



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

## Authors

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# Scoping Study on Civil Society Space in Humanitarian Action EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Civil society space is increasingly a key issue for humanitarian organisations. Independent research carried out for ICVA in the summer of 2018 sought to identify civil society needs in this area and help define the potential role of ICVA in helping and supporting its membership to navigate, protect and expand civil society space.

**Who is ICVA?**

*ICVA is a global network of non-governmental organisations whose mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by working collectively and independently to influence policy and practice.*

Civil society space in humanitarian contexts is understood to be the both metaphorical and practical 'space' within which civil society actors work. This space can be conducive to the provision of humanitarian assistance, disabling of such assistance or most probably somewhere in the middle.

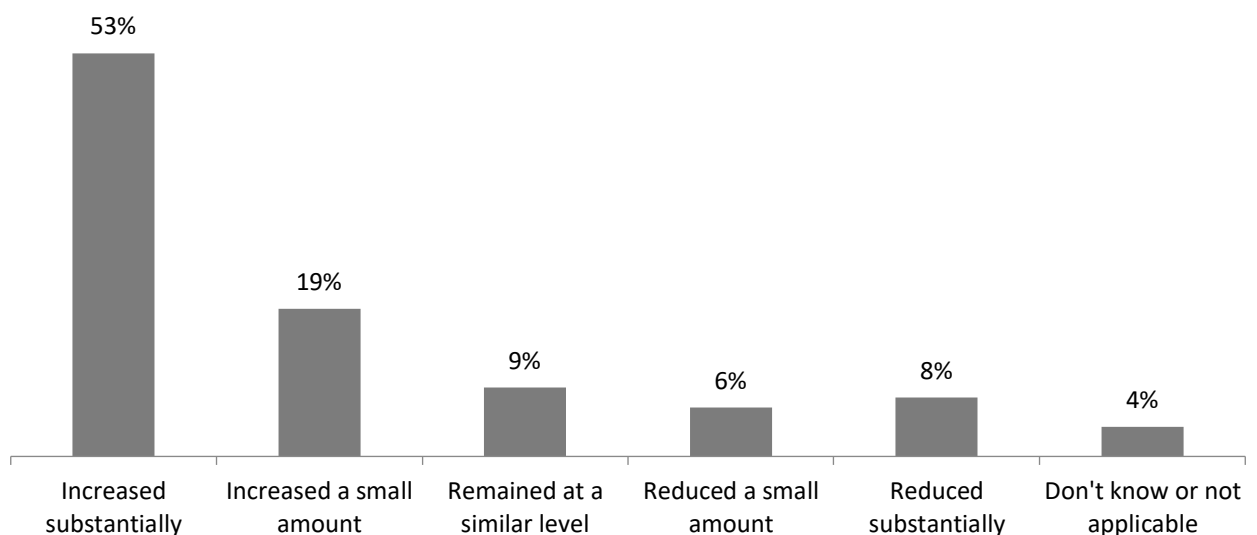
**THE CONTEXT**

Humanitarian organisations work in challenging contexts and these challenges can be exacerbated by restrictions placed on organisations by host governments and others, such as institutional donors and non-state actors. Practices, tools and initiatives, to help NGOs deal with this situation are sorely needed.

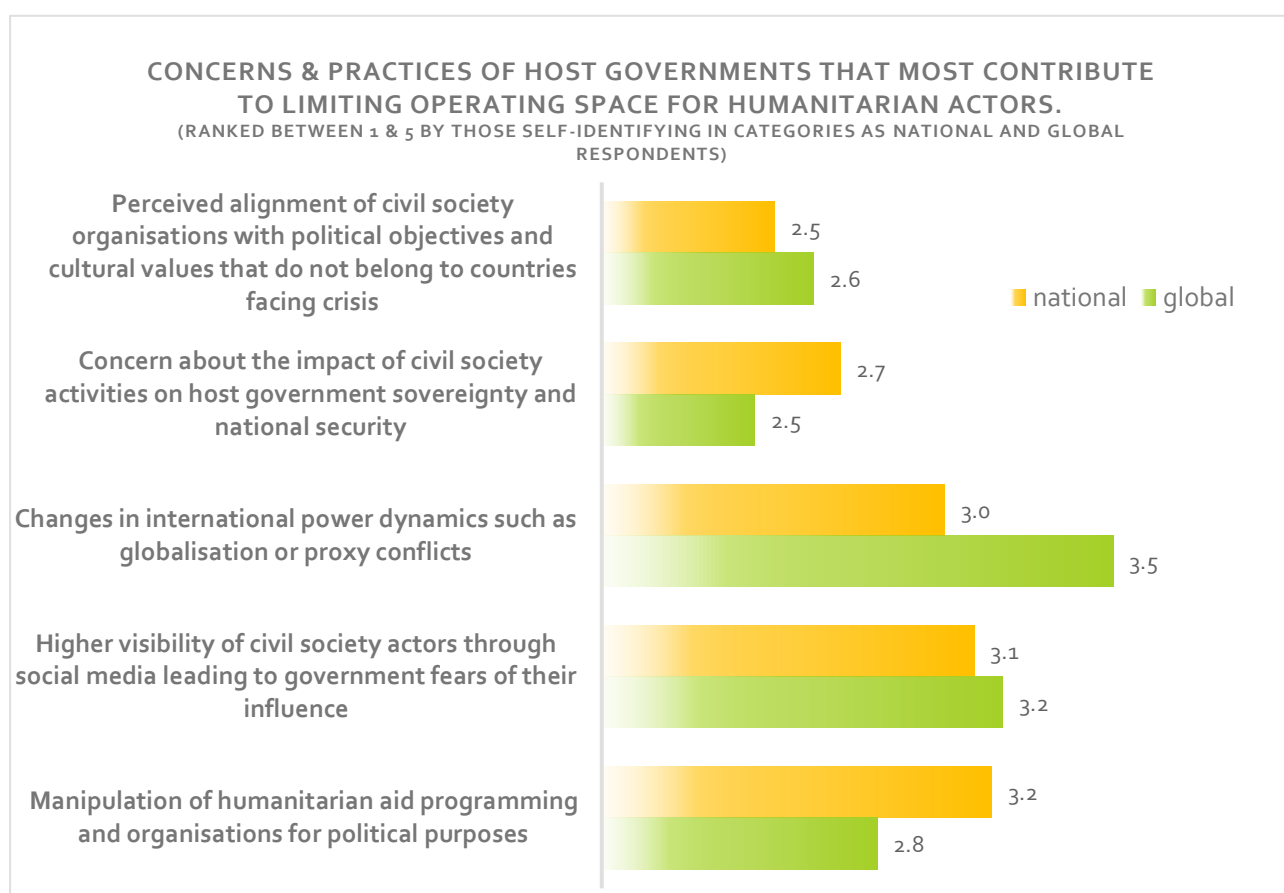
**SHRINKING SPACE**

The restriction of the space within which most civil society actors operate is a trend which is ultimately a political decision on the part of the state. In this context, the narrative about aid work has changed: the added-value of civil society involvement and of aid activities' response to disasters and conflicts has been increasingly demeaned by states. The data suggest that space for civil society organisations to operate effectively in humanitarian settings is shrinking over time and that even in stable countries civil society space has decreased as shown in the graphic below.

**Survey respondents perception of how challenges of operating as a humanitarian actor have changed in recent years**



## COMPLEX AND VARIED CHALLENGES



Challenges and restrictions in a humanitarian context are many. These may include limitations on receiving foreign funding, counter-terrorism laws affecting funding allocated to specific groups, as well as insecurity and difficulties in negotiating access. Not all challenges relate to state-NGO relations and the 'lived' experiences of NGOs differ. The experiences of International NGOs (INGOs) are not the same as national NGOs, similarly those of large national NGOs are not the same as small NGOs working in only one region of a country. National NGOs will have a different relationship with power structures than INGOs coming from the outside.

Each context is different and civil society space is defined, created or diminished in a unique way depending on the local context. Different types of actors are involved, different political and cultural histories exist, and different challenges are thus created. Legislative environments are often not conducive to planning, nor are financial mechanisms put into place by donors, and the two processes are interlinked. The two often work at cross-purposes, such that funding for a project from a donor may not match a bureaucratic timeframe.

Economic challenges also play a role in both the humanitarian crisis itself and the response by humanitarian organisations. Resources are always a major factor in political decision-making. The tensions between communities and local and national governments, the existence of corruption, and suspicion of outside agencies, can all be linked to economic factors. There are also a whole set of challenges surrounding the involvement of military and paramilitary actors with which NGOs must deal.

Governments are also not monolithic – different levels of government will provide different challenges. Sometimes government can be an ally, or NGOs can be caught-up in political battles between levels of authority, such as between federal and state levels. There may also be a changing view of civil society as political regimes change – governments are not static. Narratives change with contextual changes, as do the political calculations governments make to meet these changing environments. Governments are fearful of seeming weak and ineffective both to their populations, their political rivals, as well as to the international community.

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## THE CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE

Internally, humanitarian aid agencies must respond to these challenges but often have an uncomfortable relationship with political failure and conflict, as humanitarian agencies cannot solve the political problems or the conflict but are generally only there to provide relief for the populations suffering the consequences of the conflict and political failure.

The findings of the research suggest that there is often a poor political understanding by NGOs and senior managers about the changing views of the governments with which they must interact. NGOs do not always know when they should be supportive of the government and work with it, or when they should resist, or even how to resist. NGOs also do not always know at what level to talk with governments, or when to communicate a political message and when to stick with technical issues.

It should be noted, however, that national NGOs, being embedded in the local communities, often have a better political understanding than international NGOs which come from the outside. But being enmeshed in a local political environment can also complicate the provision of humanitarian aid based on the principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality.

## CIVIL SOCIETY NEEDS

There is a wide variety of support needed by organisations operating in humanitarian contexts in relation to civil society space.

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## UNITY AND COORDINATION

Unity within - and coordination of - civil society is a key plank to mitigate many of the civil society organisations' problems. This might include interventions such as training and capacity development on coalition building, enhanced convening of civil society organisations and the production of 'red lines' or advocacy asks, which civil society organisations would collectively advocate around. One view is that advocacy itself is the core of defending humanitarian civil society space.

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## RESEARCH

Some also see the need for greater research and more public availability of data with regard to the closure of civil society space. This is a role that others already play, but not specifically in the humanitarian arena.

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## CAPACITY BUILDING AND SHARING

Civil society organisations also need greater capacity across a range of issues including coalition building, advocacy, policy development, lobbying and networking. Some governments also need

capacity building on understanding the role of civil society and how to engage with it. There was a call to have more South-South skill-sharing and collaboration.

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## LOCALISATION

The need for the translation of key documentation and research into Arabic and other national languages is important as learning is easier through accessing documentation in one's own language. A further point is that humanitarian funding remains locked into international organisations, rather than supporting national and local groups.

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## THE HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVE

Finally, there is a need to better keep members accountable, to support rewriting the humanitarian narrative, which helps underpin the reputation of the sector, but also to bring some humanitarian organisations closer in line with it.

## EXISTING INITIATIVES SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Many organisations aim at supporting civil society organisations from various perspectives and at differing levels. These include CIVICUS, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, the Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society, Pax, openDemocracy, ACAPS, Article 19, Search for Common Ground, the World Movement for Democracy and the Act Alliance.

There are also others which work on supporting NGOs in complex environments, such as Saferworld and the International NGO Safety Organisation. Other consortia share similar concerns, such as Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection, the International Humanitarian Studies Association and Interaction. Although private sector organisations are not vocal about their support, private philanthropic organisations have organised themselves via the Council on Foundations.

There is a lot to be learned from the various perspectives these and other organisations bring to the discussion about strengthening civil society space. Increased collaboration is key. Humanitarian NGOs especially can benefit from a broader civil society perspective, and the humanitarian mindset can add value to the work of civil society support organisations.

## ICVA'S CURRENT ROLE

Generally seen as a credible partner, ICVA is credited with work on advocacy, organising meetings, putting together partnerships, facilitating and co-hosting NGO and INGO meetings, undertaking research and providing materials. Two connecting-type roles in particular - information sharing among civil society actors and connecting organisations to collaborate with each other - come out top in terms of the perceived benefits of ICVA's work.

Some observations suggest that ICVA needs to be more engaged with a broader view of civil society, recognising that NGOs are a sub-set of civil society actors which includes religious groups, educational institutions, philanthropic foundations, social groups, sport clubs, campaigning groups, human rights and environmental organisations, and a whole range of self-help and community mobilisation societies and groups.

## USEFULNESS OF ICVA RESOURCES

In general terms, in both interviews and in the survey, there were positive comments and findings with regard to ICVA resources. Respondents were notably enthusiastic when talking about the work done by the regional offices.

Comments on ICVA resources  
*"The bulletins are very useful. Webinars have been really helpful. Nice to chat to the regional rep, who is very supportive."*  
*"I attended one of the training courses. It was very helpful."*

## FUTURE POTENTIAL ROLES FOR ICVA

ICVA could potentially play a number of interconnected roles, including: convening roles, advocacy roles, capacity-building roles, among others. It is self-evident that ICVA cannot possibly fully and effectively play all of these roles simultaneously.

### 1. ADVOCACY ROLE

ICVA could potentially play several advocacy roles. The first role relates to supporting civil society in relation to governments: helping donor governments, NGOs and NGO fora prepare their case (rather than be involved in the negotiations themselves). Second, ICVA could play a number of overlapping international advocacy roles, including:

- Capacity building of donors on the issue of shrinking civil society space;
- providing support and advocacy 'back up' to civil society fora and organisations by engaging with and advocating towards governments and inter-governmental organisations in Geneva;
- helping with (re)building the positive narrative with states about NGOs, presenting them as useful organisations that are not threatening.

### 2. CONVENING ROLE

ICVA already performs a convening role. Regional convening currently occurs with the presence of ICVA regional representatives. However, the vast array of contexts and conditions makes it impossible for regional representatives to cover the entire region, so a greater focus on sub-regions is an option.

Bringing together organisations that face similar challenges is another role that ICVA could expand. This would involve making closer links with the range of organisations listed above, amongst others. Thematic links, and those centred around geographical areas, would factor into how events could be organised and capitalised upon.

### 3. CAPACITY BUILDING ROLE

One role could centre around capacity building of governments and NGOs about how best to engage with governments. Another role widely supported is for ICVA to seek expanding capacity via facilitating peer support. This suggests that ICVA should seek to highlight and disseminate success stories and good practices, common messages and allows those with similar experience to learn from each other, develop common approaches and support each other's efforts.

### 4. OTHER ROLES

There were a number of other suggestions for roles and tasks for ICVA to consider. One commonly mentioned is to ensure that resources should be made more readily available in more languages. Another is that local NGOs are better consulted and included in Grand Bargain work streams.

Overall it is crucial that ICVA remains aware of the risk of duplication of other organisations' roles and, rather, looks at the potential for linkages with them. A very important role is to facilitate linkages with other groups, such as CIVICUS, ICNL, OCHA, and increase its role in understanding civil society actors and civic space.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE STRATEGIC PATHWAYS FOR ICVA

### CORE RECOMMENDATIONS

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#### RECOMMENDATION 1: RESEARCH PLANS

The study has identified a number of areas that are important but also potentially require deeper and further research. These are:

- A full mapping of other organisations working in the area of civil society space
- A full mapping of problematic countries/governments

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#### RECOMMENDATION 2: TRANSLATION OF MATERIALS

ICVA should more regularly consider either writing reports in local or regional languages or translate reports more rapidly into regional and local languages, where budget and time allows.

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#### RECOMMENDATION 3: DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH

It is important that materials including research produced by ICVA is widely available to relevant organisations.

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#### RECOMMENDATION 4: PRIVATE SECTOR AND PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATIONS

This study has not found significant interest in or depth of views on the role of the private sector and its potential to increase or reduce civil society space, but given there is an interest within ICVA to explore this area, more research could be engaged on their role. The role of philanthropic foundations in humanitarian actions is also worthy of further engagement.

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#### RECOMMENDATION 5: NATIONAL NGOS

ICVA should seek to reach beyond the INGO-NNGO fora nexus and work more directly with local NGOs. Although supporting fora is essential, there is a benefit to working more directly with national NGOs.

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#### RECOMMENDATION 6: REGIONAL ISSUES

ICVA should be more strategic in convening events/workshops outside a regional logic. The regional set-up and the work of the regional representatives has been highly valued by the ICVA membership.

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## RECOMMENDATION 7:

## CAPACITY BUILDING INVOLVEMENT

A decision should be made limiting how much ICVA will be directly involved in conducting capacity building activities. Should ICVA link with others, such as ATHA, PHAP, RedR, to create content? More capacity development is needed, but it may not be for ICVA to implement the programme itself.

## RECOMMENDED 'PATHWAYS' AND CHOICES

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### PATHWAY 1: ICVA SPECIALISES IN PROVIDING INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY SUPPORT TO THE SECTOR

- Focus on advocacy work with international institutions, such as the UN.
- Provide a platform for country level voices at the international level.
- Consider a formal relationship with CIVICUS to advocate together/in tandem, internationally.
- Seek internationally recognised champions.
- More systematically engage with host governments at the international level.

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### PATHWAY 2: ICVA AIMS TO EXPAND RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO THE SECTOR IN THE FORM OF RESEARCH, CAPACITY BUILDING AND FACILITATED PEER SUPPORT

- Isolate further research needed and roll out an expanded research agenda.
- Expand, actively engage with and develop a portfolio of peer support and learning activities.
- Become the sector focal point for the development of peer support platforms.
- Consider options for expanded involvement in training and seek funding for this type of work.

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### PATHWAY 3: FACILITATE/CONVENE PLATFORMS

- Link bilaterally with other specialist organisations to form new partnerships.
- Create a community of practice with a range of like-minded actors.
- Decide how regions are conceptualised and then strategically expand the concept of regions.
- Seek to support and further strengthen NGO fora of all type.
- Convene a network of trainers and provide content development support.

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### PATHWAY 4: WORK IN DEPTH ON 3-5 COUNTRIES

- Increase depth of knowledge and understanding of civil society space in those countries.
- Work to support wider civil society in a variety of ways.
- Keep only a passing interest in other areas.
- Criteria could include discounting countries where civic space is so closed that intensive attention will not lead to increased benefits.

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### PATHWAY 5: RESEARCH AND PRESSURE GROUP ROLE:

- Become a kind of CIVICUS for the humanitarian sector by publishing a 'state of global humanitarian civil society space annual report', or similar.
- Work towards becoming the primary source for expertise and knowledge about the state of humanitarian civil society space.



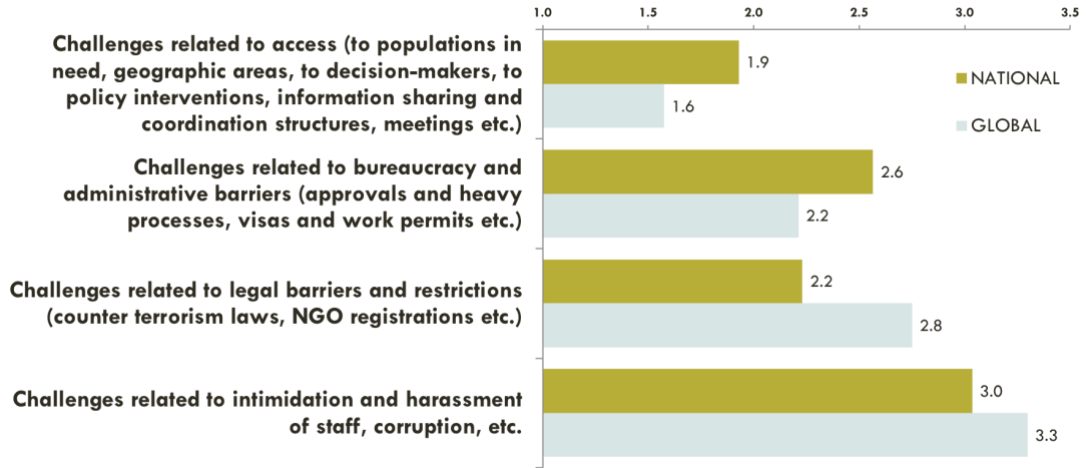
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*This summary draws on a longer report conducted for ICVA by Andrew Cunningham and Steve Tibbett. The report conducted a global **survey** with ICVA members and non-member humanitarian organisations and conducted 30 **interviews** with a range of actors across ICVA staff, NGOs, INGOs, NGO fora.*

*November 2018*

## ANNEX – CHALLENGES FROM SURVEY

**Most common challenges faced by humanitarian actors as ranked by national and global survey respondents** (lower scores mean more important)



## TYPES OF CHALLENGES FACED



**How the challenges of operating as a humanitarian actor have changed**

