



# Development Needs a Strong Civil Society

Swiss Church Aid's strategy and achievements to protect and expand an enabling environment for civil society actors to foster participation and ownership.

# Why Strengthening Civil Society Organizations Matters

## Global challenges

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In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the spread of the COVID-19 virus a pandemic. Governments around the world responded by enacting emergency laws, passing regulations and imposing codes of conduct aimed at protecting the health and lives of their citizens. Such restrictions on rights in response to health emergencies are in principle legitimate under international law. However, they must be proportionate, necessary, conform to the law, time-bound, and not discriminate against anyone.

With the added impact of the COVID-19 restrictions, 2020 marks a new, unprecedented low in terms of civil society space. 263 million people live in countries where there is space for civil society action. That is four million fewer than last year. Today, barely 13% (18% in 2019) of people worldwide can unhinderedly speak their minds, assemble, and fight against injustice. In contrast, 6.8 billion people live in closed, oppressed or restricted societies. This means that 87% of humanity has to deal with governments that restrict fundamental rights or harass, persecute and monitor their critics. Moreover, in many countries, those who physically and psychologically abuse or kill dissenters are likely to go unpunished.<sup>1</sup>

Analyses show that under the guise of the pandemic, stigmatisation and repressive forces intensified, critical voices were increasingly silenced, and social divisions rose. In many instances, civic space was restricted under the pretext to combat the virus, but in reality, it was just taken as an opportunity to further restrict civil liberties and silence critics. Only once the pandemic is over and once it is seen if (or not) civil space restrictions are lifted, the world will know how high the pandemic's real impact on the civil society's space for participation and political action is.

Years before the pandemic began, the global community had observed a steady decline of civil rights worldwide. Major emerging economies such as China and India have provided blueprints for 'top down' approaches to economic development that fail to take the people on board and displays little regard for the environment. In some cases, legitimating norms have shifted from liberal and human rights values to values emphasising economic progress and sovereignty or even towards attitudes of neoliberalism, characterised by a high tolerance for rapacious economic investment in the pursuit of profit. In such cases, the 'discourse of inclusion' increasingly competes with the need for 'Big Development' policies and major infrastructural investments.

Civic space has been changing regarding who may participate and how. For instance, it has been closing for actors in the liberal, human rights tradition, but widened for right-wing, extremist and conservative groups. The rise of digital space has reshaped the civic space for all actors, helping populist protest movements to take up more space to mobilise.

In contrast, political and economic elites want to increase their control on power (e.g., by retaining a predatory hold on lucrative office, defend national sovereignty against foreign values, or pass 'developmental' agendas that violate human rights in the pursuit of growth and profit. Conflicts over the use of natural resources and land are key reasons why civic space is restricted. How political elites balance their power between civil society, state and market in the overall development process will determine the implications to advance in achieving the sustainable development goals.<sup>2</sup>

**More details:** [www.heks.ch/civic-space](http://www.heks.ch/civic-space)

### Development needs of civil society – key findings

- The shrinking civil society space hinders social and economic development and therefore the achievements of Agenda 2030's SDGs.
- Restrictions on civic space prevent civil society organizations (CSO) and other civil actors from engaging in policy formulation, monitoring, raising awareness, championing the voices of vulnerable groups, and from building partnerships.
- When civic space is limited, development risks to exclude voices and to increase social distrust. Ultimately, this increases inequalities and makes development less sustainable.
- Civic space is essential to provide transparent and verifiable information. If fact-based data is absent due to shrinking space, trust in official data and political performance will decrease.
- Weakening of civil society may increase a permissive culture of corruption without sufficient checks and balances. This erodes trust in governance and triggers significant economic, social and political crises.
- Over-emphasis on prestigious huge infrastructure projects and unregulated economic growth competes with equality and inclusion and therefore puts the Agenda 2030's main pledge of 'leaving no one behind' at risk.

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<sup>1</sup> Bread for the World & CIVICUS (2021). Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft 2020.

<sup>2</sup> ACT alliance/IDS Development needs civil society – the implications of civic space for the SDGs 2019.

## How HEKS/EPER responds

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Strengthening civil society has always played a central role at HEKS/EPER. In the HIP 2021-24, the HRBA was even adopted as an overarching approach. HEKS/EPER supports the voice and collective engagement of civic movements to fulfil rights for all. The role and function of civil society is diverse and – depending on the context - HEKS/EPER takes different approaches to promote civil society action.

It is essential not to separate service delivery from the element of rights-based advocacy, as all of the above functions (see box) will be needed in the long term. Furthermore, HEKS/EPER distinguishes between two mutually enforcing perspectives on strengthening civil society. The first component is a means to achieve a specific goal in line with the HEKS/EPER vision, which can be access to land and resources or overcoming discrimination. The other dimension is the strengthening of civil society as a development actor in its own right. In this sense, a free and open civil society is not just a means to achieve other goals, but a value in its own. Linked to this is the conviction - based on the ACT study<sup>3</sup> – that development towards justice always needs a proactive, open civil society and that those democratic values based on the rule of law are an important goal in itself. HEKS/EPER, therefore, supports measures that strengthen civil society's freedom of assembly, the possibility to organise, to express oneself and to protest peacefully. HEKS/EPER works on both components at the international, national and local level.

**Strengthening civil society and civic space from local to national level:** At the local level, HEKS/EPER strengthens civil society by bringing together different civil society groups and providing opportunities for networking and strengthening advocacy. Local partners are supported in producing good analyses and bringing facts about human rights violations to the relevant national and international bodies. While in the past, the focus was on human rights violations such as land grabbing, today, fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and assembly have gained in importance.

HEKS/EPER's engagement includes facilitation within local civil society networks and creating missing links to increase strength at national level, as well as international lobbying, including carrying local representatives and voices into national and/or international policy development, such as the Global Partnership for Development Effectiveness and UN bodies. As HEKS/EPER is closely linked to its partners and civil society in its focus countries, it is able to carefully assess the full diversity of civil society actors while ensuring that partner organisations and supported alliances are legitimate advocates working in a rights-based and non-violent manner. Links to national and international human rights monitoring bodies or international accompaniment are means to protect courageous civil society representatives as human rights defenders.

## Promising Practices Worldwide

### Honduras – synergies for human rights

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**Honduras: Standing up for its rights puts people at risk – HEKS/EPER enhances protection and networking.**

In Honduras, fundamental human rights have been violated for years. People who work for social justice are often persecuted and killed. Worldwide, Honduras has one of the highest murder rates and other actors of violence against civilians. Those who stand up for justice are compromised. People who support land rights and environmental protection are subject to a particular high risk. The perpetrators often commit these crimes on behalf of large landowners, mining, hydroelectric or photovoltaic entrepreneurs or other powerful elites. However, impunity is high. The judiciary has neither the necessary means nor the political will to sentence those responsible.

With its 'umbrella project' PRODERECHOS, HEKS/EPER aims to foster the collaboration of several local, national and international institutions that work towards protecting human rights on different levels. The facilitation of exchange between communities and social movements leads to coordinated and mutually agreed actions. The intention is to expand the impact of activities that have been done separately until now.

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<sup>3</sup> ACT alliance/IDS Development needs civil society – the implications of civic space for the SDGs 2019.

- The project includes the main recommendations of the study 'Shrinking Space of Civil Society in Honduras, 2016' elaborated by HEKS/EPER, Peace Watch Switzerland (PWS) and Swiss Peace.
- Improving the protection of civil society organisations and human rights defenders
- Promoting the reduction of the fragmentation of civil society actors
- Promotion of dialogue, exchange and cooperation
- Working with a programmatic and inclusive approach
- Improving access to information

**Achievements:** Supported by the 'Plataforma Internacional'<sup>4</sup>, HEKS/EPER partner networks have presented over the past two years three reports on the human rights situation in Honduras.

In addition, a joint advocacy strategy was prepared by the Coalition Against Impunity for the UPR 2020, and the advocacy capacities of the Honduran delegation to the forum on business and human rights held in Geneva in November 2019 were strengthened. Two representatives from communities in the southern region that are fighting against extractive projects were accompanied to the forum, where community held meetings with relevant government and business stakeholders took place

With the support of the PRODERECHOS umbrella project, the municipalities of El Triunfo and Orocuina successfully advocated for becoming 'free of mining and photovoltaic energy production zones' in 2019. However, although consultations show that 97% of the population in Namasigüe are in favour of a 'free of mining and photovoltaic energy production zone', respective authorities did not accept a declaration to this effect. Thus, advocacy efforts need to continue.

## **Senegal – linking and strengthening local voices to influence national-level decision making**

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In Senegal, HEKS/EPER strengthens civil society networks in the area of access to land and sustainable resource governance. The rural population still lacks access to essential information, mainly on decisions made by the national government (e.g., newly passed land management laws and regulations). Thus, HEKS/EPER collects relevant information, presents it in an understandable form, is building on individual capacities and links smallholders to the decision-making level. Furthermore, HEKS/EPER collaborates closely with the CRAFS (Cadre de Reflexion sur le Foncier au Sénégal) platform, which unites all relevant civil society actors dealing with the land reform (farmers' association, pastoral and cattle farmer association, NGO's etc.). Based on in-depth consultations, CRAFS – with support of the project – has elaborated specific suggestions to be incorporated into the land reform and handed them to the Government committee in charge of the reform process. Advocates, paid by the project, provided the correct wording for the demands. Experiences in Senegal shows that authorities are very sensitive to demands issued during larger public gatherings.

HEKS/EPER is focusing on information campaigns in order to sensitise the public and the government on the importance of the thematic and in order to avoid that the government will be able to pass a 'back door reform', which does not take into account the demands of a large part of the Senegalese population.

**Achievements:** The main achievement is the successful mobilisation of the local population against injustices in the area of illegal land grabbing. In several communes where the project intervenes, local protest movements successfully put certain issues on the public agenda. They forced the local authorities to back down their decisions to give away land to enterprises or wealthy private actors. In one instance, local authorities illegally attributed 160ha of land to a concrete company. This case was taken to court, and it ruled in favour of the locals using this land as grazing zones. The concession attributed to the enterprise had to be taken back. The project also linked local civil society groups with the CRAFS where they are heard on the national level.

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<sup>4</sup> Plataforma Internacional contra la Impunidad: <https://rightsindevelopment.org/member/plataforma-internacional-contrala-impunidad/?lang=es>;

- Joint alternative report to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) by the Coalition Against Impunity
- Joint alternative report to the universal periodic review about the indigenous peoples of Tolupan and Lenca, prepared by the Movimiento Amplio por la Dignidad y la Justicia (MADJ) and COPINH
- Alternative report to the UPR that addresses Reitoca's struggle against the hydroelectric project that pollutes the Rio Grande of Reitoca, prepared by Plataforma Internacional in coordination with the Lenca Indigenous Council of Reitoca

## Strengthening civil society and civic space on the international level

Since 2009, HEKS/EPER and other members of the 'Act Alliance Community of Practise on Rights and Development' have been exploring the phenomena of shrinking civil society space. A first study in 2011<sup>5</sup> revealed that the phenomena's common pattern usually starts with ridiculing and delegitimization, cutting of finance opportunities, criminalisation and finally, threatening and physical violence, including murder. Another study in 2015<sup>6</sup> measured the space for civil society and looked at how civil society responded to increasing restrictions and concluded with good practice recommendations for civil society, states and multilateral institutions.

The latest study of Act Alliance in 2019<sup>7</sup>, drawing on a 12 desk studies and 4 country case studies provides evidence on the role and function of civil society in achieving the SDGs. The study provides evidence that: **'development without civil society is bound to fail'**.

Furthermore, it suggests enhancing and protecting civil society space if the international community wants to take the SDGs and the 'leaving no one behind' agenda seriously. Accordingly, HEKS/EPER, together with its act alliance partners, have been using the newly generated evidence to influence the development discourse and to motivate the donor community to take action to keep civil society on board in implementing the sustainable development agenda. Examples on how civil society concretely contributes to specific development goals and how shrinking space has halted or reversed achievement have been discussed in several workshops and plenary sessions (see *box above*).

**Achievements:** Together with other international organisations who are fighting for civic space, different institutions such as the OECD or the UN organisations are taking the topic of 'shrinking space' seriously and have developed and are about to endorse guidelines and recommendations for the international community, development practitioners and donors to protect and enhance civic space in international development.

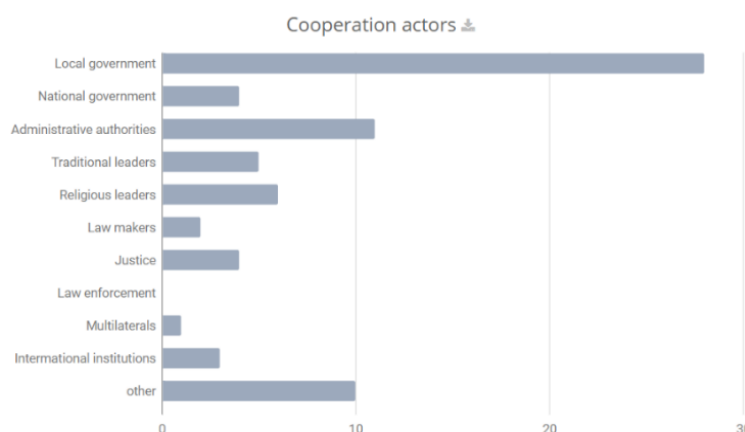
### Events used to make the international community understand why civic space is needed for sustainable development

- Rome: 'Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, SDG 16 implementation and the path towards leaving no one behind', 27-29 May, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Brussels: ACT alliance EU general assembly with EU delegates, 21-23 May.
- Paris: Civil Society Days: Meeting in Task Team for Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment, 4-5 June, OECD Conference Centre.
- New York: High Level Political Forum 2019 (Theme: 'Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality'), 9-15 July, UN Headquarters.
- New York: Senior-Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC), 13-14 July, UN Headquarters.

## Achievements & Perspectives

### Achievements 2020

The indicator 'Degree of cooperation between civil society and duty-bearers' provides information on HEKS/EPER's commitment to fostering constructive relationships for development. The data shows that HEKS/EPER focuses mainly on dialogue with local authorities, as this is where it is most likely to achieve direct results. The idea is that these can be scaled up as good practice to national level at a later stage after they have proven successful. While HEKS/EPER observed a good increase in



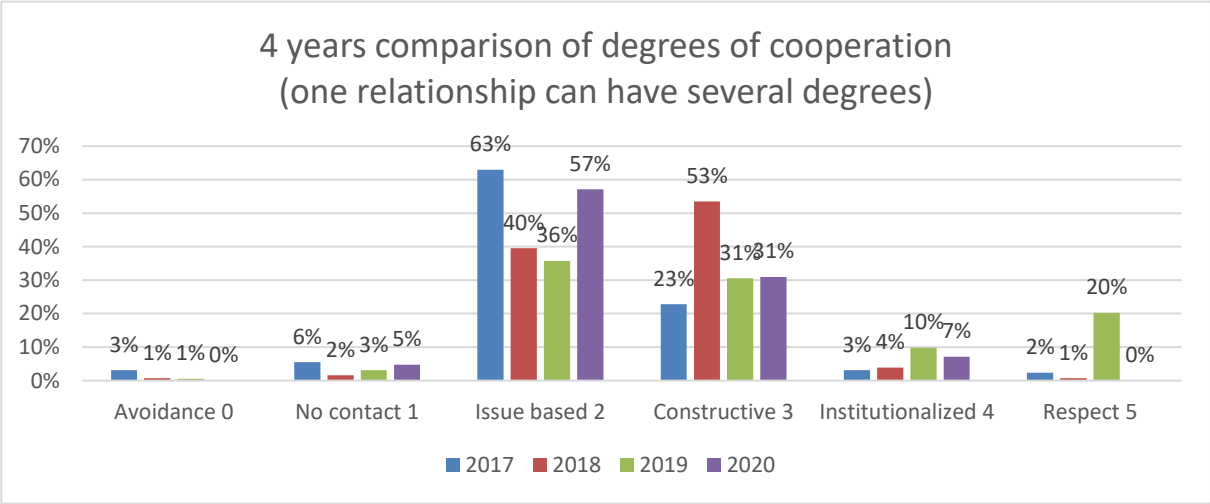
**Cooperation with local duty-bearers is most common and promising.**

<sup>5</sup> Act Alliance (2011); Shrinking political space of civil society action. Geneva. Van der Borgh and Terwindt.

<sup>6</sup> Act Alliance/CIDSE et al. (2015); [Space for civil society](#): How to protect and expand an enabling environment. Geneva and Brussels.

<sup>7</sup> Act Alliance/HEKS/BftW/DCA (2019); [Development Needs Civil Society](#). Geneva. Institute of Development Studies.

constructive, institutionalised, and respectful relationships between 2017 and 2019, the quality of the selected relationships deteriorated in 2020 compared to 2019. None of the relationships were rated as mutually respectful in 2020, compared to 20% of the relationships in 2019. Constructive relationships and institutionalised relationships also decreased. In 2020, more than 50% of relationships were rated as issue-based, which may be because the pandemic shifted the focus of government interests to immediate needs to address the challenges of the pandemic and led to neglect of rights violations raised by our partners. The other reason could be that opportunities to gather in multi-stakeholder meetings are diminishing. The full impact of this trend will be seen when the pandemic is under control. Introducing ‘strengthening civil society’ as a cross-cutting issue in the programme phase 2021–2024, HEKS/EPER will continue to provide evidence for the importance and impact of civil society on sustainable development and improve its monitoring of this cross-cutting issue in its projects and programmes.



**Ameliorations made in the last two years deteriorated in 2020. COVID-19 shrank the space for civil actors.**

**Perspectives promoting space for civil society**

Because civil society’s scope for action is a foundation of our work, HEKS/EPER has decided to introduce ‘strengthening civil society’ as a binding cross-cutting issue in each project with its international programme 2021–24. The core tasks for future engagement can be summarised into the following components:

- HEKS/EPER is committed to investing in civil society through **trust-building** in long-term partnerships based on mutual respect and equality. HEKS/EPERS strengthens **CSO’s capacity to operate independently**.
- HEKS/EPER appraises means of using the **creativity, flexibility and engagement of smaller/informal civil society organisations**. This may require innovative funding mechanisms to bridging the gap between reporting needs and using the potential of informal civil society momentum.
- HEKS/EPER examines power relations, actors, structures, institutions and norms from the visible formal to the invisible informal and engage in continuous dialogue with a representative range of CSO actors.
- HEKS/EPER **strengthens CSOs’ capacity to gather and analyse information** relevant to their programmes and the communities with whom they work. This enables them to contribute to national planning and policymaking processes more effectively and to challenge government policies and actions. Expand programs on evidence-based advocacy and rights-based development. Support alliances of CSOs with different competencies, including grassroots organisations and avoid fragmentation.
- HEKS/EPER **strengthens the collaboration between civil society groups** towards a joint voice for space. HEKS/EPER aims at enhancing collaboration between disenfranchised groups and like-minded CSOs and civil movements to build a joint voice for civil society space and justice, i.e., bridging the gap between those who work on ‘development’ and those who work on human rights and social justice and build alliances between CSOs and faith-based organisations to protect space for civil society. Therefore, HEKS/EPER will elaborate in the next phase of its international programme with other broadly shared theory of change including civil society actors and other donors and adapt expectations to analysis.

- HEKS/EPER is committed to supporting civil society by **enhancing diplomatic strategic connections**. This includes using our contacts and positioning in the national and international networks to enable our constituencies **direct meaningful participation** in **multi-stakeholder initiatives**.
- HEKS/EPER **protects the space of civil society representatives**: Starting from stigmatisation to threats and physical attacks. Permanent monitoring and follow up is meant to prevent individuals and groups from acting with impunity and encourage CSOs to step into its space. In this regard, HEKS/EPER will cooperate with governments and multilateral institutions and NGOs protecting human rights defenders. Support civil society representatives and defenders to protect themselves and their organisations and manage the accompanying stress. Facilitate cooperation to strengthen security and protection mechanisms for CSO leaders and HRDs at risk, including those advocating for the rights of women, indigenous groups and others.
- HEKS/EPER provides linkages from local to international level to make **voices of excluded groups heard**.
- HEKS/EPER supports the amendment of **laws, policies and administrative hurdles** that create barriers to CSOs taking on their roles and functions in development: HEKS/EPER aims at a dialogue with duty-bearers to assess the policies, guidelines and practices to enhance the space of CSOs. This dialogue and assessment are the foundation for enhancing the quality of multi-stakeholder initiatives or targeted advocacy for political space for CSOs.
- HEKS/EPER **enhances funding and support structures** that avoid competition but foster collaboration and accountability to vulnerable groups: Make sure cooperation allow flexibility and to improve accountability towards constituencies. Different assessments provide evidence on how financing structures and models that predominantly stress deliverables create competition and fragmentation. HEKS/EPER wants to draw up a new range of support options beyond the traditional paths. This support should link new forms of civic movements with other actors – moving both upwards into the political sphere and downwards to individual citizens. HEKS/EPER aims at revisiting its own support mechanisms and is involved in advocacy work on the topic towards bilateral and multilateral institutions.
- HEKS/EPER **collecting evidence** on the **added value of CSOs towards enhancing SDGs**: More effort should also be invested in demonstrating and communicating the benefits to the general public of a robust civil society and to help CSOs bolster their domestic support. This is meant to make business and policymakers and the public understand the important role of CSOs and support them accordingly.
- HEKS/EPER facilitates action towards **relationships between CSOs and government**: The space of political action by civil society is determined by the relationship between civil society, elites and the government. Building relationships that favour transparency, participation, mutual recognition and respect are the key of developing policies and action towards equality and justice and are at the same time a key indicator of space for civil society.
- HEKS/EPER **strengthens faith-based actors in speaking out for space for civil society**: HEKS/EPER, as a faith-based organisation, has explored means to strengthen faith-based actors in resisting instrumentalization and protecting and enhancing space for civil society. Being anchored in their communities, faith-based actors can play a vital role in overcoming social, political and economic discrimination and speaking out for space for civil society and peace and justice in general.
- HEKS/EPER supports, **local national** and **international advocacy** disseminating a robust, collective counter-narrative to visions of economic growth neglecting human rights and ecological sustainability.
- HEKS/EPER **supports learning across countries** about the experiences of formal mechanisms for civil society dialogue and other means to influence change.

## This is HEKS/EPER

HEKS/EPER is the aid organisation of the Swiss protestant churches and campaigns for a more peaceful and equitable world supporting in 2020 jointly with 100 partner organisations and strategic global alliances with 143 projects in 33 countries people and communities in economic and social need, investing worldwide 37.58 million CHF.

HEKS/EPER is active in **development cooperation** ameliorating in 2020 with 16.14 M CHF the life of 205'000 people directly – indirectly, 2.63 M people were reached. HEKS focuses on access to land and resources, securing basic services, fostering agroecological production and inclusive market systems. It promoted conflict transformation and inclusive governance structures in the countries as well as social, economic and political inclusion of disenfranchised people.

With a budget of 17.49 M CHF, HEKS/EPER's **humanitarian aid** supported 3'388'000 people affected by disasters with emergency interventions, to save lives, restoring livelihoods and rehabilitating infrastructure. In the frame of **Church Cooperation** HEKS/EPER enabled with 3 M CHF social work of Reformed Churches in Eastern Europe and the Middle East reaching out to 38'700 people. Additional 0.94 M CHF were invested in cross-sectional IC activities such as capacity building of partners and communities. **Systemic change** and the **human rights-based approach** are guiding principles, also promoting the **nexus** between humanitarian and development activities. HEKS/EPER cultivates constant dialogue with all relevant development and Government actors, protecting civil society actors and enabling them to advocate for their needs and rights.

**In Switzerland**, with a budget of 28.8 M CHF, HEKS/EPER supported disadvantaged people in becoming socially and economically integrated by promoting equal opportunity and assists jobless people, refugees and other individuals with providing day structures, legal advice, vocational trainings, language courses, and dialogue platforms in 14 cantons.

### Other HEKS/EPER publications related to 'Civil Society'

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- ACT alliance (2011), Shrinking political space of civil society action.
- ACT alliance (2015) Space for civil society - How to protect and expand an enabling environment. <https://actalliance.org/publications/space-for-civil-society-how-to-protect-and-expand-an-enabling-environment/>
- ACT alliance, IDS (2019) Development needs civil society-the implications of civic space for the SDGs. [ACT\\_SynthesisReport\\_CivicSpace\\_2019\\_Final\\_WEB.pdf \(heks.ch\)](https://www.heks.ch/ACT_SynthesisReport_CivicSpace_2019_Final_WEB.pdf)
- HEKS/EPER International Programme 2021-2024. Chapter 'cross-cutting approaches and issues' – Strengthening Civil Society. [https://en.heks.ch/Institutional\\_Governance](https://en.heks.ch/Institutional_Governance)

Strategies, policies, guidelines, reports published on ID's Governance Website: [https://en.heks.ch/Institutional\\_Governance](https://en.heks.ch/Institutional_Governance)

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Published: HEKS/EPER thematic advisor and MEL unit, May 2021, Zürich (Switzerland)