



DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION TIPS TOOLS INSIGHTS PRACTICES

In practice

THE NETHERLANDS' INCLUSIVE AND HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Key messages

As digital technology creates both opportunities and risks for inclusive development, ways of working to enhance civic space and strengthen civil society need to be adapted. The Netherlands is supporting an inclusive and human rights-based approach to technology and the protection of civic space online by encouraging digital safety and digital inclusion of civil society, and the protection of human rights online.

This content is part of [In Practice series on digital transformation](#) developed in collaboration with the [Development Co-operation Report 2021: Shaping a Just Digital Transformation](#).

Keywords

[Civil society](#) | [Digital transformation](#)

Key partner

[Netherlands](#)

Siona women in northern Ecuador use Mapeo to capture evidence of illegal hunting on their lands. Image courtesy of Digital Democracy.

Challenge

Digital technology has transformed civic space and democracy, offering the potential to accelerate efforts to achieve the sustainable development goals and to empower individuals and groups. It provides virtual spaces for individuals and civil society to access information, connect, mobilise around socio-political themes and engage in decision making.

Civil society has proven flexible and agile in adapting to a fast-changing digital world. Activism and advocacy have moved primarily online due to COVID-19 restrictions. However, as innovation and technology accelerate, civil society is faced with challenges to keep up with its societal impacts and misuse. In the context of COVID-19 this has been further exacerbated where adverse practices have increased,

including through the use of facial recognition technology used to track human rights defenders or identify protesters; the fast spread of disinformation fuelling polarisation; censorship curtailing freedoms of expression online and a growing digital divide affecting particularly women and girls, the elderly and those living in rural areas where access to digital technologies and online spaces is limited. These digital threats restrict the space for civil society and individuals to safely operate and exercise their rights online.

The Netherlands view inclusive and open civic space online as vital to maximising civil society's contributions to the 2030 Agenda and its pledge to leave no one behind, and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Approach

The Netherlands takes a dual approach to enhancing civic space and strengthening civil society, through its development co-operation policies and programmes, and its diplomatic efforts.

In 2021, the Netherlands started the 5-year implementation of the policy framework [Strengthening Civil Society](#), consisting of 42 strategic partnerships with civil society organisations to lobby and advocate for inclusive development. Civil society partners are supported through learning sessions and guidelines on adapting and responding to the changing digital landscape and anticipating the opportunities and risks of technology. Three priorities are stressed:

- **Digital safety:** Civil society actors need to be able to operate safely online. This includes strengthening the digital resilience of civil society, employing strategies to recognise and respond to digital threats, creating support networks and ensuring that there is zero risk involved for all parties in the collection of personal data.
- **Digital inclusion:** When applying digital solutions for lobbying and advocacy goals, local civil society and individuals should participate in the design of the technology to ensure digital tools are accessible, safe and suit the needs of the users.
- **Human rights online:** Civil society actors have a critical role to play in ensuring an inclusive and human rights-based approach in the development and use of technology, online platforms and policy, and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms online and offline.

These initiatives are complemented by diplomatic efforts. For example, as co-chair of the Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) Community of Practice on Civil Society, the Netherlands played a key role in driving forward the drafting and supporting the adoption of the [DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society](#). This is the first international standard focusing on the actions of providers to advance policies and practices directed at civil society actors. It covers issues pertaining to digitalisation, for example, supporting greater and more inclusive civil society participation in public policy through the use of digital technologies; as well as exploring and addressing challenges, risks, and systemic inequalities associated with digital technologies that restrict civil society actors. The Netherlands continues to support the implementation and monitoring of the recommendation, including its provisions related to digitalisation.

Results

The Netherlands' dual approach has improved the digital-enabling environment for civil society in several ways:

- **Investments have been made in digital resilience of civil society** to ensure maximum safety and inclusion. Partnerships working on politically sensitive topics offer extensive training in digital safety for civil society and human rights defenders, for example, by working with the [Digital Defenders Partnership](#).

- **Citizen-generated data and social media are increasingly being used** to advocate for the rights and priorities of marginalised communities. Examples include the [digital story telling by indigenous communities](#) for greater climate justice and the [use of technology to advocate for indigenous land rights](#).
- **Strengthening of open and human rights respecting online spaces and technology**, with the help of the [International Center for Not-For-Profit-Law](#) (ICNL) and through membership of the [Freedom Online Coalition](#). The ICNL ensures that the protection and promotion of civic freedoms are key considerations in the development of technology and policy.

Lessons learnt

- **Civil society has a critical role to play in ensuring that digital technology serves the public good** as a watchdog and as equal partners in the design and implementation of emerging technology. As digital threats and use of technology by repressive actors continue to increase and civil society participation has been further limited in the context of COVID-19, the need for inclusive processes for civil society to meaningfully engage in multi-stakeholder dialogues on development, regulation and responsible use of digital technology remains pivotal.
- **Civil society at all levels needs the expertise and capacity to assess and communicate their needs** on the use of technology and data. As much of the decision-making power on data lies with international non-governmental organisations, attention is needed to overcome the digital divide within civil society, ensuring that the values of local ownership and co-designing with the users are front and centre.

Further information

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To learn more about the Netherlands' development co-operation see:

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