

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Empowering Civil Society Partners in SIDS and LDCs to Defend and Expand Civic Space

The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) is pleased to announce a call for proposals to defend and expand civic space in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Grants of up to \$20,000 are available for projects meeting the criteria below.

Applications are due by February 28, 2026.

Background

Around the world, civil society plays a leading role in addressing the most important priorities of our time. Local activists, civil society organizations (CSOs), community leaders, and human rights defenders make particularly essential contributions in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). These countries are often vulnerable to transnational challenges, such as climate change, and face obstacles to accessing international cooperation. Civil society in SIDS and LDCs often plays an outsized role in addressing these constraints and advancing development and good governance, by promoting accountability, providing expertise, representing community interests, and engaging in service delivery.¹

To make these crucial contributions, civil society in SIDS and LDCs needs an enabling environment where local organizations, activists, and community representatives can freely establish and operate CSOs, access resources, express views, mobilize the public, ensure accountability, and participate in decision-making. Promoting this open civic space requires investment in appropriate reforms; support for civil society in navigating challenges and constraints; and, at times, advocacy in multilateral fora to highlight challenges and advance effective responses. There is a need to increase support and assistance to CSOs engaged in these activities to promote civic space and an enabling environment for civil society in SIDS and LDCs.

¹ See, e.g., ODI Global, *Nurturing civil society in Small Island Developing States (SIDS)* (Apr. 2024), https://media.odi.org/documents/Peck_NurturingCivilSocietyInSIDS.pdf; Rogers Rugeiyama & Ajali Mustafa Nguyahambi, *Civic Space for Advocacy Non-Governmental Organizations in Developing Countries* (Aug. 2024), https://brill.com/view/journals/iss/3/1/article-p66_4.xml?

Project Activities

ICNL invites proposals to defend and expand civic space² in SIDS and LDCs, through advocacy for enabling reforms; bolstering civil society resilience; and engagement in multilateral mechanisms and processes.

Activities that may be supported include:

- Advocating for the adoption of laws, policies, and other measures³ that remove restrictions on and facilitate the exercise of civic freedoms;⁴
- Bolstering civil society resilience by developing resources, trainings, and networks to support the capacity of civil society actors to navigate challenges and restrictions and exercise civic freedoms; and
- Engaging multilateral mechanisms and processes, at the international or regional level, to promote open civic space in SIDS and LDCs.

Proposals may focus on defending and expanding civic space within a single SIDS or LDC or across more than one country.

We encourage proposals combining more than one of the elements listed above (advocacy, resilience, and multilateral engagement).

All project activities must be completed by October 1, 2026.

Eligibility Requirements

This call for proposals is open to CSOs⁵ based in the following countries:

- **Africa:** Angola, Cabo Verde, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia
- **Asia/Pacific:** Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu
- **LAC:** Dominican Republic, Jamaica

Project activities must focus on one or more of the countries listed above.

² "Civic space" is the physical, virtual, legal, regulatory, and policy space where people can, individually or collectively, exercise civic freedoms (see further definition below).

³ These measures may be adopted by a range of government entities, including legislatures, ministries, regulatory bodies, law enforcement agencies, and courts.

⁴ "Civic freedoms" include the rights to freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, as well as the right of public participation.

⁵ "CSOs" include all not-for-profit, non-state, non-partisan, non-violent, and self-governing organisations outside of the family in which people come together to pursue shared needs, ideas, interests, values, faith and beliefs, including formal, legally registered organisations as well as informal associations without legal status but with a structure and activities.

Application Instructions

To apply, applicants should submit the following items **in English, French, Portuguese, or Spanish**:

- Proposal (no more than five pages);
- Line-item budget (no more than USD \$20,000); and
- Resumes/CVs of person(s) responsible for the proposed project.

Content of Proposal

In five pages or less, please describe your proposal.

The proposal must address the following elements:

- The project concept, including
 - Description of the need for the proposed activities in your context or location, including a description of particular challenges and opportunities relating to civic space in the country(ies) where the proposed activities will take place;
 - The project objectives and anticipated impact;
 - Detailed description of project activities and how these activities will contribute to the project objectives and anticipated impact;
 - Other partners who will contribute to the proposed activities, including activists, CSOs, journalists, community members, academic institutions, attorneys, and legal organizations;
 - Actors whom the activities are intended to affect or influence, including ministries, regulatory bodies, law enforcement agencies, courts, multilateral institutions, civil society actors, and the public;
 - Outputs (e.g., meetings, trainings, reports, toolkits, media campaigns, and/or policy proposals); and
 - Timeline for completing the proposed activities.
- The applicant's specific experience and expertise related to the activities covered in the proposal, with particular focus on the experience and expertise relating to defending and expanding civic space.

Selection Criteria

Applications will be evaluated based on the following factors:

- Compliance with eligibility requirements and application instructions;

- Likelihood of impact of project activities in addressing challenges and taking advantage of opportunities relating to civic space in the target country(ies);
- Quality of proposal, including that proposed activities are described in appropriate detail and feasible within the project period;
- Proposed budget and apparent value for cost;
- Demonstrated experience and expertise related to proposed activities; and
- Demonstrated capacity to exercise responsible stewardship of received funds.

Terms of Reference

All grant recipients will be required to submit progress reports during the grant period and a final report on activities conducted and project outcomes prior to receiving their final grant disbursements.

All project activities must be completed by October 1, 2026.

How to Apply

Interested applicants can apply by sending all required documents by email to global@icnl.org. Please ensure the subject of your email is “Empowering Civil Society Partners in SIDS and LDCs to Defend and Expand Civic Space” and provide the following information in your cover email:

- Name of organization applying for grant support
- Country in which applying organization is based
- Location where project activities will take place
- Project point of contact (name, position, email address, telephone number)

Deadline

Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis until February 28, 2026. Due to the number of expected applications, only shortlisted candidates will be contacted.

ABOUT ICNL

INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW (ICNL)

ICNL works with civil society, governments, and the international community in more than 100 countries to improve the legal environment for civic space around the world. We believe that when people have the space to come together, positive, lasting change can be made. To achieve this vision, individuals must be able to join together, speak out, and take action to make the world a better place. Since 1992, ICNL has worked with our partners at all levels to promote and protect an enabling legal environment for civil society. Our international staff includes experts in all aspects of the laws governing free association, assembly, and expression, spanning from the local to global contexts. We also foster a worldwide network of organizations and individuals with in-depth expertise on a diverse range of issues relevant to civil society. Learn more about our work and browse our research at www.icnl.org.