



# CIVICUS STRATEGIC PLAN 2022 - 2027





Pictured is the lifetime activist Charlotte O'Neal with Goalkeepers Youth Action Accelerator in Arusha at the United African Alliance Community Center. <https://www.uaacc.net/>. Charlotte shared her long years of experience with the young activist, and how she has kept the energy and spirit of activism for over 50 years in both the United States and Tanzania.



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## IMAGE CREDITS

COVER: Protest against regressive law approved by Guatemala's Congress, Guatemala City, March 2022. Photo: Reuters/ Sandra Sebastian

INSIDE COVER: Youth tackle global challenges. Photo: Clara Sanchiz

PAGE 5: Goalkeepers Youth Action Accelerator orientation week, Arusha 2019. Photo: Clara Sanchiz

PAGE 9: Goalkeepers explore advocacy & monitoring. Photo: Clara Sanchiz

# 1 FOREWORD

We are pleased to present CIVICUS’ revised strategic plan for the period 2022 to 2027, which is the outcome of deliberations held with stakeholders across the alliance and close collaboration between the staff and Board members of CIVICUS.

The plan was developed through an extensive process to review and refresh CIVICUS’ strategic priorities. We interrogated the successes and hurdles we have faced in the delivery of our current strategy and contrasted these with an analysis of developments in civic space across the last ten years (2011-2021). In doing so, we were able to identify tensions and opportunities in relation to how we define the change we seek and actively contribute to it.

These assessments contributed to the development of future scenarios and strategic steers, which informed the development of an updated strategy. In March this year, the CIVICUS Board unanimously confirmed the adoption of a refreshed strategy that outlines CIVICUS’ strategic course for the period from July 2022 to June 2027.



“OUR REFRESHED STRATEGY PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO RESTATE OUR AMBITIONS WITH GREATER CLARITY AND DETERMINE HOW BEST TO ADDRESS NEW REALITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR CIVIC SPACE AND CIVIL SOCIETY.”

Julia Sanchez, CIVICUS Board Chair

One of the key shifts in the revised strategic plan is a focus of one overarching goal across the work of the alliance – as opposed to three distinct goals outlined in the previous iteration of our strategy. This overarching goal, namely ‘to strengthen civil society and civic action for expanded civic and democratic space’, reflects our emphasis on actions that are not just defending but also improving civic and democratic freedoms through a combination of influencing, organising and solidarity interventions.

The plan also includes an explicit focus on working with and for groups affected by the combined impact of civic space restrictions and structural forms of discrimination. It is accompanied by a clearer articulation of our contribution to long-term, systemic change, which is captured in four outcome statements that connect and consolidate the impact of our work across all levels.

“OUR STRATEGIC PLAN FOR 2022–27 INCLUDES A GREATER EMPHASIS ON SOLIDARITY ACROSS LEVELS OF OUR WORK, AND THE STRONGER REPRESENTATION OF ISSUES OF CIVIC AND DEMOCRATIC FREEDOMS FROM A SOCIAL JUSTICE LENS.”

Lysa John, CIVICUS Secretary-General



A robust process for membership and stakeholder engagement with our strategic progress is also envisaged as part of this plan and will include further opportunities to enhance civil society strategy and impact across the alliance.

We look forward to your continued enthusiasm and engagement as we make this important transition to the next phase of the CIVICUS alliance!

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Julia Sanchez".

**Julia Sanchez**  
CIVICUS Board Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lysa John".

**Lysa John**  
CIVICUS Secretary General



# 2 WHO WE ARE

CIVICUS exists to strengthen people’s power. As a growing global alliance of more than 12,000 members in 175 countries, we work together to expand civic and democratic space. We strive to promote excluded voices, particularly from the global south. We were established in 1993 and since 2002 have been proudly headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa, with staff distributed around the world and hubs connecting with key United Nations bodies in New York and Geneva.

## OUR VISION

A worldwide community of informed, inspired, committed citizens engaged in confronting the challenges facing humanity.

The Theory of Change underpinning our Strategic Plan addresses our assumption that we are stronger when we work together. Expanding civic and democratic space requires a collective effort. CIVICUS members and allies act together to design and test sustainable solutions and deliver impact at scale. They learn from each other, adopting relevant models so they become stronger and more effective in their own unique contexts, while also sharing what they learn beyond the alliance to strengthen civil society as a whole.

Our definition of civil society is expansive and reflects the fact that civil society is a constantly evolving sphere. Among others, it includes non-governmental organisations at all levels, individual activists, civil society coalitions and networks, protest and social movements, voluntary bodies, campaigning organisations, charities, faith-based groups, trade unions and philanthropic foundations. Our membership and networks represent this diversity of civil society and span a wide range of issues, sizes and organisation types. We explicitly represent the interests of civil society that upholds the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and stands for social, economic and environmental justice.

Our shared **values and principles** unite us.

- We believe that people and their organisations, working together, can address current and emerging challenges facing civil society, civic space and democracy.
- We stand for a strong, independent civil society that promotes human rights, strives for social, economic and environmental justice and is not afraid to challenge power with principled courage.
- We are champions of accountability, diversity and inclusion and act in solidarity with communities affected by structural forms of exclusion and discrimination.
- We contribute to systems change by globally connecting locally led actions and facilitating spaces for civil society to develop innovative and proactive responses to global challenges, now and in the future.

While we aim to represent civil society in all its diversity, in this phase, our actions and networks will include a special emphasis on the following groups and individuals who we consider to be key drivers and allies in realising the change we want to see. As an alliance, we will mobilise our collective knowledge, expertise, influence and power to create meaningful partnerships with:

- Individuals and groups most affected by civic and democratic space restrictions
- Traditionally excluded communities and their networks
- Smaller, less formal groups on the frontlines of social transformation
- Protest and social movements, including online platforms
- Journalists, media and media development organisations
- Youth activists and other evolving forms of people power
- Public and private institutions that contribute to expanding civic and democratic space

## OUR MISSION

To strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world



Both Charlotte and her husband, Pete, are very well known for more their continuous community work in America and Tanzania as well as 50 years of exile from the US. 'A Black Panther in Africa' is film documenting their life. <https://kersplebedeb.com/posts/a-black-panther-love-story-charlotte-pete-oneal/>. In Arusha, they founded the United African Alliance Community Center. <https://www.uaacc.net/>.

# 3 THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

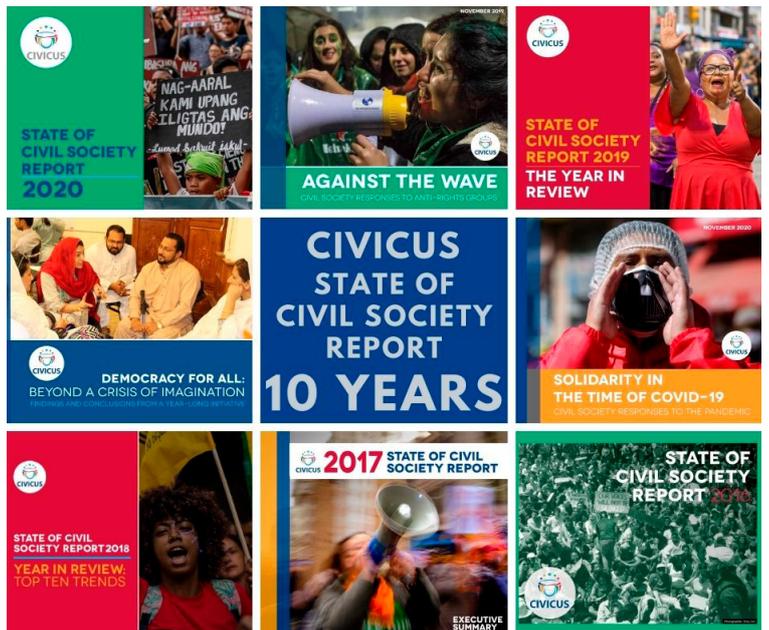
Unfortunately, there have been several setbacks when it comes to enabling environments for civil society and citizen action since our last strategy period began in 2017. In 2021, the **CIVICUS Monitor** reported that nine out of 10 people on the planet (89 per cent) live in countries with significant civic space restrictions. The review of our Theory of Change provides an opportunity to examine the current context and future scenarios, drawing from our existing research and analysis. Throughout the strategy amendment process trends from our **State of Civil Society Reports and Scenario & Foresight Analysis** reveal a complex picture of the world within which the CIVICUS alliance operates.



NINE OUT OF 10 PEOPLE ON THE PLANET (89%) LIVE IN COUNTRIES WITH SIGNIFICANT CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS



The space for civil society to promote rights and pursue social justice has been historically contested. But presently, we're seeing a greater range of states attacking civil society, the rise of anti-rights groups and a sharpening of tactics of restriction, including online attacks and censorship. Many contexts have seen political upheaval and a rejection of norms around the conduct of politics and democracy. Divisive populism and nationalism have resurged in many contexts, putting at risk respect for hard-fought universal human rights norms and the ability to resolve global challenges through multilateralism and international cooperation. Amid rising political polarisation, reasoned debate has become harder. Further, economic inequality has become ever more marked and unethical businesses and extractive industries have emerged as a key source of civic space attacks and human rights abuses. The COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened existing challenges in our societies, exacerbating fault lines. Its impacts are likely to linger for years.





Social media has created new opportunities for civil society organising, communication and mobilisation, but also brought serious risks in terms of digital security and intrusive surveillance. Further, disinformation has reached pandemic levels. It is deliberately stoked by states and regressive forces to sow confusion and discord at the domestic and international levels. The convergence of these trends is fuelling attacks on civil society, excluded groups and others who seek to promote rights, defend democracy and assert accountability. In response to these developments, civil society has become better at communicating the problem, raising awareness and working collectively while developing strategies of resilience and international solidarity.

Civil society has sounded the alarm on climate change. Mass protests have made demands for climate action a mainstream issue. Through public mobilisations people are increasingly rejecting an economic model that promotes ever-growing profits and the marketisation of the public arena at the expense of climate action, labour rights and social protection. At the same time, political flux has seen the emergence of a new cadre of young, feminist political leaders committed to social justice and climate action.

Much recent progress has been made in challenging the structural exclusion that limits the rights of so many people. Civil society actions, including protests, campaigns and legal action, have thrown the spotlight on embedded sexism and racism, and won gains, not least in LGBTQI+ rights and spurring action on racial justice. Movements are seeking not assimilation but the recognition and

CIVIL SOCIETY HAS SOUNDED THE ALARM ON CLIMATE CHANGE. MASS PROTESTS HAVE MADE DEMANDS FOR CLIMATE ACTION A MAINSTREAM ISSUE.

celebration of diversity and difference while highlighting ingrained problems such as brutality by law enforcement agencies and repression of minorities. It's clear that civil society investments in communicating with publics and connecting with communities are critical.

AN UPSURGE IN POPULAR PROTESTS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, COUPLED WITH THE RISE OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES SPURRED BY TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS, IS TRANSFORMING THE CIVIL SOCIETY LANDSCAPE.

Our analysis of civil society trends clearly points to the emergence of new frontiers. Many of today's movements centre on a new generation of people who are creating their own structures of participation and activism. These mobilisations, often fluid and non-hierarchical in nature, include young people exercising their civic freedoms for the first time and people from excluded groups reasserting the value of their worldviews. An upsurge in popular protests and social movements, coupled with the rise of social enterprises spurred by technological innovations, is transforming the civil society landscape.

Traditional notions of formal civil society are having actively having to make way for more dynamic forms of civil society experience. Across the world, people are forging new platforms and forms of civic engagement that enable greater possibilities for direct action, collaboration and sustained opposition to systemic injustices. Within this scenario CIVICUS's vision of a worldwide community of informed, inspired, committed citizens engaged in confronting the challenges facing humanity assumes greater significance. Our mission to strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world continues to resonate.



# 4 OUR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

## OUR OVERARCHING GOAL:

To strengthen civil society and citizen action for expanded civic and democratic space

CIVICUS's unique approach and objectives enable us to contribute to lasting and transformative change through varied but interconnected dimensions of our work. As a result of our efforts, we expect that civil society will build counter power and ultimately succeed in reversing the restriction of civic and democratic space.

As a result of our efforts, groups most affected by the combined impact of structural discrimination and civic space restrictions are better supported in their efforts to mobilise change, which causes decision makers and institutions to act more responsibly to uphold civic and democratic freedoms. Public trust in civil society improves significantly and is reflected through increased solidarity with the work and priorities of civil society.

In order to meet this goal, our interventions in this Strategic Plan period will be organised around five core objectives:

- **Generate timely knowledge and analyses on civil society actions in relation to civic and democratic space**
- **Coordinate targeted advocacy to defend and expand civic and democratic space**
- **Contribute to stronger emergency and sustained support ecosystems for activists and organisations at risk**
- **Strengthen public discourse on civic space and reinforce civil society narratives**
- **Build counter power with the most affected groups and their movements**





## OBJECTIVE #1:

Generate timely knowledge and analyses on civil society actions in relation to civic and democratic space

We will continue to produce and disseminate in-depth, strategic and timely **information on threats** to civic and democratic space while analysing the drivers and enablers of new and emerging attacks. In doing so, we will curate and disseminate data and information in relevant, creative and compelling ways to enable their practical application in supporting struggles for justice, equality and sustainability.

This work will be furthered by the development of new tools to track **civil society action**, including actions to expand civic and democratic space and responses to threats, to make a **stronger case** for how civic actions are proving effective in challenging systemic inequality and injustice. Our efforts will be accompanied by sustained work to increase the strategic use of **evidence-based analyses** to advance the organising and influencing efforts of citizens, civil society, communities and wider publics.



## OBJECTIVE #2:

Coordinate targeted advocacy to defend and expand civic and democratic space

We will strengthen our ability to **coordinate and sustain targeted advocacy** for civic and democratic space across all levels. Our efforts will aim to catalyse and connect civil society efforts and civic action for **greater advocacy impact across borders and at scale**. We will do this by exploring and championing new and emerging ways for citizens and civil society to influence relevant **decision-making processes** at local, national, regional and global levels.

We will develop pathways to engage decision-making forums with a view to enhancing accountability for and action on respect for civic and democratic space, while continuing to advocate for new ways to respect the agency of **smaller, less formal groups in the global south** who are on the frontlines of social transformation and show them solidarity. This will include supporting their direct involvement in decision making through **participatory democracy** at local and global levels and co-creating more effective ways for them to hold **public and private institutions accountable**.

### OBJECTIVE #3:

Contribute to stronger emergency and sustained support ecosystems for activists and organisations at risk



We will find new and innovative ways to provide activists and organisations targeted for their activism or operating in restricted contexts with **emergency support**, while also working to better understand how to **support and sustain civil society** experiencing digital and offline attacks, and how to leverage digital spaces and technologies for civic action.

Our efforts will give particular attention to **supporting activists and organisations** facing persecution in **challenging and dangerous environments** with a view to amplifying their voices, sustaining their struggles and ensuring their safety and autonomy.

We will undertake targeted efforts to encourage and enable progress towards effective and sustained **civil society resourcing and infrastructure** across locations. This will include advocating for **changes in institutional policies and public legislation** as well as showcasing how support to civil society can be more adaptable, responsive and accessible.

### OBJECTIVE #4:

Strengthen public discourse on civic space and reinforce civil society narratives



We will work more purposefully to shape and influence **public discourse** on civic and democratic space through more innovative and emphatic ways of demonstrating the **relevance and sustained impact of civil society**.

We will harness the power of emerging technologies, new and traditional media and innovative communications platforms to develop and amplify **people-centred narratives of change** to key stakeholders including change makers and global publics. In doing so, we will focus on the significant contributions of activists, peaceful protests and social movements, online and offline platforms led by groups most affected by civic and democratic space restrictions, young people and other emerging forms of power.





## OBJECTIVE #5:

Build counter power with the most affected groups and their movements

We will actively **forge alliances with groups that are most affected** by the combined impact of civic and democratic space restrictions and structural forms of discrimination. This includes working closely with networks and movements of young people, women, workers, LGBTQI+ people, Indigenous and environmental groups and broader social justice movements. Through our efforts, we will aim to connect struggles for justice, equality and sustainability at all levels while seeking opportunities to catalyse and nurture citizen action and find new and more dynamic ways to **support and expand** the civic and democratic space of excluded groups through all aspects of our work.

We will **strategically convene** diverse groups and coalitions **for joint action** and actively pursue opportunities to learn about and increase **mutual solidarity and collective impact**. We will work to improve the accountability practices of civil society with a view to urging and enabling organisations and movements to challenge unjust social norms and build greater public trust, which ultimately enhances our collective impact.





## 5 OUR CONTRIBUTION TO CHANGE

**Our ultimate goal is to strengthen citizen action and civil society that expands civic and democratic space.** The outcomes that will contribute to this goal are underpinned by our strategic objectives, which articulate CIVICUS's unique approach to achieving the breakthroughs we want to see through enabling lasting and transformative change across the varied and interconnected aspects of our work.

Our unique value lies in our ability to make use of the combined approaches of (1) **generating knowledge** and timely analysis, (2) **amplifying civil society** narratives, (3) **influencing policy making**, (4) **enabling activism** in challenging contexts and (5) **strengthening solidarity action** through strategic alliances and innovative partnerships.

We believe that this can be achieved through creating systemic shifts in policy, practice and public narratives, which help to bring about more transformative, sustainable change through:

1. Improved ability of excluded groups to challenge oppressive power and transform policy making:
  - There is increased recognition of the role of collective action by excluded groups in achieving sustained change

OUR ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO STRENGTHEN CITIZEN ACTION AND CIVIL SOCIETY THAT EXPANDS CIVIC AND DEMOCRATIC SPACE.

- There is a shift of funding, support and solidarity towards groups that are most affected by the combined impact of civic and democratic space restrictions and structural forms of discrimination
2. Improved public discourse that reflects greater value for civic and democratic space and social and environmental justice, and greater recognition of the relevance and sustained impact of civil society:
    - Locally led public deliberations and context-relevant analyses are provided in diverse locations and languages around the world
    - Greater public trust is reflected through increased solidarity with the work and priorities of the CIVICUS alliance and broader civil society
  3. Improved accountability by decision makers to uphold the fundamental civic freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression:
    - More actions are taken to support and expand democratic participation in decision-making processes with a focus on citizen and civil society engagement across borders and at scale
    - There is evidence that institutional policies and legislation are becoming more supportive of a vibrant, autonomous civil society
  4. Increased and more effective civil society action moves decision makers to safeguard and expand civic and democratic space:
    - All forms of civil society find more innovative and effective ways to create transnational and cross-thematic opportunities for solidarity action
    - Citizens and civil society leverage knowledge, research and analysis to advance organising and influencing efforts and hold decision makers accountable at local, national, regional and global levels
    - Advocacy and lobbying are done in more empowering and transformative ways to better hold public and private institutions accountable

WE COMMIT TO CONTINUING TO STRENGTHEN OUR THEORY OF CHANGE AND TEST OUR ASSUMPTIONS TO HELP US UNDERSTAND AND EVIDENCE OUR CONTRIBUTION TO OUR LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES.

We intend to achieve these shifts through **strengthening the efficacy, credibility, legitimacy and influence of citizen and civil society action to claim fundamental civic rights and resist oppressive power.**

*We will hold ourselves accountable to our contribution to change through our Accountability Framework. We commit to continuing to strengthen our Theory of Change and test our assumptions to help us understand and evidence our contribution to our longer-term outcomes.*

# 6 OUR LEARNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITMENT

In this next phase of our strategy, CIVICUS will put in practice what we have learned about learning and accountability standards and practices. We will: (1) ensure our stakeholders and allies understand decisions made in relation to our strategic plan, what we want to achieve and how we will go about doing it (**giving account**); (2) collect and address feedback from our members and networks on how we are delivering on our strategy (**taking account**); and (3) enable those who are part of and affected by our strategic efforts to inform and review decisions about the way we progress our strategy (**being held to account**).

As an adaptive, change-seeking alliance, we will:

- Put people at the centre of our work, enable more participatory programming and allow faster responses when changes in direction are required.
- Measure our contribution to social transformation, which includes using quantitative data produced by the communities our alliance serves and qualitative data to present social narratives that capture the difference our work makes in people’s lives.
- Embrace programme quality and innovation that will generate and capture learning, co-constructed with our members and stakeholders on the best ways to achieve our goals and remain resilient and relevant.
- Learn internally from the work we do to understand which of our approaches work well and where and be cognisant of how we learn from and with others as we co-create and implement our programmes with the people and groups we seek to support.
- Conduct a robust mid-term strategy review to inform future iterations of our strategy.

CIVICUS will align our various tactical strategies and frameworks to deliver this Strategic Plan in accordance with our principles and values. Specifically, we will update our results framework to help us gather evidence on our institutional and programmatic outcomes, track our progress against our Strategic Plan, test our Theory of Change and better understand and share our collective impact story.



# 7 CIVICUS STRATEGIC PLAN 2022-2027 THEORY OF CHANGE

## WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT ABOUT HOW CHANGE HAPPENS



Complexity of civil society narrative, diversity of efforts and emergence of new generation leaders

Work on structural and intersectional exclusion at all levels

Increased relevance of civil society's role in defending human rights norms and standards

Importance of investing in strategies that tackle pervasive trends rather than individuals and moments

Greater ability to connect with and learn from new civil society models and emerging actors

Increased importance of strategies that actively connect grassroots and global action

## WHO WE WORK WITH AND INFLUENCE

Individuals and groups most affected by civic and democratic space restrictions

Traditionally excluded communities and their networks

Smaller, less formal communities on the frontlines of social transformation

Protest and social movements, including online platforms

Journalists, media and media development organisations

Youth activists and other evolving forms of people power

Public and private institutions that contribute to expanding civic and democratic space



### OVERARCHING GOAL

To strengthen civil society and citizen action for expanded civic and democratic space

Context and learning informs our strategic choices and goals, underpinned by our values, principles and unique approach

## THE CHANGE WE STRIVE TO SEE

Improved ability of excluded groups to **challenge oppressive power** and transformation.



Improved public discourse that reflects **greater value for civic and democratic space.**



We see our long-term outcomes as necessary conditions to achieving our goal. These outcomes are interrelated and interconnected. Our Theory of Change recognises that the logical relationships between these are non-linear, complex and often context dependent.



Increased and more effective action **moves decision makers** to safeguard and expand civic and democratic freedoms.



Improved **accountability** by decision makers to uphold the **fundamental civic freedoms.**



Strengthened efficacy, credibility, legitimacy and influence of citizen and civil society action to claim fundamental civic rights and resist oppressive power.

Improve **capacity, practice and strategies** of civil society actors and citizens to drive effective action towards transformative change.

1

Generate timely knowledge and analyses

2

Coordinate targeted advocacy

3

Contribute to stronger emergency and sustained support ecosystems

4

Strengthen public discourse and reinforce narratives

5

Building counter-power with most affected groups

## OUR 5 STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES