



Connect
Defend
Act

Connect Defend Act

Year in Review – 2025 |
January 2026

Malawi • Indonesia • Colombia •
The occupied Palestinian territory

 **Norway**

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اليوم العالمي لحقوق الانسان HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 10 DECEMBER

استعمار
Colonialism

غياب العدالة
Injustice

فقر
Poverty

Foreword from the Global Project Manager



As we enter 2026, I am pleased to offer you the inaugural edition of the Connect, Defend, Act! (CDA) Year in Review. Program implementation ran throughout 2025 in Malawi, Indonesia, Colombia, and the occupied Palestinian territory. This was a period of profound global shifts in civic space, with authoritarianism gaining ground, polarization and right-wing extremism intensifying, and human rights defenders facing heightened threats. Democratic institutions, meanwhile, were increasingly tested by efforts to weaken accountability and civic participation.

These global dynamics also played out in each program country. Malawi's high-stakes election and political transition saw persistent barriers to inclusive participation by citizens. Indonesia experienced mass mobilization alongside intensifying repression and surveillance. Colombia continued to grapple with violence against civic actors. In the occupied Palestinian territory, civic life remained severely constrained by occupation and conflict. Yet across all contexts, CDA partners persevered, adapting their strategies, sustaining coordination, and keeping civic space alive where it was most under strain.

Across the four countries, 2025 showed how locally grounded strategies can keep civic space alive even under pressure. In Malawi, district-based civil society organizations strengthened their ability to identify and act on civic space challenges, moving from general social advocacy to targeted engagement on issues such as youth participation in local councils, digital insecurity affecting women and young people, and restrictions on public gatherings. Through mapping local power holders and working through CSO networks, partners were able to coordinate responses, engage councils and MPs, and support communities to advocate directly for their rights. In the occupied Palestinian territory, partners sustained civic engagement under extreme

constraint by documenting socio-economic impacts of the war, defending the right to education, and amplifying community-led narratives that challenge erasure and humanitarian reductionism.

In Colombia, civic actors continued to play a critical role in peace, accountability, and reform processes, using coalition-building and monitoring to engage institutions despite ongoing risks to safety and participation. In Indonesia, partners combined civic space monitoring with public education and cultural advocacy, responding to growing concerns around criminalization, digital surveillance, and artistic freedom while strengthening collaboration between civil society, researchers, and youth movements. Together, these experiences underscore the program's design to protect civic space through local relationships, collective action, and the ability of communities to claim participation on their own terms.

Through coalition-building, evidence generation, and collective care, the Communities of Action formed under Connect, Defend, Act! laid the groundwork for deeper collaboration ahead. For the duration of the program, our Year in Review will document CDA's work and strengthen the connections that carry the program forward.

Tisungane Nanthoka
Global Project Manager,
Connect, Defend, Act!

Civic Space in 2025



Civic participation workshop, Colombia.
Picture: Peace and Progress Collective

Across all four countries, 2025 exposed both the fragility and resilience of civic space.



Linking and learning event, Malawi

In Malawi, civic space was shaped by the September general elections and the subsequent political transition. The pre-election period saw arrests, intimidation, and violence targeting protesters and civic actors, alongside harassment of journalists covering political events. Restrictive legal frameworks, including proposed NGO and cybercrime legislation, continued to generate uncertainty for civil society operations. At the same time, opportunities emerged through coordinated election monitoring efforts such as the Election Situation Room, expanded civil society participation, and increased inclusion of women, youth, and candidates with disabilities. These openings enabled coalition-building and reinforced the role of civic actors in promoting transparency and accountability during a high-stakes political moment.

In Indonesia, mass protests in August 2025 highlighted deep public frustration with inequality, labor conditions,

and regressive policy reforms. While these demonstrations represented a powerful assertion of constitutional rights, they were met with excessive force, arbitrary arrests, censorship, and intimidation. Civic space narrowed further through surveillance, criminalization, and pressure on media outlets. Yet civil society organizations responded with renewed coordination, documentation, and innovation. Networks such as KontraS, IIS UGM, Combine Resource Institution, and Koalisi Seni strengthened monitoring, academic freedom, artistic expression, and grassroots safety mechanisms. These parallel trends revealed a shrinking civic environment alongside growing civic determination.

In Colombia, violence against social leaders and human rights defenders continued to restrict participation, particularly for Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities. While structural barriers persisted, localized openings emerged through multi-stakeholder dialogues and increased attention to digital harms. Youth-led digital participation expanded, with communities using storytelling and online advocacy to reclaim visibility. These efforts created entry points for evidence-based engagement, even as insecurity remained a defining risk.

In the occupied Palestinian territory, civic space contracted to one of its most restrictive levels in recent history. The genocide in Gaza, intensified military aggression, settler violence, governance by decree, and donor conditionalities collectively eroded participation, transparency, and accountability. Despite this, civic actors sustained coordination, documentation, and advocacy through decentralized and hybrid organizing methods. National debates around constitutional participation and the right to information offered limited but critical openings for engagement in 2026.

Across contexts, these dynamics shaped how CDA partners prioritized relationship-building, coalition strengthening, and community-level advocacy, grounding action in evidence, solidarity, and adaptability

Voices of CDA



Malawi

Viwemi Chavula

Role: Executive Director

Organization: Centre for Civil Society Strengthening (CCSS)

In 2025, a politically sensitive election year, Viwemi Chavula played a central role in strengthening the grassroots civic infrastructure that empowers residents to connect, build relationships, and work together. Through CDA-supported work, CCSS – led by Viwemi – revitalized Human Rights Defender chapters for women, youth, and persons with disabilities in Mangochi and Nkhotakota districts, restoring local coordination structures that had weakened over time. The organization conducted civic space situational analyses in both districts, producing evidence that shaped advocacy priorities and local engagement strategies.

CCSS also trained civil society organizations and media actors in guiding principles for civic engagement, emphasizing standards for participation, accountability, and rights protection. At the national level, Viwemi actively contributed to Malawi's 2025 Universal Periodic Review process, ensuring that civic space concerns were reflected in the CSO shadow report. He further participated in civil society-wide discussions that identified ten human rights issues requiring urgent attention by the post-September 2025 government.

In the lead-up to the elections, CCSS published an observatory report on civic space dynamics throughout the electoral process, documenting patterns of participation, restriction, and response. According to Viwemi, "The coming years must focus on dismantling restrictive civic space laws and institutionalizing platforms that deliberately cultivate

new generations of civic actors. My hope is for a Malawi where civic participation is protected by law and renewed annually through structured leadership development.”

Colombia

Kenny Stiven Espinoza

Role: Coordinator, Civic Space Monitoring Team

Organization: Corporación Cambio Sostenible

In Colombia, Kenny Stiven Espinoza coordinated one of the most comprehensive civic space monitoring efforts of 2025. The Civic Space Monitoring Report – Colombia 2025 documented restrictions, risks, and opportunities affecting civil society across various regions. His work focused on Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities through coordinated field engagement that strengthened local participation and collective resilience.

Alongside monitoring, Kenny promoted digital security and civic rights training for grassroots organizations, with particular attention to women and LGBTIQ+ groups facing online harassment and surveillance. He represented Cambio Sostenible in dialogues with embassies, academic institutions, and public authorities, ensuring that evidence from affected communities informed policy discussions.

“Defending civic space in Colombia means amplifying the voices of those most at risk, and ensuring their rights are not silenced,” he reflected. His work exemplifies CDA’s commitment to basing advocacy on lived experience and sustained documentation.

Occupied Palestinian territory

Iyad Riyahi

Role: Co-founder and Lead Researcher

Organization: Al-Marsad – The Social and Economic Policies Monitor

In 2025, Iyad Riyahi led Al-Marsad’s national civic space baseline research, titled The Architecture of Control. It shows how Israeli colonial occupation, Palestinian executive governance by decree, and political conditions set by donors intersect to restrict Palestinian civic space. And how violence,



fragmentation, and economic pressure systematically undermine participation, accountability, and civil society independence.

Beyond research, Iyad led national advocacy campaigns defending social and economic rights, civic freedoms, and the autonomy of Palestinian civil society. He played a central role in collective advocacy addressing the genocide in Gaza, the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements, restrictive decree-laws such as the General Debt Law, and in the Right to Curricula campaign defending Palestinian children’s educational rights.

Despite extreme repression and mobility restrictions, Iyad helped keep coordinated civic action going through national coalitions, which reinforced shared positions and strategies at a time of acute fragmentation. As he notes, “Oppression generates its own instruments of misdirection. Our task as civil society is to confront and dismantle them, not be pulled into reproducing them.”



Activities and Achievements



 NOIS Radio



Malawi

In Malawi, CDA partners focused on reinforcing civic infrastructure during an election year. Civic space monitoring activities generated district-level and national evidence on participation, restriction, and response, informing advocacy strategies. The Connect Café provided a platform for dialogue among women, youth, and civic actors, linking lived experience with broader civic space analysis. At the national Linking and Learning event, partners and rightsholders reflected on advocacy initiatives, shared lessons, and developed joint priorities for post-election engagement.



Indonesia

CDA-supported activities in Indonesia emphasized monitoring, reflection, and protection. The Civic Spacetime Workshop in Yogyakarta convened civil society actors to map risks, alliances, and resilience strategies, introducing a broader understanding of civic space that includes time, energy and safety. Ongoing civic spacetime monitoring by IIS UGM and KontraS produced tools and frameworks that will inform subnational reports through 2027. Koalisi Seni's workshop on artistic freedom strengthened networks among artists, journalists, and rights defenders, focusing on mobility restrictions, unstable funding, and the need for legal protection.



Colombia

In Colombia, CDA supported spaces where marginalized youth learned narrative and advocacy skills. Workshops such as Defending Ethnic Civic Space in Colombia enabled Afro-descendant and Indigenous participants to develop advocacy messages rooted in cultural identity and lived experience. By combining ancestral knowledge with digital tools, these initiatives strengthened community-led storytelling, digital

resilience, and collective advocacy.

Occupied Palestinian territory

In the occupied Palestinian territory, CDA focused on sustaining civic resilience despite severe restrictions. Support for civic space monitoring enabled partners to document patterns of repression, governance by decree, and donor bureaucracy. Working with national coalitions and community initiatives such as Ouneh and the Right to Curricula campaign, civic actors collectively defended social and economic rights and preserved their autonomy in an extremely hostile environment.

Cross-Country Learning and Shared Lessons

Across Malawi, Indonesia, Colombia, and the occupied Palestinian territory, 2025 revealed strikingly similar patterns regarding civic space. One in particular stood out: civic pressure rarely appears in isolation. Legal uncertainty, political intimidation, digital surveillance, economic precarity, and social polarization often reinforce one another, narrowing the room for participation even where formal democratic structures exist. At the same time, the year underscored the centrality of coalition-building as a protective and strategic response.

In all four countries, civic actors were most effective when they acted collectively. Communities of Action provided not only to coordinate their efforts but also provided spaces for shared analysis and joint positioning during moments of heightened risk, including elections, mass protests, armed conflict, and legislative overreach.

Another important lesson CDA learned was about the evolving nature of civic engagement. Digital spaces became places of both opportunity and risk. While online tools enabled documentation, storytelling, and connection across great distances, they also exposed rights defenders to harassment, surveillance, and disinformation. This dual reality stressed the need for holistic approaches that combine digital safety, narrative power, and offline organizing.

Finally, 2025 reaffirmed that evidence matters. Civic space monitoring, whether through observatories, reports, or community-led documentation, proved essential for grounding advocacy, countering misinformation, and preserving legitimacy. Across countries, partners proved that rigorous, locally rooted evidence can vastly strengthen both national advocacy and cross-country learning.



Looking Ahead

In 2026, Connect, Defend, Act! will consolidate these lessons with a special focus on joint action, while continuing to support coalition-led advocacy in contexts where political transitions and protracted crises rapidly change conditions for civic action.

Digital protection will remain a core priority. Building on the experiences of 2025, the program will increase support for all-round digital safety, linking technical security and collective response mechanisms. Along with continued investment in civic space monitoring, this will ensure that partners are equipped to document trends, identify risks early, and generate evidence that informs action.

Cross-country learning will intensify. By creating dedicated spaces for exchange among partners in different regions, CDA aims to identify strategies that work in various contexts, recognizing that shared challenges can be handled with context-sensitive solutions.

Above all, the year ahead will prioritize local ownership. CDA will continue to amplify the agency, knowledge and leadership of civic actors who are already defending space under pressure. In doing so, the program remains committed to supporting civic action that is adaptive and rooted in the lived realities of communities.



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WHO WE ARE
Civil Society Strengthening (CCSS)
aim of strengthening and advocating
and protecting human rights,
and local development.

PROJECT NAME
Connect, Defend, Act! - Civic Space
Grant

PROJECT GOAL
Actors in Malawi can positively
openness of and respond to
the civic space by strengthening
to monitor, document and
shifts in Malawi's civic space.

**WHAT DO WE WANT TO
ACHIEVE?**
Strengthening Civil Society Actors Coalition in
and assessing civic space.
Building Organizational Capacity
targeted capacity-build


Habiba Osman
(Presentation on human
rights defenders toolkit)_3



Resources and Knowledge Products

Palestine

[Post-Ceasefire Priorities for Municipalities in the Gaza Strip](#)

[The Future of Commodity Prices in the Gaza Strip](#)

[The Aid Economy: "Humanitarian" Assistance in Gaza](#)

[A New Public Debt Law: The Authority Plans Billions in Additional Borrowing](#)

[Assessment of Democratic Practices in Labor Unions and Professional Syndicates](#)

[The War on Gaza: Why It Is Among the Worst Modern Global Disasters](#)

[The Role of Social Solidarity in Recovery and Reconstruction, with a focus on children](#)

[Comparative Study on the Rights of Women Workers in Private Kindergartens \(2021–2024\)](#)

[Professions of Survival in Gaza](#)

[In the Swamp of Concepts: Gaza, Denied Justice, and an Excluded Generation](#)

[On Journalism and Storytelling: How Gaza Exposed the Falsehood of 'Global Standards](#)

[Israeli illegal settlements and land appropriation](#)

[We Eat What We Grow](#)

[The Economic Crisis](#)

Indonesia

[State of Artistic Freedom in Indonesia 2024](#)

[Civic Space Monitoring Report – Semester 1 \(2025\)](#)

[Let's Understand the Monitoring of Civil Liberties Situation in Indonesia](#)

[Understand and Protect: Civic Space is Ours](#)

[Central Java: The Granary of Criminalization.](#)

Colombia

[Country Strategy Development for Colombia](#)

[Civic Space Monitoring Report 2025- Partner Cambio Sostenible](#)

[Civic Space Monitoring Report 2025 - Partner Nois Radio](#)

[Community of Action presentation - Partner Fundación SIDOC](#)

Malawi

[Call for CSO's to monitor government services](#)

[Media editors' engagement on child protection](#)

[Children led engagement on climate change](#)

[The media's role in safeguarding child rights](#)



Gaza Genocide
Displacement Tent Camp

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Norway

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