

INSPIRES Flexible Response Fund

Around the world, civil society and independent journalists work tirelessly to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms but face mounting challenges including threats, harassment, intimidation, and physical attacks.

The USAID-funded Enabling and Protecting Civic Space (EPCS) Illuminating New Solutions and Programmatic Innovations for Resilient Spaces (INSPIRES) project is increasing knowledge and capacity to respond to growing restrictions on democratic freedoms of association, assembly, and expression through: 1) new analytical tools to forecast troubled civic spaces; 2) testing programmatic interventions to boost civil society resilience; and 3) empowering local partners through flexible response support. The prime partner of INSPIRES is the Internews Network. The consortium partners include the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), DevLab@ Duke University, PartnersGlobal, Results for Development (R4D), CIVICUS, and the ZINC Network.



One key feature of INSPIRES is the ability to provide timely, short-term assistance to local actors through a **Flexible Response Fund** (FRF) to assist local partners to respond to both threats to civil society and opportunities for enabling civil society reform. This is intended to be flexible, allowing rapid response as needs emerge, and supporting longer-term more sustained engagement where necessary and appropriate. It is triggered by local needs and country context developments – in most cases generated by requests from USAID Missions and local civil society partners. Support can take many forms and can be for various purposes, including context-specific technical assistance and subgrants to local organizations. It is intended to be both proactive, as warning signs of closing space begin to emerge, and reactive, as civic space begins to shift.



This assistance contributes to the United States Government action plan to support and protect civil society activists and journalists who have been threatened, harassed, or attacked for peacefully exercising their rights of free expression, association, or assembly. This support builds on the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law's previous USAID-funded Legal Enabling Environment Program (LEEP) efforts but has been expanded under INSPIRES to include a more holistic approach and encompass a broader array of civil society needs in closing civic space environments. Evaluation findings show that technical legal-regulatory analysis and monitoring should be coupled with a wider empirical lens on implementation and practice. Academic and practitioner research to date shows that key areas for support to build civil society resilience include legal enabling environment, media and public image, financial viability, and civil society network ties to constituents.

FRF Interventions

Generally, FRF interventions may include remote or in-country technical assistance or direct local subgrants and are estimated at between \$10,000 to \$70,000 over a period of up to 18 months, with approximately 10-20 interventions per year during the life of the project. However, there is flexibility to adjust those parameters based on identified needs.

Criteria

In consultation with USAID, the consortium has identified the following criteria for consideration when evaluating an FRF possibility.

1. **INSPIRES Specific:** The intervention must meet the technical requirements of the governing project documents and advance INSPIRES objectives of strengthening protection of civic space.
2. **Need:** INSPIRES focuses on countries where there is justified concern that civic space is closing or at risk, and/or where there are gaps in USAID civic space-related programming or overall donor support. Interventions should respond to a specific, discernable, and time-sensitive development, threat, or opportunity (e.g. not a "regular" long-term development need).
3. **Likelihood of Success:** The proposed intervention should have a reasonable chance of achieving its intended impact.
4. **Security:** INSPIRES will generally not work in countries where INSPIRES efforts could cause undue risk to consortium members or local partners.
5. **Local Actor Support:** Whenever possible, INSPIRES will work with and through local partners.
6. **Geography:** FRF can occur anywhere that USAID-supported work can take place, but the consortium does have a geographic focus in Africa, Europe and Eurasia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Moreover, countries where the consortium already has a presence will allow INSPIRES to deliver FRF more quickly and cost-effectively.
7. **Learning and Cooperation:** INSPIRES will continually seek opportunities to bolster the

learning objectives of the project, test critical hypotheses, and work collaboratively. Each intervention should identify specific outcomes that might realistically be achieved.

8. Cost Effectiveness: Given budgetary constraints that limit the number of activities, the INSPIRES team will consider the cost-effectiveness of proposed interventions. Interventions should avoid duplication of existing USAID-funded or other donor-funded activities.

Eligible Activities

Priority categories of activities where INSPIRES can consider support for civil society actors in closing civic space include, but are not limited to, the following: the legal enabling environment, the media and information space, financial viability, and networks and legitimacy. In addition, applicants are encouraged to consider multiple complementary interventions that will have a multiplier effect, where appropriate, as opposed to single one-off episodic interventions.

I. Legal Enabling Environment

Governments may impose complicated or restrictive legislation, regulations, or practices governing civil society registration, taxation, reporting, or activities.

- **Written analysis or comments on laws, amendments, and regulations:** When a law or regulation affecting civil society, such as one impacting the freedom of association, assembly, or expression, is proposed or enacted, legal experts can analyze the law's compliance with international and relevant regional legal standards. Expert advice can help USG personnel, the international community, and local partners gain a better understanding of the law and how it may affect civil society, provide an intellectual framework for policy development, and inform advocacy around the law. Illustrative activities:
 - Drafting legal briefing papers, including comments and advice on existing or proposed laws, amendments, and regulations, and discussion of practical implementation issues or unintended side effects of the proposed changes.
 - Providing analysis and recommendations on comparative best practices and compliance with applicable international and regional standards.
 - Working with CSOs and relevant drafting committees to proactively draft or revise laws, amendments, and regulations that follow international best practice.
- **Capacity building to enhance local legal expertise and civil society advocacy:** INSPIRES can improve local actors' understanding of the local legal environment relating to civil society, international and regional legal requirements, and comparative best practices and can provide



mentoring to NGO partners and official counterparts through joint work. Support may be provided to civil society representatives, law drafters, legislators, officials from relevant ministries, lawyers, and academics. Illustrative activities:

- Facilitating engagement and dialogue between CSOs and policy actors.
- Convening partners for training or information sharing events or workshops and formulation of potential responsive strategies to closing legal space.
- Supporting in-depth research and case studies of reform efforts.
- Developing CSO sector codes of governance and conduct.

II. Media, Information and Public Image

Journalists and independent media outlets may be repressed or disparaged, while false information can be circulated to shape public perception of civil society in a way that delegitimizes and undermines the sector.

- **Media and information ecosystem mapping:** Rapid analysis of different sources, tools, flows, producers, consumers, and sharers of information interacting within a defined community or space. This can provide a systematic picture in order to identify where strengths can be leveraged and where deficiencies must be addressed. This approach focuses on the capacity of supply-side of media and information outlets, and on the community demand-side, while examining the dynamic human-centered aspects of information flows. Illustrative activities:
 - Mapping and analyzing the traditional media environment, including issues such as ownership, trust, sustainability, censorship and self-censorship.
 - Analysis of informal, cultural, and social media factors that can disrupt/corrupt community information flows with rumors, toxic narratives, hate speech, misinformation, and propaganda.
 - Mapping and analyzing digital challenges such as internet shutdowns, slowdowns, site blockages and surveillance.
- **Strategic communications development:** CSOs and the media often need help to “take back the narrative” in innovative ways when they are being targeted by smear campaigns and disinformation. INSPIRES can help civic actors strengthen their legitimacy by building core skills for increasing transparency and accountability; and also, by building relationships and sharing relevant information in creative ways to reach direct constituents and the general public. Illustrative activities:
 - Building local capacity for tracking and countering hate speech, rumors, toxic narratives and fake news.
 - Mentoring networks of influencers/information outlets to produce content about civic space issues and assist outlets to target their content to key audiences using social media tools.

- Assisting marginalized groups to protect themselves in civic space and provide alternate narratives of resilience and respect for differences.
- Strengthening ties between CSOs and the media to create content that is more factual, compelling, and informative around issues of civic space.
- **Media and internet law and policy analysis and advocacy:** INSPIRES may build the capacity of local organizations/individuals to counter repressive cyber laws and practices that seek to limit human rights online. This may include capacity building on broad digital rights concepts, positive legislative alternatives, and digital security practices (to ensure that they can engage both safely and securely in a space that might close rapidly), as well as direct legislative and policy advocacy on digital rights.

Illustrative activities:

- Providing digital security knowledge and strategies to civic rights actors.
- Connecting local champions to the international digital rights community for broader support.
- Convening partners for information sharing and formulation of potential responsive strategies to closing information space.
- Facilitating cooperation between CSOs and media/communications professionals around key advocacy issues for closing space.
- Sharing analysis of existing or proposed laws governing the online space that highlights those laws' compliance with international and regional laws and best practices.

III. Access to Resources

Civil society actors may face restrictions on their ability to receive external donor funding, apply for government support, or manage their own resources.

- **Developing an entrepreneurial mindset for CSOs:** In order for CSOs to improve their



financial viability, they often need capacity building to diversify their revenues, increase business acumen, professionalize staff, mobilize domestic resources and engage with stakeholders outside of the civil society sector. Illustrative activities:

- Assisting organizations to develop a nonprofit business model suited to their context, identify potential clients, and implement a marketing and sales strategy for income-generating activities.
- Facilitating engagement between CSOs and private businesses to identify potential strategic partnerships.
- **Legal and regulatory frameworks to enable financial sustainability:** Laws and regulations can facilitate or impede CSOs' ability to access funding. This may include anti-money laundering efforts and bank de-risking practices that unnecessarily target CSOs, difficulties in obtaining tax-exempt status, or tax benefits for charitable giving. INSPIRES can provide support for civil society actors to engage in reform, advocacy, and oversight efforts. Illustrative activities:
 - Trainings or support for advocacy for civil society actors and/or government officials on best practices on Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing standards.
 - Convening civil society actors to formulate advocacy strategies around financial space closures (such as restrictions on foreign funding) or openings (such as opportunities to develop crowdfunding regulations).
- **Innovative avenues to generate support for civil society activities:** Civil society organizations and other groups are increasingly using tech and non-tech platforms and tools to identify, target and match potential offerors and users of assets and services. INSPIRES can provide training for CSOs in how to use these innovative financial instruments. Illustrative activities:
 - Training local actors to use technological innovations such as cryptocurrencies and other forms of online payment when restrictions prevent operations.
 - Sharing of lessons and consultation on establishing tech platforms such as service marketplaces, crowdfunding sites and sharing economy platforms.
 - Training for civil society and media on new avenues for income generation and increasing revenue from legacy revenue sources and diversification, such as targeted collaboration with diaspora, the use of remittances or local philanthropy models.

IV. Strengthening Civic Ties

Civil Society is often accused of being unduly influenced by external actors, and not truly representative of a local constituency. This can be used to justify repressive policies based on distrust towards the sector and lack of legitimacy. In addition, Civil Society is sometimes fractured, and organizations have difficulty coordinating both internally and externally with potential allies to push back on repressive measures.

- **Alliance building:** CSOs are stronger when they act together and threats to civic space are most effectively addressed when diverse civil society actors join forces. Alliances should be as broad and inclusive as possible – including formal and informal civic actors with various identities across sectors and within communities. Through mapping, connecting, convening and facilitation, INSPIRES can help form and strengthen alliances. Illustrative activities:



- Establishing alliances between national-level CSO networks, local beneficiaries and communications firms to build positive identity for the sector as a legitimate contributor to social justice and service delivery.
 - Facilitating frontline public servants and influencers to deliver positive messages on civil society.
- **Cooperative advocacy:** When the civil society sector is under threat, it is important for civic actors to collaborate strategically. Cooperative advocacy involves an orderly intervention of people and organizations that, in a non-confrontational manner, can influence decision-making and/or public opinion. INSPIRES can help ensure that cooperative advocacy is used to develop common underlying and complementary interests. Illustrative activities:
 - Support for civil society mapping to identify the common threats and vulnerabilities to shifting space faced by CSOs in order to define issues for common action.
 - Convening broad and diverse representatives of civil society to strategize effective approaches to address civic shifts and proactively promote openings.
- **Constituency strengthening:** CSOs and media organizations are stronger when they are focused on engaging with their constituents to identify their needs and then tailor their work to those needs. They need to communicate transparently and creatively to form relationships of trust that can develop into both monetary and intangible support. INSPIRES can help enhance constituency building through training and mentoring. Illustrative Activities:
 - Improving feedback loops and primary constituency engagement mechanisms in CSO practices.
 - Strengthening the ability of CSOs to effectively coordinate broad constituencies by building skills in conflict negotiation, sustainable mediation; do no harm principles, etc.
 - Increasing transparency and accountability of CSOs to build public support and decrease the impact of negative narratives.

V. Comprehensive Civil Society Resilience

In addition to the challenges identified above, civil society must often deal with an environment that is insecure or that otherwise creates threats to their security. At the same time, the greater the extent of internal vulnerabilities (including lack of adaptive leadership and outdated organizational models), the more at risk an organization is in their increasingly difficult external environments. Therefore, in order to navigate civic space shifts, an organization must be adequately prepared and increase their level of resiliency in a comprehensive way.

- **Civil society resilience strengthening:** INSPIRES is piloting a comprehensive framework for increasing civil society resilience in the face of the most urgent external threats and internal vulnerabilities. While implementation of the full year-long process ([framework available here](#)) is open to a selected cadre of organizations in this phase, INSPIRES can also strengthen resilience of local actors through shorter-term interventions. The consortium can build awareness of how to identify when civic space is shifting; present the most common threats and vulnerabilities encountered by civil society actors; and offer resources, tools and connections to help participants predict, prevent and manage the impact of threats when they arise. Illustrative activities:
 - Training in “Resiliency 101” that provides a comprehensive introduction to the larger Resiliency+ process and framework, including the key resiliency factors affecting civil society in shifting civic space.
 - Providing small grants of up to \$10k so that CSOs can utilize their newly acquired adaptive skills and capacities and bolster their resilience, or to engage in broader civil society efforts to counter closing space threats.

Process

FRF needs are often identified as they arise by USAID missions and bureaus, as well as other on-the-ground stakeholders. (They can also be identified from analysis during the consortium’s work plan process, via predictions of the machine learning component of the project, or from the CSO resiliency strengthening process.) As needs emerge, the following steps are necessary to meet those needs in a timely manner:

- 1. Identification:** First the need for FRF must be brought to the attention of the consortium. If identification comes from a local partner, they should consult with a consortium member. If identification originates with a USAID mission, a representative should send an e-mail request to the INSPIRES USAID Agreement Officer’s Representative (AOR), explaining the nature of the situation and the requested support.
- 2. Discussion:** Once a request is initiated, the AOR will immediately schedule a phone call with the relevant consortium members and/or email with the requesting entity and relevant mission to flesh out the issue and identify potential activities. This is critical for establishing what specific issue the mission/local partner wants to see addressed and conveying any guidance on partners, approaches, or red lines.
- 3. Confirmation:** Within 48 hours if not sooner, the consortium members and AOR will use

the criteria to determine eligibility of the proposed activity and whether the consortium can proceed to the design phase.

- 4. Consortium Lead:** The consortium partners will determine which of the INSPIRES partners will lead on this response, basing that decision on factors such as technical expertise, country presence, in-country partners and contacts, etc.
- 5. Design and Approval:** Depending on the complexity of the proposed activity (e.g., whether it includes a subgrant, multiple consortium members, etc.) INSPIRES can either move forward immediately with actions that have the approval of the AOR and mission; or the consortium can draft a brief activity description, budget, and other required documentation for approval. Once the AOR receives their proposal, the AOR will immediately share that with the mission and seek guidance on how to proceed from there. If the mission is comfortable with the proposal submitted, the AOR will provide concurrence to the partners. If there are further questions, additional negotiations may take place. Overall, as soon as agreement is reached on the proposed activities, the consortium partners will be given approval to utilize the funds for this purpose. At that point, they will immediately commence implementation.
- 6. Implementation:** Since there is no new award or procurement action required for a flexible response intervention, there will be no new management units or additional action required of an Agreement Officer at the mission. The funds that will be used to support this intervention are already obligated under the global award for this purpose (in a general “flexible response” line item in the budget) and can be utilized for each specific intervention based on AOR approval only as long as the proposed activity falls within the already approved INSPIRES scope and budget. There is no additional management burden for the mission.
- 7. Mission Concurrence:** INSPIRES will be sure to coordinate with the designated mission representative prior to implementation of any in-country activity and will consult on any proposed sub-grants or in-country travel. Per Agency Policy on USAID Mission Concurrence, pursuant to ADS 201.3.3.6, Washington Operating Units and Regional Missions/platforms (WOU/RMs) that fund and manage activities implemented in the field must obtain concurrence for such activities from the responsible Mission Director or designee. If there is a specific deliverable it will be shared or e-mailed directly to the mission, with a cc to the AOR upon completion.

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