

# Civic Space Briefs

## Civil Society Space and COVID-19

“The pandemic has highlighted the gaps between centralized ministries and people on the ground. We urgently need to learn the lessons.”

Civil society representative

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights’ new report ([A/HRC/51/13](#)) sheds light on challenges, both online and offline, and practices related to civic space and the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 affected civic space in many ways and often led to an erosion of people’s trust in institutions and information. The UN Secretary-General has made trust a pillar of “[Our Common Agenda](#)”, emphasizing the need to ensure systematic participation, including of women and other under-represented people and groups.

### CIVIL SOCIETY PROVIDED VITAL SUPPORT DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

- ✓ Responded to community needs, supporting and providing at times life-saving COVID-19 related community services and brought these voices to the table.
- ✓ Raised awareness and helped disseminate, and sometimes translate, timely and accurate information about COVID-19 and vaccines.
- ✓ Campaigned and built skills around the role of online tools, social media networks, and online risks.
- ✓ Facilitated and provided funding for efforts to address COVID-19.
- ✓ Spoke up to draw attention to, and litigated against, unlawful, discriminatory and disproportionate effects of emergency measures and restrictions.
- ✓ Volunteered in efforts to prevent epidemics and build back better from COVID-19.

### COVID-19 CHALLENGES AND TRENDS



**Criminalization** under laws on “fake news” and disinformation

**Lack of online and offline participation,** access to digital tools and internet



**Killings, detention, arrests and attacks** against civil society, defenders, academia, journalists, health workers, whistle-blowers



**Bans of and crackdowns on peaceful protests and assemblies**



**Decreased or lack of access to funds and resources**



**Infringements of privacy and digital security, digital surveillance**



**Silencing dissent and free speech, lack of access to critical information**



## THE CIVIC SPACE PUZZLE FOR TRUST

ENABLE PARTICIPATION	EMPOWER AND CREATE SPACE	ENSURE THAT THE SPACE IS SAFE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Promote representation of different constituencies and voices</b> in decision-making at all level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Enable civil society</b>, including the academic community and media, <b>to operate freely and without discrimination.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Establish effective protection mechanisms and protocols</b> to respond to attacks against those who speak up.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Collectively strategize to remove barriers to representation of diverse communities</b> including those at risk of being left behind.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Make long-term, flexible funding for civil society available</b>, and refrain from limiting receipt of funds, including foreign funding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Recognize and celebrate the key role of a pluralistic civil society</b> at all levels, including human rights defenders and journalists.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Build trust with civil society</b> by creating easily accessible channels and platforms for exchange and feedback, including at grassroots level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ As interference with online content exacerbates confusion and undermines trust, <b>maximize transparency</b> and access to information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Refrain from, prevent, and respond to threats</b>, both online and offline, aimed at silencing dissent and harassing critical voices.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Invest in making internet access available</b> more widely and <b>strengthen relevant skills</b> to bring new voices to the table.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Ensure civil society has access to information</b> to monitor the implementation of health, education, including budget allocation and use.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Take measures to protect privacy</b> and refrain from using and exporting surveillance technologies.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Adjust tech tools to reach constituencies</b>, use social media, incorporate lessons learned during the pandemic.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Facilitate vibrant debate offline and online</b>, including of controversial measures and restrictions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Ensure protection responses integrate the online dimension</b>, e.g. systematically document online threats and attacks.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Ensure human rights inform internal processes</b>, e.g. the WHO pandemic prevention, preparedness and response treaty.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Enable peaceful protests.</b> Blanket restrictions on peaceful assemblies are disproportionate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Protect against and eliminate SLAPPs</b> (Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation).</li> </ul>