

TEN YEARS TO TURN THE TIDE

SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY IN TIMES OF SURGING AUTHORITARIANISM AND INEQUALITY 2026 - 2036

OUR VALUES AND MISSION

Hivos is a human rights and social justice organization driven by humanist values. We were founded in 1968, at the height of the global wave of social and political mobilizations in the 1960s that laid the foundation for new progressive civil society movements worldwide.

Our values are people centered. We believe everyone has the right to live in freedom and dignity, to enjoy equal opportunities, and to influence decisions that affect their lives, communities, and country. We believe that people are not the same, but equal, and that they should be treated and treat each other fairly. We work collaboratively with individuals, communities, activists, and movements, respecting their autonomy and building partnerships based on mutual trust. Recognizing the risks involved in defending civil and political rights, we highly value the courage it takes to (support those who) stand up to threats and repression.

Our mission is to amplify and connect voices that promote justice and challenge power imbalances. We particularly empower marginalized groups to organize, raise their voice, and demand their rights. Our work with individuals and organizations contributes towards just, inclusive, and life sustaining societies where people have equal access to opportunities, rights, and resources.

THE CURRENT STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

A quick search of "the current state of civil society" in any browser will pull up the same bleak landscape. Since the mid 2010s, civic space and the broader environment in which it operates have been shrinking at an alarming rate.

Governments and other actors are increasingly turning to legal and political means of restricting the ability of civil society organizations to operate. Repressive laws are passed to stifle dissent, while human rights defenders, activists, and independent media face growing threats to their safety and security from both state and non-state actors. Targeted funding cuts further hamper civil society's ability to operate.

Rapidly evolving technologies are being used to spread disinformation, undermine democratic values, and expand invasive surveillance, while tech leaders are increasingly aligning with right-wing politics and authoritarianism.

These mounting hurdles to activists' and organizations' ability to do their work are compounded by economic inequality, political polarization, and the rise of right-wing populism and anti-rights movements. Individual activists and established civil society organizations are affected equally, as are excluded groups including women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, Indigenous communities, migrants, and youth.

Despite these obstacles, people and their organizations continue to show remarkable resilience and creativity, combining advocacy, sustained protests, online campaigns, strategic litigation, and activism.

Grassroots resistance movements have emerged and are building networks. They organize and protest to defend human rights and democratic values, push for systemic change, and seize opportunities for positive transformation. These movements and concerted civil society action have stood up powerfully to corruption, democratic backsliding, and lack of government responsiveness in, for example, Guatemala, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Indonesia.

INGOs are also becoming more local by supporting local civil society and forming alliances with local governments and community-based organizations to address challenges.

However, the sustainability of these efforts is at risk due to acute lack of funding, fragmented civil society landscapes, and the increasing complexity of challenges and threats.

OUR FOCUS FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS

We envision a just world in which everyone, regardless of their identity, background or circumstances, lives in dignity and freedom and can build a fair and sustainable future for themselves, their communities, and the wider society.

Hivos therefore sees its mission moving forward as defending and expanding the civil and political rights that enable individuals, marginalized communities, their movements, and their organizations to claim and realize equality and justice. The full, unhindered exercise of these rights is necessary to keep civic space open and growing.

Our focus in the coming decade is on supporting civil society organizations and networks; informal groups; independent media and cultural actors; human rights defenders; community organizations, and other organized civil society actors that form vital networks to improve their societies. We plan to sustain and strengthen these target populations by providing funding, knowledge, and skills, as well as access to institutions, platforms, and donors. But also, by publicly taking sides with activists and human rights defenders to amplify their voices. At the same time, we are constantly developing our organization's technical and political skills to support civil society effectively and share these skills with others.

More and more, cities are the places where people organize and negotiate power. So we see the greatest potential for supporting and organizing civic and political activism in urban areas across Africa, the Americas, and West Asia. And we will continue our close collaboration with the Humanis Foundation in Indonesia. But we will also seek to work in Europe, engaging with like-minded networks and coalitions to help turn the tide of shrinking civic space that threatens this continent as well.

Our priority is the civil and political rights of movements and civil society actors targeted by the powerful because of their transformational social or political agenda. However, we believe that these rights can also be promoted and protected by addressing underlying economic, social, and/or human rights as an entry point.

For example, through our past and present initiatives that use economic empowerment to increase the resilience of LGBTIQ+ people facing societal exclusion, or the Urban Futures program, which facilitates youth participation in city-level governance by involving them in promoting healthy food systems, or Voice, an inclusive grant-making program that supported around 750 projects led by groups and individuals from the margins of (civil) society.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Our Theory of Change is grounded in the firm belief that individual agency and collective action are what bring about systemic change. This means that civil society actors and movements must be the key decision-makers and co-creators behind collective action so they can shape narratives, propose solutions, and lead responses to shrinking civic space.

Three strategic assumptions underpin our support for movements and civil society actors:

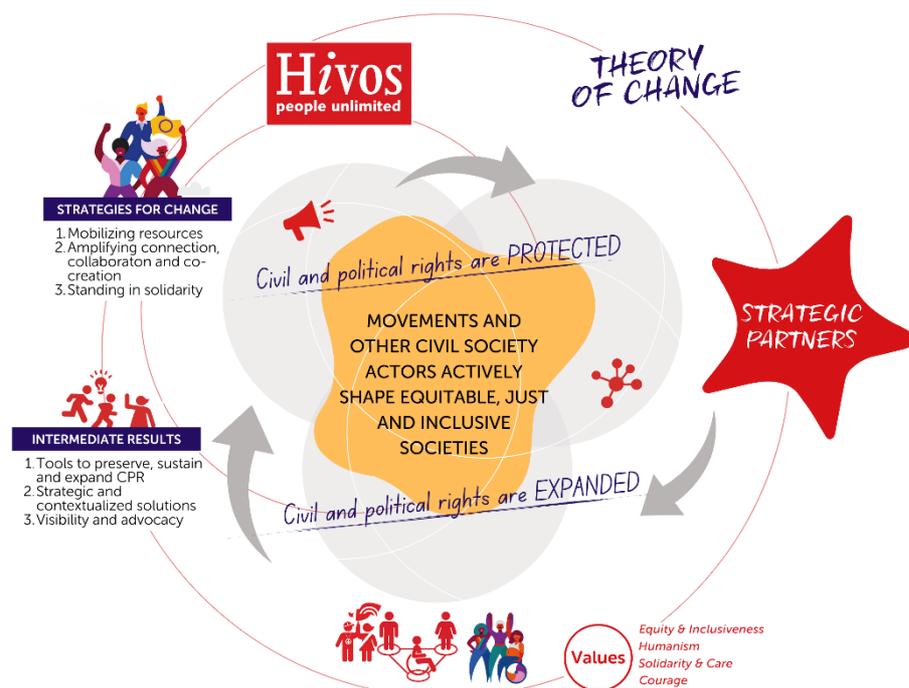
- Flexible funding, rapid support, holistic security, open knowledge, and de-risking mechanisms will help them sustain vibrant civic environments and adapt to shocks.
- Convening “safe and brave” spaces—physical, digital, or hybrid—will enable civic actors to connect, collaborate, and co-create strategies across borders while working within local contexts.
- Solidarity in the form of taking public stances, offering legal and financial backing, providing emergency protection, and engaging diverse allies will help civic actors continue to shape public agendas instead of retreating.

If these strategies advance, they will likewise lead to three intermediate results:

- Movements and civil society actors have tools to preserve, sustain, and expand vibrant and resilient civic environments.
- Movements and other civil actors implement strategic and contextualized solutions.
- Civil society actors and movements are visible and positioned in advocacy spaces.

Once the intermediate results take root, movements and civil society actors will be able to respond to threats and protect civil and political rights – our first long-term outcome, and then, they will be able to claim and expand civil and political rights – our second long-term outcome.

If these long-term outcomes are realized, movements and other civil society actors will be able to actively shape equitable, just, and inclusive societies that respect civil and political rights, which is the desired change at the heart of the Hivos Theory of Change.



HOW WE WORK

Hivos strengthens and resources organizations and movements with the potential to improve a broad range of human, civil, and political rights. In particular, if they are directly at risk of being targeted or if they have the potential to spark popular mobilization for a transformative progressive agenda. Hivos also uses its lengthy experience to create supportive environments for civil society organizations.

Whether our support consists of long-term capacity sharing, alliance building, or short-term emergency funding, it can count on our decades-long track record of working closely with individuals, their projects or organizations, and movements across the world. This lets us support both established and emerging initiatives in or outside the mainstream, and work with creative and courageous people, to address sensitive and under-resourced issues, often in volatile or complex environments.

We take pride in our grant-making role — key to resourcing initiatives that are under (political or financial) pressure or struggle to access funding directly — but understand the complexities of power dynamics that this brings. That is why participatory grant-making and people-led Communities of Action are central to our program development.

We also understand that activism and advocacy in complex contexts might need to take place in secure spaces and spheres. So, in addition to supporting in-person gatherings and actions when safe and effective to do, we have co-created programs that allow people to safely meet online.

Standing with people and their movements against injustice is also the criteria we use in selecting program partners, funders, and allies. We partner with and seek funding from and for institutions that support power distribution at the global, national, and increasingly local level.

Lastly, we are uniquely positioned to combine the expertise of our partners with our own to contribute to global knowledge production and advocacy on issues that affect civil society organizations and movements. Using our experience in advocating at global fora, we amplify local voices, bring organizations together regionally, and advocate for their solutions globally. Hivos takes a clear public stance when civil and political rights are under attack, joining the voices of those most affected, or taking the side of our outspoken partners. When helpful, we speak truth to power on our own.

OUR ONGOING EFFORTS TO DEFEND CIVIC SPACE

Promoting civic space has long been an integral part of our work. Through initiatives like the *Digital Defenders Partnership* (DDP), *Connect, Defend, Act!* and the *Bessy Ferrera Emergency Fund for LGBTIQ+ activists*, Hivos provides safe and inclusive environments for civil society actors and human rights defenders affected by shrinking civic space.

At a systemic level, we co-lead the *EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society* (EU SEE), which engages and supports civil society organizations across more than 80 countries where civic space is under pressure.

With input from local and global civil society partners, EU SEE's Early Warning Mechanism documents changes and sheds light on critical trends in the enabling environment for civil society. The mechanism issues real-time alerts about deteriorations or improvements that give civil society, governments, and stakeholders actionable insights to tackle challenges and seize opportunities effectively.

HOW WE FUND OUR WORK

Hivos has traditionally worked closely with governmental and philanthropic funders to deliver ambitious grant-making and capacity strengthening programs. We plan to continue working with them to strategically support civil society networks, while further diversifying our sources of income and portfolio of activities. Public supporters, whose unearmarked contributions and political support can provide additional legitimacy and flexibility to our work, will become increasingly important in our donor portfolio.

OUR ORGANIZATION

To better defend and expand the civil and political rights of our target populations in the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), we have restructured the organization. The new set-up will also help us manage a wider mix of activities either directly or through partners. This includes public engagement, running programs directly at times, and managing different funding streams. The structure will keep evolving to help us connect with more people and stay active in key places while remaining flexible and efficient.

As of 2026, we use a functional structure to organize our operations. Collaboration and coordination across countries is still important, but geographical regions no longer define how the organization is set up. The "center" of the organization is not located at a single office. A CEO leads staff based in multiple locations and grouped into five departments that provide direction and support:

- Business Development
- Programs
- External Engagement
- Finance and Information Systems
- People and Culture

The new model keeps Hivos connected and effective while promoting a fair, collaborative, and truly decolonized way of working.

