CIVICUS CRISIS RESPONSE FUND

GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOLS

What is the Crisis Response Fund?

CIVICUS is currently guided by its 2022 - 2027 Strategic Priorities, which were identified through an extensive consultation process. These Strategic Priorities are to i) Generate timely knowledge and advocacy, ii) Coordinated targeted advocacy, iii) Contribute to stronger emergency and sustained support ecosystems, iv) Strenghten public discourse in civic space and reinforce civil society narratives, v) Build counter power with the most affected groups and their movements.

While some threats develop gradually, others materialise swiftly and require an immediate response. Thus, the CIVICUS Crisis Response Fund was set up in 2008. It serves as a mechanism for mobilising quick, principled, and effective responses to events that threaten civil society's fundamental rights to collectively express, associate and organise.

In 2011, CIVICUS joined a coalition of seven international civil society partners administering the Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund; an emergency fund for civil society established multilaterally by 20 donor governments and independent foundations, to provide additional financial and technical support to embattled civil society around the world.

Lifeline supports projects seeking to enable CSOs and informal groups to take preventive action to avoid or mitigate threats or conduct advocacy on freedom of association and assembly issues at domestic and international levels to open and protect civic space. Applications with a specific focus on freedom of expression, or LGBTIQA+ advocacy are not supported by the Lifeline consortium, as there are existing dedicated funds for these areas managed by Freedom House.

In 2024, CIVICUS became part of the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (EU SEE) Program. Under the EU SEE Flexible Support Mechanism (FSM), CIVICUS delivers Emergency/Resiliency and Sudden Opportunity/Advocacy Grants through CRF grants. These grants aim to respond to restrictions and threats on civic space, seize on opportunities to enhance the enabling environment for civil society, and enhance resiliency of civil society actors in the EU SEE 86 countries. The grant process operates in close coordination with the Early Warning Mechanism of the EU SEE, and applications are prioritized based on alerts triggered by this system.

Smaller organizations, grassroots movements, and collectives that are often excluded from existing funding sources or represent traditionally marginalized groups—such as women, LGBTIQA+ individuals, youth, people with disabilities, Indigenous communities, and rural populations—will be prioritized in the EU SEE FSM evaluation process.

You can see the list of the EU SEE eligible countries* at the end of the document.

Please note that applications related to freedom of expression and/or those submitted by LGBTIQA+ organizations will be evaluated and funded exclusively in EU SEE countries through the EU SEE Flexible Support Mechanism.

The Crisis Response Fund team evaluates applications based on the eligibility criteria. Once an application is selected to be granted, the team identifies the most appropriate donor for funding and proceeds with the necessary consortium and donor steps.

Following the submission of the application online, partners can expect to hear back from the CRF team within 2-4 working days. If the application abides by the protocols listed and the partner verification process is successful, partners can expect a 4–6-week turnaround in the processing of their application, contracting and initial payout.

Guidelines for the use of the Fund

The CIVICUS Crisis Response Fund differs from other civil society campaigns to support human rights defenders. Rather than focusing on individual cases, it aims to protect the civil society sector, as a whole, against systemic threats to its existence with a specific focus on protecting the rights to Freedom of Assembly, Association and Expression (FOAAE). Such threats include, but are not limited to, the introduction or existence of restrictive legislation, the systemic targeting of human rights defenders, arbitrary closure of civil society organisations, fiscal threats such as the freezing of bank assets, and barriers to or attacks on free civic expression and assembly.

The CIVICUS Crisis Response Fund will be used in cases that require immediate action – either to forestall imminent threats (through resiliency/emergency grants), or to address ongoing and new restrictions (through advocacy/sudden opportunity grants). Although responses should be as immediate as possible, CIVICUS evaluates when, why and how it should respond to particular situations. If the situation under review makes us answer YES to the following three questions, CIVICUS will then have sufficient justification to mobilise the Fund's resources:

1. (For advocacy/sudden opportunity grants) Is it a crisis in freedom of assembly, association, and expression?

(For resiliency/ emergency grants) Is it a crisis that requires action to enhance the resilience of civil society actors in response to violations of freedom of assembly, association, and expression?

It is a crisis if the case can be categorised as one of the following:

- Significant deterioration of civic space in the areas of freedom of assembly, association, and expression: for example, urgent response is necessary to prevent the curtailment of civil society activities, because there are enough indications that restrictions on civil society are imminent.

- Escalation of existing threats to civil society: for example, civil society is already suffering from restrictions on its activities. This includes cases where civil society activity has been recently curtailed, as well as situations involving a growing number of threats over a period of time.

2. Are there systemic threats to civil society?

Systemic threats to civil society include those which undermine civil society in general in the country or region. This also includes threats to specific sectors of civil society, e.g. women's groups, environmental organisations, indigenous movements, among others. An individual attack on an activist would not generally be seen as a systemic threat; however, numerous attacks on activists could be part of a campaign to intimidate civil society groups, which would then be seen as systemic.

3. Will our actions be beneficial?

In addition to deciding whether a situation has become a 'crisis', we must assess whether a response by CIVICUS will be of assistance and will have a positive impact. This must always be considered in consultation with local partners or members, where they exist. In countries where CIVICUS does not have members or partners, CIVICUS will consult with other international organisations working on the ground.

In evaluating potential positive impact, some of the criteria to consider are:

a) Security: Will our actions place CIVICUS' staff or local members, partners or civil society in general in greater danger?

b) Local actions: Will our actions complement and enhance, or undermine, the work of local civil society?

c) Presence of other international actors: Are there already other international actors working on this crisis? Would our involvement provide additional assistance, or make an additional impact?

d) Strategic value: Is the country in a position to influence other countries in the region? Will CIVICUS' work in this country have a positive impact externally as well as, or only, within the country?

What is the Response?

Responses will be chosen in consultation with local partners and members, and where possible or relevant, other international organisations working in the area. Actions taken using the Fund's resources are envisaged to be short-term (i.e. under six months in duration).

Prospective advocacy responses could include, but are not limited, to:

- Convening of working groups of local, regional and international civil society to address the crisis.
- Supporting civil society representatives from the ground in advocacy at international and regional forums.
- Submissions of reports to the human rights monitoring bodies of regional and international institutions.
- Solidarity visits or missions by international high-level officials and/or celebrities.
- Networking regionally with other civil societies under siege to exchange best practices and share legal expertise.
- Regional and international advocacy campaigns directed at regional and international bodies.
- Technical assistance for the analysis of pending or existing repressive legislation.
- National workshops to discuss and plan advocacy strategies, such as repealing restrictive legislation.

Prospective resiliency activities under the grant could include (but are not limited to):

- Training for organisations on the ground, such as in digital security.

- Activities to improve the physical security of the civil society organisation's premises.

- Psychosocial capacity development and support for civil society actors.

- The creation of safehouses to support the relocation of civil society actors at risk.

- Development of strategic responses to anticipated and verifiable threats e.g., in response to prospective laws restricting access to foreign funding, the development of an alternative funding protocol for civil society.

Notes on the funds to human rights defenders: While the CIVICUS Crisis Response Fund Crisis is designed to protect the civil society against systemic threats to its existence; emergency assistance that is required for an individual or a CSO where two or more individuals are at risk will be coordinated with Freedom House and Frontline Defenders as key international partners. Emergency assistance consists of mainly, but not limited to: legal representation, medical support, relocation costs, and transportation for family members, equipment replacement, and other such expenses.

Freedom House and Frontline Defenders will lead on any emergency assistance required using their own established guidelines and protocols. Click here to read more about the funds available to individual human rights defenders under the Lifeline Embattled CSO Fund.

Approval process and protocols for the use of the Fund

The use of the Fund can be proposed by any civil society organisation in a situation of crisis, including any CIVICUS members and partners. Applicants do not need to be CIVICUS members to apply for the CRF. Steps towards an approved use of the Fund's resources will be as follows:

1. Requests will be submitted on an online form which will contain all necessary information to allow the request to be properly evaluated.

2. Only in circumstances where partners feel unsafe or do not have access to the internet, they can either submit an application via this email: crisis.response@civicus.org

3. Requests will be evaluated by the CRF team according to the criteria presented above. Relevant partners and members will be consulted in evaluating the requests.

4. Partners are eligible to apply for personnel costs on the fund, but these must be in proportion to the activities undertaken and should not be in excess of 40% of the overall

budget. Similarly, core costs will be considered in the budget commensurate with project activities undertaken.

5. Recommendations for use of the Fund's resources, the amount, as well as the type of response will be submitted to the Secretary General.

6. The Secretary General will approve or reject. The Secretary General may delegate the responsibility of approval to other member(s) of the Management Team.

7. The application will then proceed with the necessary consortium and donor steps.

8. CIVICUS issues grants through a tranche system. Upon signing the sub-partnership agreement, partners receive a first tranche payment (e.g. 60%) of the grant which is calculated based on the partners' risk profile. When submitting the final reporting documents, partners are required to have spent 100% of the funding, and thereafter CIVICUS will provide the remaining balance as a reimbursement (e.g. 40%) within 14-20 working days.

9. Partners are required to submit monthly grant updates, a final narrative report and an impact report as part of their undertaking in the implementation of the grant.

Cross department and unit involvement in the response

In addition to resources, CIVICUS is able to provide additional support across its clusters for the overall enhancement of envisaged project activities. This may include:

- Identifying partners and networks for additional coordination during the project;
- Identifying possible crises;
- Developing new media contacts in countries and regions where CIVICUS has not worked previously;
- Raising awareness among networks;
- Mobilising partners and networks to support campaigns;
- Providing convening space to address issues; and
- Assisting with the development of long-term initiatives in particular countries.

***The list of the EU System for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Countries**

Middle East, Asia and the Pacific

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Tajikistan, Timor-Leste

Sub-Saharan Africa

Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Americas and the Caribbean

Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago

Southern Neighborhood

Algeria, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian territories, Tunisia