

# CONNECT, DEFEND, ACT!

MALAWI BASELINE STUDY 2024



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## Baseline Study Connect, Defend, Act! (CDA) Country Malawi

### Brief Project Overview

All around the world, those in power, not only in autocratic governments but in established democracies as well, are increasingly imposing restrictions on civil society to freely express themselves, to protest against systemic injustices and to organize themselves to defend fundamental human rights. Digital tools and platforms carry the potential to create safe and brave spaces for trust-based collaboration and increased access to information, but they remain shaped by unequal access, as well as undermined by increasingly sophisticated digital surveillance and attacks by state and non-state actors.

With Support from NORAD, Hivos is implementing a project called [“Connect, Defend, Act!”](#) To respond to the issue of shrinking civic space and amplify civil society-led action, the “Connect, Defend, Act!” (CDA) project will support Civil Society Actors in Colombia, Indonesia, Malawi and the occupied Palestinian territory in their efforts to defend and expand civic space through three strategic objectives:

- 1) By promoting coalition building among diverse Civil Society Actors, including Human Rights Defenders, Rights holder-led civil society organizations and independent media actors, grounded in civil society-led evidence gathering and knowledge production, and facilitated by context-specific Communities of Action.
- 2) By contributing to safe and inclusive digital civic spaces for sustained collaboration and action among Civil Society Actors through localized holistic digital security capacity strengthening, knowledge production and active referral to digital protection providers.
- 3) By increasing Civil Society Actors’ flexibility to rapidly respond to changes in civic space through organizational capacity strengthening and the provision of strategic funding for sustainable action.

The project aims to strategically support relevant actors within civil society whose work actively contributes to civic space from the perspective of different sectors and interests, while particularly including groups who are marginalized within civil society, such as women, youth, LGBTIQ+ persons, Indigenous People and others. With Support from NORAD, Hivos is implementing a project called ‘Connect, Defend, Act!’. To respond to the







## Specific problems per country

In all four countries, civic space is under considerable pressure according to the CIVICUS Monitor but not fully closed. This means that there are opportunities for Civil Society Actors to positively influence the openness of civic space by preventing further backsliding as well as harnessing windows of opportunities through joint action.

Malawi is a country with a history of political changes, transitioning from one-party rule to multiparty democracy in the early 1990s. While the country has experienced peaceful transitions of power through elections, there have also been instances of contested elections and allegations of electoral fraud. This has led to political polarization and, at times, public protests. Socioeconomic challenges have impacted the ability of citizens to participate in civil society. Despite having solid policies and strategies, their implementation remains weak, primarily due to politicization, ineffective oversight and accountability mechanisms, and weak coordination, among others.

Despite having a diverse media landscape, Malawi is classified as being partly free<sup>18</sup>. There have been instances of harassment and violence against journalists, which have raised concerns about press freedom and media safety. The government's role in regulating media and potential threats to independent reporting has significantly impacted civic space. Malawi faces a substantial digital divide, with limited access to the internet and digital resources in rural and remote areas. This digital divide has also hindered the ability of civil society organizations and citizens to engage in online advocacy and communication.





## Baseline Study Connect, Defend, Act! (CDA)

Country Malawi

### Specific problems per country

<p>Approximately 46 per cent of the population is below 16 years of age and approximately 22 per cent of the nation's young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years are in neither employment nor education or training, and approximately 27 per cent of those with a job are underemployed</p>	<p>A number of human rights issues persist: police brutality, violence against children, child labour and child marriage (one of world's highest rate), gender discrimination, discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people and recently increasing reports of abductions and killings of people living with albinism.</p>	<p>Despite having a diverse media landscape, Malawi is classified as being partly free<sup>18</sup>. There have been instances of harassment and violence against journalists, which have raised concerns about press freedom and media safety. The government's role in regulating media and potential threats to independent reporting has significantly impacted civic space</p>	<p>Malawi faces a substantial digital divide, with limited access to the internet and digital resources in rural and remote areas. This digital divide has also hindered the ability of civil society organizations and citizens to engage in online advocacy and communication</p>
<p>Poverty, limited access to education, healthcare, and other basic services pose significant challenges. These socioeconomic challenges have impacted the ability of citizens to participate in civil society.</p>	<p>Huge disparities exist in access to justice for women, as well as for other marginalized groups such as people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ persons, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.</p>	<p>The space for civil society has been under pressure leading to an 'obstructed' rating of the civic space in Malawi by CIVICUS</p>	<p>The participation of women and young people in governance institutions and processes remains weak</p>

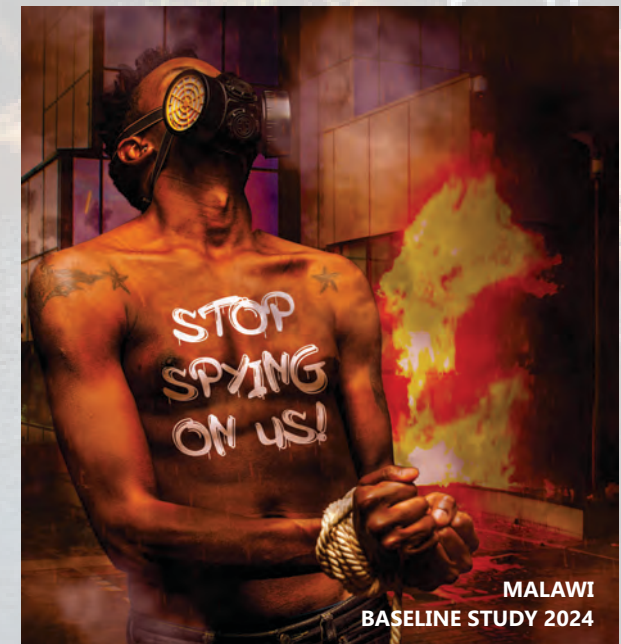
The baseline study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the civic space in Malawi. The study was conducted in two phases: Phase 1 involved a desk review of secondary data, including literature, policy documents, and reports from CSOs and digital security assessments, which laid the foundation for identifying key trends, coalitions, and capacity gaps. The review incorporated international frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and various UN conventions, guiding the assessment of civic space through five principal dimensions: freedoms of information and expression, rights of assembly and association, citizen participation, non-discrimination/inclusion, and human rights/rule of law. Phase 2 focused on primary data collection through surveys and interviews with key stakeholders, including CSOs, human rights defenders, and media actors. Stratified sampling ensured broad representation from CSO and Media actors working with different regions and groups, particularly women, youth, and LGBTIQ+ persons. The data collection process included structured surveys, key informant interviews, and the use of Kobo Toolbox for digitizing and coding the survey, ensuring data accuracy and security. Data analysis utilized SPSS for quantitative data and thematic analysis for

qualitative data, with ethical considerations strictly adhered to, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the safety of participants



The baseline study assessed the civic space context in Malawi, revealing varying perceptions of the environment among civil society organizations (CSOs). Half of the CSOs considered the civic space to be "slightly restricted," while 33.3% felt it was "moderately open," and 16.7% viewed it as "very open." Despite some openness, a majority of CSOs (66.7%) reported facing challenges in participating in civic activities, mainly due to resource shortages (100%), legal barriers (75%), threats or intimidation (75%), and institutional constraints (25%). Furthermore, 25% of CSOs frequently encountered challenges like arrests and threats, while 50% experienced them occasionally. Media actors also

highlighted the crucial role of independent media in promoting civic space, with 66.7% providing platforms for underrepresented voices. Despite press freedom, 33.3% of media actors felt that media independence was compromised by government influence, and 66.7% saw it as under pressure, especially on sensitive issues. Key challenges for media included funding constraints, lack of reliable information, and threats from authorities. These findings underscore a challenging environment for CSOs and media in Malawi, with restrictions and risks impacting their ability to operate effectively and freely.







The baseline results for civic space threats in Malawi reveal a complex and challenging environment for CSOs. While the majority (66.7%) of CSOs reported not facing legal, physical, or digital threats, 33.3% confirmed experiencing such threats. These include physical threats, digital attacks, and legal actions, with some CSOs forced to limit their activities or adjust operational strategies for safety. Media smear campaigns and lawsuits were common, and many CSOs engaged in regular risk assessments to gauge threats.

The baseline also highlighted that the nature of the work and alliances play a significant role in exposure to threats. CSOs working on less controversial issues or with strong protective networks faced fewer risks. Despite these challenges, half of the CSOs reported a somewhat safe physical environment for their activities. Various protective mechanisms, including legal protections, international support, and local safety networks, were identified as vital in safeguarding CSOs. However, challenges remain in ensuring the effectiveness of these measures.

Public perception of civil society actors showed a mixed outlook, with 16.7% noting significant improvement and 50% observing slight improvement. However, 33.3% felt that the public perception remained unchanged, suggesting that while some progress has been made, there is still work to be done to increase recognition and support for CSOs in Malawi.

The baseline results on digital security in CSOs in Malawi revealed varied levels of digital security knowledge among organizations. While 16.7% rated their knowledge as "Excellent," 50% rated it as "Fair," and 33.3% as "Poor." Despite understanding digital security, many CSOs still face challenges securing their digital operations. Half of the organizations reported experiencing digital attacks, such as phishing, hacking, and online harassment. To combat these threats, CSOs have implemented measures like antivirus software, firewalls, strong password protocols, and regular digital security training.

Moreover, 83.3% of CSOs provide digital security training to their staff, with 50%





using antivirus software and 16.7% adopting encryption for data protection. A media actor emphasized using encrypted communication to protect sources' identities, highlighting the importance of digital security for confidentiality, especially when dealing with sensitive information. Additionally, media actors noted that digital platforms expanded their reach and enabled them to report on sensitive topics more freely, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. These findings underscore the growing awareness and response to digital security risks within CSOs and media in Malawi.

The baseline study revealed several gaps in organizational capacity for civil society organizations (CSOs) and media actors in Malawi. While CSOs recognized the importance of strong governance, financial sustainability, and adaptability, some faced significant challenges in securing sustainable funding. About 83% of CSOs had access to sustainable funding, but 16.6% did not, with international donors, government grants, and local fundraising being the primary sources. However, many organizations experienced structural barriers like limited donor interest, competition, geographic isolation, and bureaucratic processes, which hindered access to funds. Additionally, media actors reported that funding for independent journalism was often project-specific, limiting their ability to pursue

critical investigative work.

Despite the importance of funding, half of the CSOs reported having no contingency plans for emergencies, such as sudden restrictions on civic space. This gap in preparedness highlights potential vulnerabilities in adapting to rapidly changing environments. Furthermore, 33% of CSOs felt "somewhat prepared" to respond to changes in the civic space, and there were discrepancies in how frequently organizations updated their strategies—one-third did so quarterly, while another third did so rarely. The lack of regular strategy updates may reflect resource constraints or inadequate capacity to respond to ongoing shifts in the civic landscape.





CSOs' approaches to addressing capacity gaps varied. While half used a comprehensive strategy involving internal capacity building, partnerships, and external expertise, others focused mainly on external partnerships and funding, with fewer prioritizing internal capacity building. These findings suggest that while some organizations leverage multi-faceted approaches to overcome challenges, others may face limitations in developing long-term in-house capacities.

The baseline study revealed significant involvement of CSOs in coalitions. However, while coalitions focused on human rights and gender equality were prominent, challenges persist in their formation and sustainability. Key barriers include a lack of trust, particularly around LGBTIQ+ issues, inadequate funding, poor coordination, and political pressure. These factors contribute to discord among CSOs and hinder effective collaboration.

Additionally, competition for limited resources and varying organizational goals exacerbate the difficulties in coalition-building. Political interference, such as politicians establishing counter-CSOs, further complicates the landscape. While CSOs acknowledged the benefits of coalition membership—such as increased funding, broader networks, and enhanced credibility—there is a clear gap in the

ability to overcome trust issues and align donor-driven priorities with the goals of diverse organizations. Strengthening leadership, securing stable funding, and fostering better coordination are crucial for improving the effectiveness of coalitions in expanding and protecting civic space in Malawi.





## 05 BASELINE RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen Coalition Coordination:** Establish robust frameworks for both formal and informal coalitions that ensure effective communication, shared resources, and mutual support among CSOs, especially those advocating for marginalized groups.
- **Build Digital Security Capacity:** Provide CSOs with tailored digital security training and tools to protect sensitive information and communications, especially for organizations working on high-risk issues like human rights and LGBTIQ+ rights.
- **Address Organizational Capacity Gaps:** Offer targeted capacity-building programs to CSOs, particularly those with limited resources, to enhance their administrative, financial, and strategic capabilities, enabling them to better participate in coalitions and defend civic space.
- **Create Safe Spaces for Marginalized Groups:** Foster inclusive platforms that ensure marginalized voices, such as those of women and LGBTIQ+ individuals, are heard and respected within coalitions, ensuring their rights and needs are prioritized.
- **Improve Trust Among CSOs:** Implement programs that encourage trust-building activities between organizations, focusing on shared values and mutual goals to overcome barriers stemming from differing priorities and competition for resources.
- **Advocate for Long-Term and Flexible Funding:** Engage with donors to secure more sustainable, flexible funding mechanisms that allow CSOs to focus on long-term strategies and adapt to emerging challenges without solely depending on donor-driven agendas.







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