnessed in the aftermath of the 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

- **The defenders' views of protection.** The threats faced by civic actors at risk are complex and dynamic. In environments characterised by mutating patterns of insecurity and risk factors, protection needs can change very quickly. Moreover, what protection might look like depends on the type of civic actors, for example indigenous peoples or ethnic groups at-risk whose land is intrinsically connected to their collective existence. Defenders are best placed to inform the development of protection mechanisms that can adapt to changing needs and threats. It is also critical to support and enhance civic actors' own self-protection efforts rather than supplant them. Far too often, international responses focus on protection for safety, whereas defenders themselves frequently call for protection that will enable and support their agency and activism. Sometimes these objectives may be difficult to reconcile and pursue concurrently.
- **Adapting and strengthening protection systems.** A dynamic understanding of the risk factors and sources of threats for civic actors across different contexts is critical for informing efforts to adapt and strengthen protection systems. Policymakers, donors, and transnational actors involved in protection often work in silos with divergent organizational interests and cultures, limited collaboration and information-sharing. Remote support and resources are increasingly required in the context of closed civic spaces, travel bans, and violent conflict. Strategies for adapting and strengthening protection ecosystems must be grounded in granular analysis of political and security landscapes, civic actors' capacities, and rapidly shifting threats and opportunities.

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## INSIGHTS

Across these lines of inquiry, we are interested in understanding the conceptual and practical implications of an ecosystem approach to protection. Using the concept of civic ecosystems as an analytical lens, this collaboration will generate critical insights about issues such as the categorization of actors and the distinction between protection focused on the safety of civic actors and protection aimed at enabling their agency and activism. In practical terms, we expect these kinds of insights to provide an evidence base and conceptual guide for developing an ecosystem approach to protection of civic actors at risk that best responds to their needs and priorities.

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