

THE
CARTER CENTER



From Pressure to Purpose

**A Pathway for the Democracy, Rights,
and Governance Community**

June 2026



A not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization, The Carter Center has helped to improve life for people in more than 90 countries by resolving conflicts; advancing democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity; preventing diseases; and improving mental health care. The Carter Center was founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide.

From Pressure to Purpose

**A Pathway for the Democracy, Rights,
and Governance Community**

June 2026

THE
CARTER CENTER



One Copenhill
453 John Lewis Freedom Parkway NE
Atlanta, GA 30307
(404) 420-5100

www.cartercenter.org

Contents

Acknowledgements	1	Key Priorities	11
Executive Summary	2	Information Ecosystems: Insights and Recommendations	17
Democracy, Rights, and Governance – The Current State of Play	2	Key Priorities	18
Supporting Civil Society Resilience and Healthy Information Ecosystems	2	Section Three: Challenges and Opportunities in Resourcing the DRG Community	25
Challenges and Opportunities in Resourcing the DRG Community	4	Summary	25
Conclusion	4	Official Development Assistance (ODA) and DRG Funding Trends	25
Introduction	5	Spotlight: Civil Society Funding	28
Section One: Democracy, Rights, and Governance – The Current State of Play	6	Spotlight: Information Ecosystem Funding	29
Summary	6	Resourcing Opportunities	30
Faultlines and Fractures: Drivers of Democratic Decline	7	Enabling Conditions and Ecosystem Requirements	32
Section Two: Supporting Civil Society Resilience and Healthy Information Ecosystems	10	Risks, Tensions, and Safeguards	32
Summary	10	Practical First Steps	33
Civil Society Resilience: Insights and Recommendations	11	Conclusion	34
		Appendix 1: Case Study References	35

Acknowledgements

This report was developed through a collaborative process, drawing on analysis, discussion, and reflection from The Carter Center's 2025 Democracy, Rights, and Governance convenings and supplemented by additional research and case studies. The Center is grateful to the individuals listed here for their contributions to the development of this paper, and also wishes to acknowledge those that attended the convenings but are not listed below.

Primary Contributing Authors

Michael Baldassaro, Elias Davis, Elise Ditta, Christopher Hobbs, Laura Neuman, Kourtney Pompei, Barbara Smith, Luis Villaherrera, Sairah Zaidi

Additional Contributors & Convening Participants*

Gerardo Berthin, Matias Bianchi, Eric Bjornlund, Tom Carothers, Cheri-Leigh Erasmus, Blair Glencourse, Shannon Green, Paulina Ibarra, Siphosami Malunga, Carla Musi, Annika Silva-Leander, Elton Skendaj, Evan Smith, Mandeep Tiwana, and Juliana Uribe Villegas

**The opinions and analysis presented in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of all contributors and convening participants.*

Executive Summary

The Democracy, Rights, and Governance (DRG) community is operating in a period of sustained and intersecting disruption. Intensifying global democratic backsliding, increasingly contested information environments, and a profound reconfiguration of international funding have converged to expose vulnerable fault lines across the sector. These include:

- **Intensifying political polarization and social fragmentation** that weaken trust and limit coalition building.
- **Extreme economic inequality** that concentrates political power in the hands of elites, reinforcing exclusion and undermining accountability.
- **Post-colonial, Western-centric aid structures** that constrain local leadership and adaptability.
- **Overreliance on formal, NGO-centric models** that produce a professionalized but often disconnected civic sector that is both vulnerable to repression and misaligned with grassroots mobilization.

At the same time, the DRG community has struggled to engage effectively with youth and emerging political actors, who are driving contemporary movements, and remains constrained by outdated assumptions about democratic institutions and models that no longer reflect current political, technological, and societal realities.

This moment, while destabilizing, also creates an opportunity for recalibration. This report, based on a series of three convenings of the DRG community in 2025, and additional research and case studies, argues that the DRG community must move beyond efforts to restore prior models of DRG assistance and instead pursue a reset that is locally based, decentralized, and strategically diverse.

Democracy, Rights, and Governance — The Current State of Play

Democratic decline has deepened into a global condition. Patterns of autocratization, once concentrated in fragile contexts, now extend across regions, including historically stable democracies. Civic space is shrinking through a combination of overt repression and more sophisticated mechanisms such as restrictive legislation, digital surveillance, and information manipulation.

At the same time, the global funding landscape has undergone a structural shift. The contraction of official development assistance (ODA) and the near total withdrawal of U.S. DRG funding have generated a systemic shock with cascading effects across civil society and independent media ecosystems.

Under these pressures, civic engagement is transforming. Political mobilization is increasingly decentralized, digitally mediated, and youth-driven, often occurring outside formal NGO structures.

Case evidence highlights several key dynamics. In Kenya and Uganda, governments are consolidating control through legal restrictions and information manipulation, while facing decentralized civic resistance. In Nepal, youth-led digital mobilization has demonstrated both the potential for rapid political disruption and the structural challenges of institutional follow-through.

Other cases, including in Guatemala, Eswatini, and Minnesota, demonstrate the growing importance of alternative civic infrastructures, including Indigenous governance, labor networks, and mutual aid systems in sustaining resilience under pressure.

Supporting Civil Society Resilience and Healthy Information Ecosystems

As democratic systems experience sustained stress, civil society and information ecosystems have emerged as central arenas in which the struggle between democratic resilience and authoritarian consolidation will be decided. Robust civil society, particularly when it is adaptive, locally rooted, and capable of building broad coalitions, has proven critical in halting or reversing backsliding, with even relatively small-scale participation capable of driving meaningful change. At the same time, the information environment is increasingly shaping political outcomes, as declining press freedom, digital repression, and the rapid evolution of technologies such as AI enable information manipulation to become a core tool of authoritarian consolidation. Together, these dynamics underscore that strong democracies depend not only on institutions, but on the resilience of civic actors and the integrity of the information systems that enable citizens to organize, access credible information, and hold power to account.

Strong democracies depend not only on institutions, but on the resilience of civic actors and the integrity of the information systems that enable citizens to organize, access credible information, and hold power to account.

Civil Society Resilience: Insights and Recommendations

Participants in the DRG convenings, and additional research and case studies, highlight the following

important insights and recommendations for strengthening civil society resilience:

- **Resilience must be redefined beyond organizational survival.** Effective civic actors are those capable of adapting under constraint, maintaining legitimacy, and continuing to function even as formal structures come under pressure. This requires funding and evaluation frameworks that prioritize flexibility and local ownership over compliance and organizational stability. Without this shift, funding frameworks will continue to incentivize rigidity at the expense of resilience.
- **Legal defense and counter-lawfare infrastructure must be treated as central to democracy support.** As repression is increasingly embedded in legal systems, sustained investment is required in litigation capacity, legal networks, and early warning systems that can respond to evolving restrictions. This includes anticipating patterns across jurisdictions and creating rapid coordination mechanisms that allow legal actors to respond collectively rather than in isolation.
- **Decentralization of power and resources is critical.** Concentrated NGO ecosystems have created vulnerabilities and legitimacy gaps. Future approaches must support subnational actors, informal networks, and community-based organizations capable of sustaining participation across diverse contexts. This can strengthen resistance to both elite capture and external manipulation.
- **The sector must move beyond NGO-centric models.** Many of today's most influential civic actors, youth movements, mutual aid networks, and digital coalitions, operate outside formal structures. Expanding participation requires reducing barriers and adapting funding models accordingly. In practice, this means designing funding instruments that tolerate fluid organizational forms and prioritize effectiveness over formality. It also requires greater acceptance of political risk, particularly when engaging with movement-based actors.
- **Youth leadership must be elevated as a structural priority.** Youth are driving political change yet remain underrepresented in decision-making. Deliberate integration of youth into governance processes, advisory structures, and program design is essential. Without institutional pathways, youth mobilization will continue to outpace institutional absorption.
- **Horizontal solidarity and peer learning must be strengthened, particularly across the Global South.** Exchange platforms can accelerate learning on strategies that have been tested under constraint, including digital security, coalition-building, and nonviolent resistance. These networks also help sustain morale and collective identity among actors operating in isolation.

- **Issue-based organizing tied to lived experience must be prioritized.** Anchoring DRG work in practical issues helps bridge divides between democratic values and material realities, strengthening both participation and legitimacy. It also creates entry points for constituencies that may not traditionally engage with governance frameworks.
- **Rapid-response infrastructure is essential to support civic actors** facing acute threats, requiring flexible and timely support mechanisms. Pre-positioned resources and streamlined decision-making processes are critical to ensuring that support arrives when it is most impactful.
- **Resilience depends on narrative capacity and coalition breadth,** expanding the civic tent to include actors beyond traditional DRG networks and engaging more effectively with identity, values, and belonging. Narrative strategies should be designed with cultural fluency and emotional resonance, enabling democratic actors to compete more effectively in contested spaces. Broad coalitions also increase political durability by embedding democratic commitments across sectors of society.

Information Ecosystems: Insights and Recommendations

To create a stronger information ecosystem, recommendations include:

- **Engagement in information governance and digital policy,** including convening diverse stakeholders and incorporating Global South perspectives, must be expanded. This engagement should aim to influence emerging norms and standards for platform accountability, data governance, and AI regulation. Without proactive participation, democratic actors risk ceding influence over rules that will shape political discourse for decades.
- **Regulatory responses to interference and manipulation** must address transnational disinformation and platform dynamics, while safeguarding democratic freedoms. Policies should be developed with careful balancing mechanisms to prevent misuse by governments seeking to restrict legitimate expression. Cross-border coordination will also be necessary to match the transnational nature of these threats.
- **Citizen resilience through media literacy and civic education** is essential, extending beyond formal schools into community-based institutions to create a more resilient public capable of navigating complex information environments. Over time, this contributes to rebuilding trust and reducing susceptibility to manipulation.

- **Protection of journalists and independent media** must be prioritized as threats to press freedoms intensify. This includes not only physical and legal protection, but also sustainable financial models that reduce vulnerability to political and market pressures. Independent media must be treated as core democratic infrastructure rather than an auxiliary sector.
- **Investment in investigative journalism and digital forensics** is needed to identify and expose influence operations and coordinated manipulation. Strengthening these capabilities can both deter malign actors and raise the cost of interference.
- **Subnational actors and trusted local institutions** must be engaged as key intermediaries in rebuilding trust and supporting information resilience. Local institutions often operate closer to communities and enjoy higher levels of credibility, making them effective partners in countering misinformation. Their involvement also helps ground interventions in local realities.
- **Proactive and culturally resonant narrative strategies** must be adopted, recognizing that effective communication depends on relatability, trust, and format. This requires investment in content production, audience research, and partnerships with trusted messengers. Narrative strategies must compete to provide accuracy, and also emotional and cultural relevance.
- **Creating knowledge-sharing mechanisms** for the DRG sector is critical considering sector fragmentation and loss of institutional memory. Centralized platforms and shared tools can help reduce duplication and improve the efficiency of collective action. Rebuilding this infrastructure is essential for maintaining continuity across a rapidly evolving field.
- **The promotion and protection of the fundamental right of access to information** is essential to democratic resilience. It strengthens accountability, participation, and public trust by enabling citizens to understand government actions and hold leaders accountable. As misinformation and disinformation increase, reliable information supports confidence in institutions and ensures that marginalized communities are not left behind.

Challenges and Opportunities in Resourcing the DRG Community

Since late 2020, the decline in official development assistance (ODA) has reached unprecedented levels, with total aid falling sharply and major bilateral donors—including the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the Netherlands—implementing significant reductions. Across multiple countries, DRG programming is being deprioritized in favor of security cooperation, humanitarian aid, migration management, and geopolitical competition.

The DRG community faces a widening gap between political commitments to democratic values and the resources required to sustain the institutions and actors that uphold them. Addressing this challenge requires exploring alternative resourcing strategies aimed at strengthening resilience and reducing dependency on traditional donor models. These include diversified revenue streams, such as social enterprise, reader revenue for media, digital philanthropy, diaspora giving, pooled funds, intermediary re-granting mechanisms, and corporate social responsibility partnerships. Where conditions allow, such approaches can deepen local ownership, enhance legitimacy, and anchor civic institutions more firmly within their communities.

The DRG community faces a widening gap between political commitments to democratic values and the resources required to sustain the institutions and actors that uphold them.

However, these strategies are not substitutes for core grant funding. In low-income, repressive, or conflict-affected environments, market-based and domestic funding models remain limited by weak economies, restrictive legal frameworks, and political constraints. Diversification must therefore be understood as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, public and philanthropic funding. Traditional donors must address weaknesses in existing funding models, including donor dependency, short-term funding cycles, misalignment with local priorities, and restrictions on foreign funding. Addressing these challenges requires a broader shift toward ecosystem-level financing approaches that support interconnected civic and information systems rather than isolated organizations. It also requires changes in donor behavior, including greater flexibility, multi-year commitments, and support for intermediary institutions and collective funding mechanisms.

Conclusion

Civil society resilience and information ecosystems are no longer peripheral to democracy support; they are the primary arenas in which democratic futures will be determined. The central challenge for the DRG community is not to preserve existing institutional models, but to realign its strategies, partnerships, and investments with the realities of contemporary democratic contestation.

A meaningful reset will depend on the ability to move from organization-centric approaches toward ecosystem-level strategies that integrate civic participation, information integrity, and sustainable resourcing. In a context defined by sustained disruption, the effectiveness of the DRG community will ultimately be measured by whether it can help build systems that are resilient, adaptive, and grounded in the lived realities of the societies they seek to support.

Introduction

The Democracy, Rights, and Governance (DRG) community is confronting a moment of profound and accumulating pressure. This pressure has already resulted in seismic disruption: In January 2025, the Trump administration's abrupt move to dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) sent shockwaves through the sector. More than a year later, the DRG community—a global network of organizations, practitioners, donors, activists, and scholars working to strengthen democratic systems, protect human rights, and promote accountable governance—continues to grapple with a fundamental question: What comes next?

This rupture cannot be understood as a funding crisis alone, nor can it be attributed solely to the dismantling of USAID. The administration's decision landed after years of mounting strain. Official development assistance had already been in significant decline, and major global conflicts, including the wars in Ukraine and Israel-Palestine, were accelerating a broader reorientation away from democracy, rights, and governance within bilateral and multilateral donor agendas. These shocks compounded an already fragile landscape shaped by nearly two decades of global democratic recession, raising deeper and more unsettling questions about whether the DRG sector is equipped to confront contemporary drivers of democratic decline—and whether democracy itself has failed to anticipate and adapt to these gathering pressures.

Yet, moments of structural disruption also create openings for recalibration. While this period has generated existential uncertainty for the DRG community, it also presents an opportunity to reimagine DRG assistance at

a time when bold and adaptive responses are essential to reversing global democratic backsliding. This report moves from pressure to purpose, offering a pathway for resetting DRG support by drawing on insights that emerged from three DRG convenings hosted by the Carter Center in 2025. These key recommendations from a diverse group of practitioners, experts, funders, and scholars are supplemented by additional research and a series of case studies highlighting recurring themes and regional learning.

Section One assesses the current state of the DRG community in the wake of major donor funding shocks, maps the core fault lines driving global democratic decline and backsliding, and outlines guiding principles for a purposeful reset of DRG assistance.

Section Two provides a roadmap for supporting civil society resilience and healthy information ecosystems, the two priority areas for DRG assistance identified during the Carter Center's 2025 DRG community convenings.

Section Three explores how the DRG community can adjust funding and resourcing strategies in the wake of donor funding shocks, with particular attention to sustaining civil society and information ecosystems amid diminishing bilateral and multilateral support.

The remainder of this report takes a clear-eyed view of the fault lines defining the current moment and charts a forwardlooking pathway for the DRG community—grounded in practice and oriented toward purposeful, resilient action under sustained pressure.

Section One:

Democracy, Rights, and Governance — The Current State of Play

Section One assesses the current state of the DRG community in the wake of major donor funding shocks, maps the core fault lines driving global democratic decline and backsliding, and outlines guiding principles for a purposeful reset of DRG assistance.

Summary

The Democracy, Rights, and Governance community is in the midst of a severe global recession that has been decades in the making, with well under half of the world's population living in free countries.¹ Trends of democratic decline have reached alarming proportions. There are now more autocracies than democracies worldwide², with 74% of the world's population living in autocracies and only 7% living in liberal democracies.³ These figures provide a stark contrast to the optimism that marked the end of the Cold War, which Francis Fukuyama hailed “the end of history” and a new era of peace, undergirded by a Western-led international order of liberal institutions and free markets.⁴ Perhaps most striking is the decline of democracy in the West. The average citizen in Western Europe and North America is experiencing the lowest level of democracy in more than 50 years. This is primarily driven by the decline in the United States, which has, in a stunning reversal, lost its long-term status as a liberal democracy due to the erosion of key democratic institutions and safeguards.

The crisis of democracy, rights, and governance is not unfolding in isolation, and a contemporary DRG strategy

must employ a cross-sectoral approach that accounts for the current polycrisis, where economic shocks⁵, climate emergencies, and conflict are converging to create remarkable levels of strain on global governance and societal cohesion.⁶ Proliferating conflicts threaten democratic progress globally, even as authoritarian advances and weaponized information environments challenge the integrity of democratic systems.⁷ Civil society, particularly in the Global South⁸, faces increasingly hostile environments and a crisis of identity as traditional support structures are lost.⁹ Amongst countries that are classified as autocratizing, which now include a significant number of Western states, the repression of civil society has surged as both a driver and symptom of democratic decline.¹⁰ Assaults on freedom of expression¹¹ and increasing media censorship¹² have emerged as perhaps the most consistent and worrying fault line in the contestation between democracy and autocracy worldwide.

There are now more autocracies than democracies worldwide, with 74% of the world's population living in autocracies and only 7% living in liberal democracies.

In order to re-envision a future for DRG assistance, it is imperative that the DRG community identify the root causes and drivers of this global shift toward autocracy and assess why it is that democratic systems were so vulnerable to begin with.

1 Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights*, (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2025).

2 V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* (University of Gothenburg: VDem Institute, 2025).

3 Nord, Marina, David Altman, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good, and Staffan I. Lindberg. *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?* (University of Gothenburg: VDem Institute, 2026).

4 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Free Press, 1992).

5 World Economic Forum. *Global Risks Report 2025*, (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2025).

6 Lawrence, Michael, Megan Shipman, and Chris Collins. *Global Systemic Stresses: Understanding the Drivers of Polycrisis*, (Toronto: Global Risk Institute and Cascade Institute, 2025).

7 Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict*, (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2024).

8 CIVICUS, *2025 State of Civil Society Report*, (CIVICUS, 2025).

9 CIVICUS, *State of Civil Society Report 2026*, (Johannesburg: CIVICUS, 2026).

10 V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?* (V-DEM Institute, 2026).

11 United Nations Human Rights Council. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression*, (A/HRC/55/43, 2024).

12 Reporters Without Borders (RSF). *World Press Freedom Index 2025*, (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

Faultlines and Fractures: Drivers of Democratic Decline

The drivers of democratic decline, identified in this section, reflect the views of the participants of the 2025 DRG convenings, which brought together a diverse cross-section of practitioners, experts, and academics. These are not intended as a prescriptive, definitive framework for the future of DRG assistance, but as a starting point for a conversation that must bring under-represented voices to the table, particularly those in the Global South.

Political and cultural polarization, or failing to “broaden the tent,” is a key driver in the decline of democracy, rights, and governance globally.

Political polarization is rising sharply across most regions, with data showing a significant increase in both polarizing elite rhetoric and mass attitude division over the past two decades.¹³ While often associated with the U.S. and Europe, this trend is global—spanning Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia—and is often attributed to the rise of populist leaders, ethnic or religious tensions, and the rapid spread of misinformation via social media.¹⁴ While these are certainly driving factors, another vital piece of the puzzle is the decline in people-to-people interactions and community structures. In his essay “Bowling Alone,” Robert Putnam argued that American community life had collapsed due to a steep decline in social capital. Putnam proposed that social bonds are equally important to formal institutions in holding communities and, in turn, democracies together.¹⁵ Political polarization is also driven by gender and class-based divides, and lack of opportunity, compounded by resentments over the upending of traditional social hierarchies which have created vast

Economic inequality is at exceptionally high levels worldwide and functions as both a driver and a symptom of democratic decline that can operate in a vicious feedback loop.

constituencies of resentment that look to strongmen and autocrats to restore old structures and norms. Three decades after Putnam’s warnings, we find ourselves in an era where communication is increasingly dominated by the internet and social media, and a corresponding rise in isolation, reduced trust, and intensifying polarization has already begun to erode the very fabric of democracy.

Extreme levels of economic inequality and the outsized role of money in politics remain a major threat to democracy, rights, and governance.

Economic inequality is at exceptionally high levels worldwide and functions as both a driver and a symptom of democratic decline that can operate in a vicious feedback loop. Once economic inequality crosses a certain threshold, it tends to concentrate political decision-making in the hands of elites, who are then able to modify the “rules of the game” to further entrench their influence. This, in turn, fuels policies that continue to concentrate wealth and power amongst elites, accelerating the widening of the gulf between the “haves” and the “have nots”—a dynamic that can accelerate polarization and the breakdown of social fabrics, particularly in societies that lack social safety nets.¹⁶ The world appears to have crossed that threshold. A recent Oxfam study notes that, in 2025, billionaire wealth increased three times faster than the average annual rate over the preceding five years.¹⁷ The unprecedented influence and control of billionaires is apparent in everything from the funding of political parties and election campaigns to ownership of media houses and newspapers. States with greater inequality are up to seven times more likely to experience democratic erosion.¹⁸ In 2015, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter remarked that the United States was now an “oligarchy” in which “unlimited political bribery” had created “a complete subversion of our political system as a payoff to major contributors.”¹⁹ These remarks were made in response to a question from a journalist about U.S. Supreme Court decisions on campaign financing—such as *Citizens United v. FEC*. A decade later, President Carter’s words remain highly salient, as we grapple with the downgrading of U.S. democracy in leading global indices.

13 Cesi Cruz and Horacio Larreguy, “Political Polarisation Across the World,” VoxDevLit, 2025.

14 Jennifer McCoy, Benjamin Press, Murat Somer, and Özlem Tuncel, *Reducing Pernicious Polarization: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Depolarization*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022).

15 Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995): 65–78; see also Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

16 Laura Silver, Shannon Schumacher, Mara Mordecai, et al., “In U.S. and UK, Globalization Leaves Some Feeling ‘Left Behind’ or ‘Swept Up,’” (Pew Research Center, 2020).

17 Alex Maitland, Anjela Taneja, Anthony Kamande, et al., *Resisting the Rule of the Rich: Defending Freedom Against Billionaire Power*, (OXFAM International, 2026).

18 Alex Maitland, Anjela Taneja, Anthony Kamande, et al., *Resisting the Rule of the Rich: Defending Freedom Against Billionaire Power*, (OXFAM International, 2026).

19 Jon Schwarz, “Jimmy Carter: The U.S. Is an ‘Oligarchy With Unlimited Political Bribery,’” (The Intercept, July 2015).

Post-colonial aid structures pose a continued and unsustainable challenge to the democracy, rights, and governance community.

Global aid has historically operated under Western-centric models and assumptions, with power, decision-making, and resources concentrated in Western donor and implementing organizations. Assumptions around concepts, such as “beneficiary communities” and structural inequities in access to DRG assistance, continue to limit the DRG community’s ability to meet the current moment. Prior to the termination of USAID, the DRG community had made some inroads towards reorienting aid into more equitable structures, with the mainstreaming of principles such as localization and co-creation in DRG assistance programs.²⁰ However, much more remains to be done, and current trends in democratic backsliding underscore the reality that those in the Global North have much to learn from counterparts in the Global South. Today’s global context calls for the elevation of Global South expertise on resisting authoritarianism, innovating under resource constraints, and addressing democratic erosion with mutual solidarity. Such expertise is already proliferating organically amongst pro-democracy resistance movements, and this creates a driver that the DRG community can harness toward decolonizing DRG assistance.

The NGO and principles-based model of DRG aid fails to empower flexible, grassroots-level coalitions, movements, and activists.

Grassroots movements and community-based organizations are at the heart of authentic, participatory democracy. They mobilize collective action and elevate the voices of citizens who are often sidelined in traditional policymaking and national-level debates. People-powered movements have often served as the primary drivers of social and political change on a vast range of issues ranging from decolonization in Africa and Asia to post-industrial labor rights in the West.²¹ In the U.S., the civil rights movement and feminist organizations mobilized vast cross sections of society to successfully push for desegregation and the right of women to vote. Issue-based grassroots movements thus function as the very lifeblood of democracy. And yet, the DRG community—and the aid sector writ large—has historically relied on registered nonprofit organizations and operated under timebound, milestone-based project

models. There are a number of reasons for this. Donors often require grantees to have 501(c)(3) status, or an international equivalent, for funding eligibility, which excludes many grassroots and movement organizations. Both donors and the INGOs, as well as civil society organizations in the target country, tend to have academic backgrounds in fields such as law, advocacy, or technical specializations—rather than expertise in building social movements and community based organizing.²² The disproportionate support for formal, registered NGOs also contributed to key vulnerability in DRG assistance, as it provided a clear target for authoritarians and illiberal actors that is evident in shrinking civic space worldwide.

Young people are rarely recognized as full partners in the fight for democracy, but they continue to drive the most dynamic political and social changes worldwide.

Despite efforts to prioritize youth engagement across the DRG and broader aid community, current trends suggest a significant disconnect between DRG assistance and the priorities and approaches of young people. The DRG community has been unable to anticipate the spread of Gen Z protests that have cropped up in a number of countries, including Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, Serbia, Peru, Morocco, and more. While uprisings are generally difficult to predict, this also suggests that the DRG community is not adequately tapped into the grievances and daily lived experience of young people around the world. Studies of recent Gen Z movements and uprisings, a number of which have successfully ousted governments and powerful regimes, illustrate that while these movements certainly are not

Anger over greed and corruption in public institutions is a global grievance that is boiling over and pushing young people into the streets.

a monolith, anger over greed and corruption in public institutions is a global grievance that is boiling over and pushing young people into the streets.²³ While Gen Z movements have utilized a remarkable range of creative tactics to push for social and political change, they often struggle to translate short-term mobilization into sustainable, long-term political structures and entry into governing institutions—even when they successfully

20 USAID, Growing Momentum: USAID Localization Progress Report, FY 2024. (Washington, DC: USAID, 2024).

21 Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, Dynamics of Contention, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

22 Benjamin Naimark-Rowse, Dollars and Dissent: Donor Support for Grassroots Organizing and Nonviolent Movements, (Center for Nonviolent Conflict Research, 2022).

23 Erica Chenoweth and Matthew Cebul, “Why Gen-Z Is Rising,” (Journal of Democracy 37, no.1, 2026).

oust sitting governments and regimes.²⁴ Among the DRG community, the cost of disengagement with young people will inevitably be the continued decline of legitimacy for democratic institutions.

Long-held assumptions limit the ability of the DRG community to reimagine democracy and DRG assistance.

The most fundamental driver of change identified by convening participants is the tension between traditional conceptions of democracy, rights, and governance and the changing global context that now demands new ways of thinking about these principles. Systems of democracy—such as the Westminster model, presidential democracy, and consensual democracy—are facing grave evaluations by citizens worldwide, who recognize the ways in which democratic institutions have, at times, failed to deliver on DRG commitments. This is not cause

to renounce our shared commitment to democracy, but rather to engage in clear-eyed evaluation of traditional democratic institutions and playbooks against contemporary challenges. New safeguards, norms, and processes may need to be developed to account for the influence of powerful multinational corporations and big tech on political processes, decision-making, and broader social, cultural, and economic trends. Reforms rooted in a whole-of-society approach and consensus-based dialogue may be needed to reconstitute legitimacy and trust. The DRG community is well positioned to shepherd these processes forward, but it will require concerted action from the community as a whole.

The thematic foci and recommendations that follow this section offer a way forward, one in which DRG community efforts can most directly rebuild legitimacy, trust, and democratic agency in the current global context.

²⁴ Sabina Henneberg, “The Role of the International Community in Supporting Tunisia’s Post-2011 Economic Transition,” (Columbia Journal of International Affairs, 2025).

Section Two:

Supporting Civil Society Resilience and Healthy Information Ecosystems

Section Two provides a pathway for supporting civil society resilience and healthy information ecosystems, the two priority areas for DRG assistance identified during the Carter Center’s 2025 DRG convenings.

Summary

As global democracy, rights, and governance systems experience mounting tectonic pressure, civil society and information ecosystems have become principal arenas where these stresses surface—and where the struggle between democratic resilience and authoritarian consolidation will likely be decided.

Civil society resilience is a decisive factor in halting or reversing democratic backsliding. In an era when 73% of the world’s population lives under repressed or closed civic conditions, the catalyzing potential of civil society is more vital than ever before.²⁵ Comparative analysis of 35 cases from 1991–2021 shows that countries without civil resistance movements have only a 7.5% probability of halting backsliding, compared to 51.7% where such movements exist.²⁶ Even relatively small-scale participation—approximately 3.5%—can be enough to drive transformative change and counter democratic decline.²⁷ That being said, the future of civil society resilience will not depend on numbers alone. Strategic leadership, adaptive organizing, coalition building, genuine political will, and sustained local legitimacy are all key to rebuilding the capacity of global civil society and reversing global democratic decline.²⁸

While lessons on civil society resilience draw on decades of comparative experience, evolving **information ecosystems** present a parallel challenge shaped by far more rapid technological change and uncertainty. Freedom House reports that global internet freedom

declined for the 15th consecutive year in 2025²⁹, while Reporters Without Borders now classifies the global state of press freedom as a “difficult situation” for the first time in the history of its index. U.S. support has long provided the backbone of assistance to international media, and the average media grantee has suffered 35%-40% revenue loss and ³⁰25% staffing cuts following 2025 cuts.³¹ Illiberal trends in information ecosystems are being drastically accelerated by the pace of technological developments, with information manipulation, digital repression, and the weaponization of AI becoming increasingly central tools of contemporary authoritarianism. As the information environment continues to evolve at speed, effective responses will depend less on established programming models and more on experimentation, cross sector collaboration, and cutting-edge analysis.

The remainder of this section draws on convening discussions and case studies to lay out key recommendations for supporting both civil society resilience and healthy information ecosystems. It also points to a necessary sector reset. An emerging consensus from the convenings was that the challenge facing the DRG community is not simply restoring funding or preserving existing institutions; it’s fundamentally rethinking who is funded, how support is structured, how risk is managed, and which actors are treated as key partners in the effort to reestablish democracy, rights, and governance globally. The resulting recommendations below emphasize flexible and decentralized funding, inclusive issue-based and grassroots organizing, rapid-response systems, support for independent and local media, legal defense and counter-lawfare infrastructure, cross-sectoral coalitions, and whole-of-society approaches as key steps in the DRG assistance reset.

25 CIVICUS, *People Power Under Attack 2024: Global Findings*, (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024).

26 CIVICUS, *People Power Under Attack 2024: Global Findings*, (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024).

27 Erica Chenoweth, “Questions, Answers, and Some Cautionary Updates Regarding the 3.5% Rule,” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School, 2024).

28 Hardy Merriman, Patrick Quirk, and Ash Jain, “Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave: A Playbook for Countering the Authoritarian Threat,” (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2023).

29 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2025: An Uncertain Future for the Global Internet*, (Freedom House, 2025).

30 Reporters Without Borders, “RSF World Press Freedom Index 2025: Economic Fragility Leading Threat to Press Freedom,” (RSF 2025).

31 Daniel Sabet and Susan Abbott, *The Impact of Ending U.S. International Media Assistance*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026).

Civil Society Resilience: Insights and Recommendations

Civil society has historically served as democracy's frontline defense, and it is now doing so under conditions of extraordinary strain. Across much of the world, civic actors are confronting a dual crisis: the contraction of civic space and the erosion of the financial, political, and normative support structures that have traditionally sustained their work. Military spending now outpaces aid 13-to-1, even as 117.3 million people are displaced globally and billions more live in repressive civic contexts.³² Repression has become both more widespread and more sophisticated, ranging from direct crackdowns on protesters, journalists, and human rights defenders to more bureaucratic and legalistic forms of control, such as foreign-agent laws, restrictions on association and registration, online censorship, financial surveillance and the selective weaponization of tax and compliance frameworks.³³

Civil society has long been treated within the democracy assistance field as a natural bulwark against authoritarianism and democratic decline. In many contexts, this remains true. Civil society organizations, social movements, youth groups, labor and trade unions, journalists, and community organizers often function as key mobilizers of democratic energy, connecting citizens to collective action, defending rights, demanding accountability and, in some cases, helping catalyze democratic openings. Yet, civil society is not inherently democratic in orientation. The same associational power, narrative reach, and mobilizing capacity that can be deployed in defense of pluralism can also be captured or exploited by illiberal actors. In Hungary, for instance, former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán worked to fill civic space with state-aligned organizations that promote illiberal democracy, while other more independent organizations self-censored out of a fear of being censured through legislative and other repressive measures. Similar tactics have also been deployed in Turkey and India. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to strengthen civil society, but also to elevate civil society actors that are rooted in pluralism, broad-based legitimacy, and democratic and human rights principles. The DRG community must prioritize organizations, movements, and individuals who are focused on tangible issues that are important to their communities. Failing to do so risks further losing the support of citizens, particularly young people,

to illiberal actors. For example, surveys conducted in Africa, including the 2024 African Youth Survey and Afrobarometer studies, indicate that a significant portion of young people prioritize economic opportunities and employment over democratic principles, when forced to choose between the two.³⁴ While many still value democracy, severe unemployment and economic challenges are reshaping their priorities toward practical considerations. Relatedly, centralized donor funding mechanisms have favored large, well-established civil society organizations that are often based in capital cities over rural and grassroots community-based organizations that may be smaller or more dispersed. As a result, many civil society organizations have become preoccupied with donor compliance and reporting requirements, and have shifted from activist roles to “project-management units that prioritize grant delivery over political transformation.”³⁵

Discussions within the convenings repeatedly underscored that successful civil resistance to authoritarianism often depends on timing, breadth, and social rootedness. Where civil society mobilization emerges early and can bridge political, social, or generational divides—before autocratization becomes fully consolidated—it is much more likely to generate meaningful momentum. Conversely, where civic space is fragmented, where organizing is dominated by capital-city elites, or where civic actors are detached from the everyday concerns of ordinary people, resistance is far less likely to succeed. Timing and the phase of democratic backsliding is also critical. Once a “partly free” country backslides further, civic space tends to shrink further, and it is much harder for these movements to operate.³⁶

Key Priorities

Redefine resilience as adaptation and community trust, not just organizational survival

The convenings identified characteristics that distinguish resilient civic ecosystems: adaptation, courageous ownership, decentralized power, solidarity, belief in the possibility of positive change, and strong local grounding. These should not remain rhetorical principles. They should be embedded into funding models, partnership structures and evaluation frameworks. A resilient civic actor is not simply one that remains

32 CIVICUS, State of Civil Society Report 2026 (Johannesburg: CIVICUS, 2026).

33 Nick Robinson, Foreign Influence Registration Laws and Civil Society, (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2025).

34 “African Youth Concerned about Health and Unemployment, Casting Eyes Abroad to Find Better Work, Escape Poverty,” Afrobarometer, September 3, 2025.

35 ALZ Communications, “Rethinking the Future of Democracy Support: Insights from the 2025 Electoral Integrity Summit,” Accountability Lab: Zimbabwe, December 4, 2025.

36 Mark R. Beissinger, “Civil Society Resistance to Democratic Backsliding,” in *Global Challenges to Democracy: Comparative Perspectives on Backsliding, Autocracy, and Resilience*, ed. Valerie J. Bunce, Thomas B. Pepinsky, Rachel Beatty Riedl, and Kenneth M. Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 196–214.

registered or financially solvent, but one that can adapt tactics as conditions change, cultivate new leadership, retain community trust, and continue functioning even when formal structures are targeted or external funding contracts. This has practical implications for donors. OECD guidance on funding partner-country civil society argues that both flexible core funding and multi-year support make local civil society more resilient in times of shrinking civic space because they allow organizations to change strategy when restrictions arise. In other words, resilience is not built through tighter control, but through greater flexibility and stronger local ownership.³⁷ This type of shift in the DRG community will not be easy, but it will ensure that support is directed to the types of movements that overwhelmingly drive change. As the case studies in this paper highlight, fluid and grassroots-based movements focused on specific local issues are driving change and resistance to democratic backsliding around the world, whether it be Gen Z protests in Nepal, Indigenous leaders in Guatemala, or diverse coalitions of female traders, teachers, and nurses unions in Swaziland.

Build legal defense and counter-lawfare infrastructure as core DRG programming

In many contexts, repression now unfolds through administrative harassment, selective prosecution and restrictive legislation as much as through overt violence. We are seeing this, for instance in the proliferation of onerous NGO registration and reporting laws, particularly through the scrutiny of foreign funding sources, and a marked increase in the number of human rights defenders (HRDs) worldwide who are facing criminal charges and judicial harassment.³⁸ Democracy assistance must therefore invest in organizations and networks capable of professionalizing legal response, coordinating rapid action and contesting repressive laws. This includes regional legal aid hubs, strategic litigation funds, emergency rosters of vetted lawyers, and partnerships with universities, bar associations, pro bono clinics and public-interest law centers. Rather than waiting for individual organizations to come under attack, the sector should build a standing legal infrastructure and early warning systems that can anticipate patterns, circulate comparative legal analysis, and respond with speed when new restrictions emerge.³⁹

Decentralize power and resources to subnational, grassroots, and informal civic networks

The decentralization of power and resources must also become a more deliberate priority. One of the recurring critiques raised in the convenings was that democracy assistance has too often been concentrated in professionalized urban NGO circles that are legible to donors but weakly rooted in communities. This has created both political and operational vulnerabilities. It can produce civic sectors that are technically proficient yet socially brittle, while also making them easier targets for governments that wish to disrupt democratic organizing by focusing on capital-based NGOs. Supporting resilience, therefore, requires a shift toward subnational actors, community-based organizations, informal networks, and regional coalitions. Decentralization should be understood not only as a matter of inclusion, but as a practical strategy for building civic ecosystems that are harder to co-opt or dismantle. Additionally, while digital communications will remain a defining feature of the modern information ecosystem, the DRG community should tap into conversations on going “back to analog” and seeking “third spaces” that are already on the rise as people deal with digital fatigue, increased loneliness, and a desire for more authentic interactions.

Enable flexible, issue-based civic coalitions beyond NGO compliance frameworks

Closely linked to the previous priority is the need to move away from narrow NGO compliance models and toward more enabling frameworks for public participation.⁴⁰ In many settings, the most dynamic and legitimate civic actors are not formal NGOs at all, but youth movements, neighborhood associations, labor groups, digitally coordinated campaigns, mutual-aid formations, and social enterprises with public-interest goals. Yet, both legal systems and donor architectures continue to privilege registered organizations and compliance-heavy models of engagement. A more enabling approach would lower barriers to participation, reduce punitive compliance burdens, and recognize a broader range of civic forms. This includes recognizing social enterprises, creating lighter-touch frameworks for community groups, and making funding systems more accessible to informal or issue-based civic coalitions. Civil society funders must also reassess their appetite for risk. People-based movements require greater flexibility, and some of the tactics

37 OECD, *Funding Civil Society in Partner Countries*, OECD Publishing, 2023.

38 CIVICUS, *People Power Under Attack 2025: Global Findings* (Johannesburg: CIVICUS, December 2025).

39 Nick Robinson, *Foreign Influence Registration Laws and Civil Society*, (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2025).

40 OECD, *Shifting Power with Partners: Toolkit for Implementing the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1787/7987e8db-en>.

Civil Society Under Absolute Monarchy: Eswatini Case Study

1986

Start of current
monarchy rule

2021

Pro-democracy protests
and state violence

REPRESSED

CIVICUS civic
space rating

Context

Eswatini is one of the world's last absolute monarchies. King Mswati III has ruled since 1986 in a system where political parties are banned, political organizing is criminalized, and the legislature remains advisory to the monarchy.¹ Governance is organized through the tinkhundla system, which channels participation into local councils that reinforce rather than challenge monarchical legitimacy.²

Despite severe constraints, civil society persists in limited but meaningful form. Labor unions, women's rights groups, human rights defenders, and independent media operate in restricted space, contributing to democratic progress by expanding civic norms, sustaining collective organization, and preserving channels for dissent.³ While this does not constitute democratic transition, it reflects incremental institutional and social foundations for potential long-term change.

Movement and Tactics

In the absence of legal political parties, trade unions have become central civic actors. The Trade Union Congress of Swaziland (TUCOSWA), reregistered in 2013 after dissolution, organizes workers around wages, safety, and freedom of association, often functioning as a de facto political voice.⁴ Unions engage international bodies such as the International Labour Organization, generating external accountability pressure and embedding domestic struggles within global labor networks.⁵ Political movements such as the People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO), though banned, persist indirectly through civil society and professional networks, reflecting blurred boundaries between social and political organizing.⁶

Women's organizations, particularly Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA), have expanded civic space through sustained advocacy against gender-based violence and discriminatory

customary practices.⁷ Their work has contributed to gradual legal and policy reforms, including improved domestic violence protections and expanded women's property rights.⁸ However, donor funding models often misalign with their operational realities, privileging short-term outputs over long-term community-based advocacy.

Independent media plays a critical role in documenting repression and informing public discourse. Outlets such as The Nation report on corruption and human rights abuses despite legal risks, including detention and prosecution under security legislation.⁹ During the 2021 protests, journalists and civil society actors documented lethal state violence in real time, enabling international scrutiny through mechanisms such as the UN Universal Periodic Review.¹⁰

Lessons Learned

This case highlights that civil society can sustain key democratic functions even without formal democratic institutions. DRG support should therefore be grounded in the realities of constrained political environments rather than anchored to electoral or institutional benchmarks that may not be applicable in practice.

Priority should be given to strengthening core civic infrastructure—labor movements, women's rights networks, and independent media—alongside practical protections such as legal aid, digital security, and emergency support for activists and journalists, which are often more relevant than traditional governance programming in restrictive contexts.¹¹

Programming should also reflect the overlap between civic and political activity in repressive systems, rather than treating them as separate spheres. Finally, evaluation should go beyond only measuring electoral outcomes and also consider the durability of civic organizations and protection of civic space over time, with regional solidarity networks remaining an important channel for sustaining resilience.¹²

See Appendix 1 for case study references.

employed by people-based movements—such as nonviolent disruptions and boycott campaigns—might traditionally make donors uneasy. Loosening oversight rigidity may break up this dynamic and may also serve to mitigate the liability associated with organizational targeting by autocrats.⁴¹

Treat youth inclusion as structural

The convenings also pointed to the need to treat youth inclusion as a structural rather than symbolic priority. Youth are often described as the future of democratic renewal, yet in many democracy programs they remain peripheral to real agenda-setting, funding decisions, and leadership transitions. If resilience is to be sustained over time, the sector must invest more seriously in youth leadership pipelines, not through one-off fellowships alone or paternalistic approaches, but through long-term support for youth-led organizing, leadership development, and intergenerational power sharing. Representation within the DRG community also needs a hard look. Amongst funders and implementers, those in decision-making positions are rarely from younger generations. Elevating young people, including those from the Global South and other underrepresented communities, in decision-making structures like boards, selection committees, program design teams, and thought leadership roles would enable a tangible, genuine shift toward programming that centers the needs and priorities of youth. This is particularly important in contexts where large youth populations are politically consequential and where formal institutions are struggling to absorb or respond to youth grievance.

Build horizontal Global South solidarity networks and structured peer-learning systems

DRG assistance continues to be shaped by one-directional assumptions about knowledge and expertise, even as some of the most important lessons in resisting authoritarianism are emerging from actors who have spent decades navigating repression, scarcity, and institutional fragility. Supporting peer exchange should therefore be understood as a strategic investment rather than a supplementary activity. Exchanges across contexts can help civic actors share organizing tactics, legal strategies, digital-security practices, and coalition-building lessons, but they also do something deeper: They cultivate a sense of solidarity and common purpose among actors who are often isolated by geography or political circumstance. This is especially important at a time

when traditional Western aid architectures are weakening and democratic actors increasingly need models of mutual support rather than top-down transfer.

Fund issue-based organizing around locally salient issues

A related priority is greater investment in grassroots organizing around issues that matter to people's daily lives. One of the recurring weaknesses of donor-driven democracy programming has been its tendency to privilege abstract institutional agendas over the everyday concerns through which legitimacy is actually built. Civic resilience is more likely to emerge where people are organizing around labor rights, informal livelihoods, healthcare, education, local corruption, women's rights, mental health, access to justice, or community safety than where programming is framed primarily through a democracy, human rights, and governance framework. This does not mean moving away from those core principles but, rather, grounding those principles in lived experience. DRG assistance should, therefore, shift more resources toward issue-based movements, community-based organizations, and locally rooted initiatives that are already embedded in public grievances and public trust. These are often the spaces in which democratic energy is generated most authentically and in which cross-cutting coalitions are most likely to form.

Create prepositioned rapid-response mechanisms

The need to create robust rapid-response infrastructure also emerged as a key operational recommendation. If authoritarian advances are increasingly opportunistic and fast-moving, the support systems available to civic actors must be equally agile. DRG has often been too slow, risk-averse, and bureaucratic to respond effectively when crackdowns occur. A more resilient model would establish pre-positioned emergency mechanisms capable of providing rapid grants, legal aid, digital protection, relocation support, and crisis coordination, when civic actors and human rights defenders come under immediate threat.⁴² Flexibility and speed must be treated not as exceptions to standard practice, but as essential operational capacities in the context of accelerating repression. The DRG sector already has several models for “identify-support-protect” mechanisms for human rights defenders that can be replicated for other at-risk activists, organizations, and movements working on democracy-related issues. For instance,

41 Nick Robinson, *Foreign Influence Registration Laws and Civil Society*, (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2025).

42 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Co-ordinating Action for Civic Space: Toolkit for Implementing the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1787/61416414-en>.

Gen Z Uprising: Nepal Case Study

76

Deaths in protests
(Sept 2025)

25

Median age
of Nepal¹

800K+

New voters registered
post-uprising²

182 / 275

Seats won by RSP
in 2026 election³

Context

In September 2025, Nepal experienced a major Gen Z-led uprising after the government banned 26 social media platforms, following viral #nepokids content that exposed elite privilege amid widespread unemployment, poverty, and inequality in a country with a median age of 25. The ban acted as a catalyst for preexisting grievances, including long-standing perceptions of elite impunity.⁴

Protests escalated rapidly and were met with lethal state force, resulting in 76 deaths. The violence expanded participation beyond youth into a cross-generational uprising. Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli resigned on Sept. 9, and an interim government led by Chief Justice Sushila Karki was sworn in on Sept. 12.⁵

In the March 2026 elections, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), led by 35-year-old Balendra Shah — who built his political base through digital platforms — won a major parliamentary victory, displacing long-standing coalition parties. The case reflects a broader global pattern of digitally networked outsider movements reshaping party systems.

Movement and Tactics

The uprising relied on decentralized online tools to organize, share symbols and messages, and rapidly exchange ideas across countries.

Core digital infrastructure for the uprising included Discord servers with over 150,000 members, where more than 10,000 participants deliberated on interim leadership selection. While nonbinding, the outcome was acknowledged in practice by key institutions, illustrating how digital legitimacy can emerge in institutional voids.⁶

Communication persisted through VPNs and Bluetooth mesh networks following platform disruptions, while TikTok and YouTube served as amplification channels for protest messaging and political content.

Cultural and symbolic tools were central to scaling participation. The #nepokids trend functioned as an entry point for political engagement through humor

and satire, lowering barriers to participation. Music and pop culture, including protest songs by Balendra Shah and the adoption of global symbols such as the One Piece flag, helped construct a shared Gen Z identity across class and geography.⁷

The movement also enabled real-time transnational learning, with activist networks in Morocco, Madagascar, and Bulgaria engaging with Nepal-based Discord communities during the protests.

It is important to note that decision-making remained concentrated among urban, digitally connected users, creating a structural gap between national participation in the streets and digital governance processes.

Lessons Learned

This case highlights the increasing convergence of information ecosystems, youth-led civic mobilization, and institutional substitution under crisis conditions. DRG actors should recognize that young people are not only participants but primary architects of digital political space, using platforms not just for communication but for coordination, decision-making, and legitimacy-building when formal institutions weaken.

DRG programming should also move beyond traditional youth engagement models and invest in the ecosystems, skills, and structures that enable young people to translate rapid mobilization into inclusive, durable, and institutionally anchored political change. This was a challenge in this case, which showed the mismatch between the speed of youth-led digital mobilization and the slower pace of institutional response. It is important to support youth leadership and autonomy, while also enabling pathways into formal governance structures, such as participatory councils or transitional mechanisms.

Support should also focus on strengthening hybrid civic infrastructure that connects youth-driven digital participation with inclusive offline governance systems. Without these bridges, digitally mediated processes risk reinforcing existing inequalities, particularly between urban, connected youth and rural or less digitally included populations.

See Appendix 1 for case study references.

the Freedom House Emergency Assistance Program (EAP) has supported over 13,000 human rights defenders (HRDs) since 2007 and provides rapid, short-term financial aid for legal, medical, or security needs. Similarly, through the ACCELERATE funding mechanism, DT Institute and The Carter Center provide rapid response

grants to human rights defenders confronting unprecedented challenges to democracy and fundamental freedoms. These types of mechanisms could be adapted and scaled to support activists and movements who are mobilizing on diverse issues such as healthcare, labor rights, and immigrant protection.

Mutual Aid and Civil Resistance to Operation Metro Surge: Minnesota Case Study

2025
Launch of Operation
Metro Surge¹

4,000+
Reported arrests
during operation²

75,000
Peak estimated
protest participation³

12,000+
Food boxes distributed
via mutual aid⁴

Context

In December 2025, Operation Metro Surge, described as the largest immigration enforcement operation in U.S. history, targeting Minneapolis and St. Paul was launched. The tactics used, which bypassed judicial oversight and infringed on constitutional rights⁵ triggered large-scale protests and rapid organizing. Mobilization built directly on preexisting civic infrastructure developed through COVID-era mutual aid systems and post-George Floyd protest networks. These earlier formations provided the relational and logistical base for rapid-scale coordination under conditions of heightened enforcement pressure.

Movement and Tactics

The movement combined decentralized rapid-response systems with highly coordinated community organizing. Residents used Signal-based alert networks to track ICE activity, while whistle systems and neighborhood patrols were used to warn communities near schools, intersections, and public spaces.

Mutual aid networks played a central role in sustaining participation, distributing more than 12,000 boxes of food and coordinating informal support systems, including work disruption assistance and eviction moratorium arrangements for affected households.⁶ These mechanisms extended the movement beyond protest into sustained community protection infrastructure.

On Jan. 23, organizers led a general strike supported by unions, faith leaders, and community groups. The action mobilized an estimated 50,000–75,000 participants, led to widespread business closures, and sustained daily actions over a six-week period. In parallel, coordinated protests at airports resulted in

approximately 100 arrests, including among participating religious leaders.⁷

Organizers drew explicitly on global civil resistance traditions. Influences included Serbia's Otpor movement, Chilean anti-authoritarian resistance under Pinochet, South Korea's 2024 civilian response to an attempted military takeover, and sanctuary-based organizing in Central America and the United States. Faith-based networks, such as ISALAH, framed their work within the sanctuary movement tradition, linking contemporary organizing to earlier religious protection networks.⁸

Lessons Learned

This case highlights the increasing globalization of civil resistance repertoires and the growing bidirectional exchange of tactics between Global North and South movements. Rather than treating nonviolent strategy development as geographically segmented, DRG actors should recognize the active circulation of methods across contexts of repression and democratic backsliding.

Support should prioritize infrastructure that enables sustained collective action under pressure, including secure communications systems, scalable mutual aid networks, legal defense capacity, and accompaniment models that reduce risk for vulnerable participants. Equally important is investment in platforms that facilitate structured peer exchange between organizers operating in different political environments.

Finally, DRG programming should move beyond episodic protest support toward strengthening the underlying civic ecosystems — mutual aid, labor, faith-based, and decentralized community networks — that make sustained mobilization possible under conditions of state pressure.

See Appendix 1 for case study references.

Invest in culturally grounded, resonant narratives

Finally, rebuilding civil society resilience will require renewed attention to narratives, public meaning, and coalition breadth. Antidemocratic actors have become increasingly effective at claiming the language of patriotism, religion, tradition, dignity, and belonging, while democratic actors are too often confined to technical or donor-shaped vocabulary that fails to resonate widely. Rebuilding belief in DRG principles requires more culturally grounded and emotionally intelligent approaches to narrative work, including partnerships with faith leaders, veterans, local cultural figures, and other actors not traditionally centered in democracy assistance. It also requires a broader civic tent. As argued in Section One of this report, democratic renewal will depend on coalitions that extend beyond professional NGOs to include labor networks, tech companies, faith-based organizations, business communities, Indigenous groups, and other constituencies that may not closely identify with DRG language but do share practical commitments to dignity, pluralism, or accountable governance.

Information Ecosystems: Insights and Recommendations

A healthy information ecosystem is one of the essential foundations of democratic governance. The flow of information allows for deliberative decision-making, supports accountability, facilitates meaningful public participation, and helps sustain trust in democratic institutions and processes. Under democratic conditions, that flow allows citizens to hold power to account. Under sustained pressure, when the information environment is degraded, distorted, or captured, democratic functions may weaken.

Today, the global information ecosystem is under profound strain. Governments and political actors are increasingly taking leading roles in shaping online information environments through censorship, harassment, election interference, and platform weaponization.⁴³ The strategic and economic value of information has also increased sharply in an age of digitization, global connectivity, and data extraction. In a world where information flows are primarily hosted online, technological disruption, algorithmic amplification, and the

monetization of outrage have also created an environment in which factual reporting struggles to compete with emotionally charged, polarizing, and often deliberately manipulative content. Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2025 describes a landscape of declining engagement with traditional news media, low trust, and rising concern over the role of online personalities, video platforms, and algorithmically distributed content in shaping public understanding. These conditions create openings that illiberal actors readily exploit.⁴⁴

The ability of state and non-state actors to control,

Governments and political actors are increasingly taking leading roles in shaping online information environments through censorship, harassment, election interference, and platform weaponization.

manipulate, distort or flood the information space can have profound democratic effects. UNESCO and related governance entities increasingly emphasize that information integrity depends not only on limited content moderation, but on the wider rules, incentives, and institutions that govern digital platforms and public communication.⁴⁵ UNESCO's framing of journalism as a public good is particularly relevant. Trustworthy and independent journalism is not simply another sectoral good, but a core democratic infrastructure that makes civic oversight, increased accountability, and public reasoning possible.⁴⁶ Available evidence suggests that investment in healthy information ecosystems has generated substantial and measurable returns. Investigative reporting initiatives supported through international assistance have contributed to more than 800 indictments and over \$12 billion in asset recoveries—representing an estimated return of \$100 for every dollar invested.⁴⁷ Enabling healthy information ecosystems is not merely a communications effort; it is a governance effort, a market effort, and a democratic culture effort.

The DRG convenings reflected a clear consensus that resilience in the information space requires more than simply reactive fact-checking. In order to effectively counter threats to democracy, rights, and governance, and build up healthy information ecosystems, the DRG community must focus on three pillars:

43 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2025: An Uncertain Future for the Global Internet* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2025).

44 Nic Newman, Amy Ross Arguedas, Craig T. Robertson, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025*, (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025).

45 UNESCO, *Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms: Safeguarding Freedom of Expression and Access to Information through a Multistakeholder Approach* (Paris: UNESCO, 2023).

46 UNESCO, *Journalism Is a Public Good: World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development*, (2021).

47 Daniel Sabet and Susan Abbott, *The Impact of Ending U.S. International Media Assistance* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026).

1. Mobilize and sustain public pressure to advance a policy environment capable of addressing and mitigating threats to the information ecosystem.

2. Build citizen resilience to information warfare.

3. Increase the supply of good information (both through independent media and effective dissemination of public information) with more savvy approaches that counter messaging from illiberal actors and strengthen democratic ideals.

In addition, healthy information ecosystems cannot be rebuilt through top-down programming alone—solutions must be rooted in local contexts, adapted to local media habits and cultural norms, and delivered through trusted channels and trusted messengers.

Key Priorities

Champion Global South voices in digital governance and platform policy debates

DRG institutions should serve as a bridge to convene and promote diverse voices, including smaller and Global South states, in the vital digital policy conversations that will shape the trajectory of the information ecosystem for years to come. For example, the transatlantic divide on approaches to digital governance—increasingly laissez-faire in the United States, while the European Union has opted for ambitious regulatory infrastructure through the Digital Services Act and other laws—would benefit from a collective push to bring more Global South voices into the fold. This is a pivotal moment for policy development around data governance, AI regulation, and platform accountability, and the DRG community is uniquely suited to help ensure that Global South partners have a seat at the table.

Develop regulatory mechanisms to counter malign information manipulation and foreign interference

Participants stressed that democratic states and civic actors are operating in an environment where information manipulation is often transnational, networked, and strategically resourced. Policy responses must, therefore, address not only false content, but also algorithmic distortion, covert influence operations, illicit financing channels, and foreign-backed information warfare operating across both digital and analog spaces. At the same time, such policies must be crafted carefully so as not to create new tools for censorship or repression. The DRG

community has a unique set of expertise it can bring to the table here: technical expertise on mis- and disinformation, and AI, in the context of electoral and political processes; rights-based frameworks that can ensure regulatory responses consider core principles, such as freedom of expression and the right to information; and convening power that can bring together big tech, policymakers, and Global South voices.

Promote whole-of-society media and digital literacy efforts

Another clear priority is to promote and advance citizen resilience to information manipulation. Convening participants repeatedly emphasized that the strongest long-term defense against disinformation is not simply elite rebuttal or reactive debunking, but a citizenry better equipped to distinguish credible information from manipulation, identify trusted sources, and navigate an increasingly complex media environment. This requires a whole-of-society approach to civic, media, and digital literacy that extends beyond formal schooling. Finland's national media-literacy policy is frequently cited for this reason.⁴⁸ Media literacy is treated not only as an educational goal, but as a societal competence supported across institutions. The OECD, likewise, points to media-literacy education as a systemic response rather than an isolated classroom intervention. The implication for DRG assistance is that media literacy efforts should be hosted and promoted not only by schools, but also by community organizations, religious institutions, unions, libraries and other civic spaces which have already built local trust.⁴⁹

Surveillance Concerns

There is a growing concern about the expansion of surveillance practices. In democratic contexts, these practices often take more diffuse and less visible forms than in overtly authoritarian systems. Mass data collection through commercial platforms, targeted advertising ecosystems, and data brokerage markets enable granular behavioral profiling without meaningful user awareness or consent. Online monitoring—whether conducted by governments, private firms, or political actors—can blur the line between legitimate oversight and intrusive surveillance, particularly when legal frameworks are outdated or inconsistently applied. Without adequate safeguards, such practices risk undermining fundamental rights, chilling civic participation, and eroding trust in democratic institutions.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, "Media Literacy," Government of Finland, <https://okm.fi/en/media-literacy>.

⁴⁹ OECD, Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity, (OECD Publishing, 2024).

Authoritarian Drift in East Africa: Kenya/Uganda Case Study

60+
Deaths linked to
Kenya's protest
crackdown (2024–2025)

82
Enforced disappearances
documented in Kenya

7th term
Secured in Uganda's
2026 elections

70%
Share of Africa's
population under
age 30

Background

Kenya and Uganda illustrate converging trajectories of democratic erosion, with governments increasingly consolidating control over civic space and the information ecosystem. In Kenya, protests triggered by the 2024 Finance Bill evolved into broader anti-government mobilization. State response was marked by lethal force and repression. At least 60 deaths and 82 enforced disappearances were documented, with evidence of torture and extrajudicial killings.¹ Authorities framed protests as criminal or “treasonous,” enabling expanded targeting of digitally organized activism.²

In Uganda, the 2026 electoral cycle reinforced a system of competitive authoritarianism in which formal democratic institutions persist, but meaningful contestation is constrained. President Yoweri Museveni secured a seventh term through legislative manipulation, institutional capture, and coercive enforcement.³ A series of laws—including amendments to cybercrime, NGO regulation, and military authority—enabled systematic repression of opposition actors, civil society, and media.⁴

In both countries, domestic repression is reinforced by external partnerships that provide financial and technical support without governance conditionality, reducing the leverage of traditional democracy actors.⁵ Nontraditional actors have instead emerged to fill the organizational and informational vacuum, mobilizing citizens (especially youth) through decentralized digital networks, and reshaping the landscape of democratic engagement outside formal institutional channels.

Movement and Tactics

Control of the information ecosystem has become central to state strategy. In Kenya, authorities restricted live media coverage during protests, despite court rulings prohibiting such interference.⁶ Internet shutdowns, platform restrictions, and use of cybercrime legislation constrained digital expression, while declining press-freedom rankings reflected growing pressure on independent media.⁷ Corporate actors also played a role, as advertising withdrawals weakened the financial sustainability of critical outlets.⁸

In Uganda, repression combined legal enforcement with direct coercion. Journalists, opposition figures, and digital content creators faced arrests, prosecutions, and prison sentences under cybercrime provisions.⁹ Independent media were suspended, civil society organizations constrained, and political opposition systematically targeted.¹⁰ High-profile incidents, including cross-border abductions of opposition figures, underscored the regime's willingness to project coercive power beyond its borders.¹¹

At the same time, civic mobilization is increasingly occurring outside formal NGO structures. In Kenya, the 2024–2025 protests were youth-led, decentralized, and digitally coordinated via platforms such as TikTok, WhatsApp, and X, bypassing traditional civil society channels.¹² Across the region, the professionalization of NGOs has contributed to fragmentation and reduced their relevance to mass mobilization, with critics arguing that donor-driven structures can depoliticize activism and create visible targets for repression.¹³

External actors further shape the information environment. In Uganda, expanded partnerships with Russia, China, and Gulf States have included military assistance, media influence, and economic investment without political conditions.¹⁴ In Kenya, Chinese media expansion and debt-based economic engagement raise similar concerns about influence within the information ecosystem.¹⁵

Lessons Learned

First, DRG programming should prioritize the information ecosystem as a central arena of democratic contestation. This includes supporting independent media sustainability, countering digital repression, and addressing the misuse of legal frameworks to control public discourse.

Second, engagement models must adapt to decentralized, youth-led civic movements. Africa's median age is approximately 19, and democratic mobilization increasingly occurs through horizontal, digitally networked structures outside formal NGOs.¹⁶ Flexible funding and support mechanisms are needed to reach these actors without constraining their effectiveness.

Third, legal defense and accountability mechanisms should be strengthened to counter the growing use of legislation as a tool of repression. Support to

judicial institutions, bar associations, and watchdog organizations remains critical.

Fourth, international strategies must account for the expanding role of nondemocratic external partners. Their provision of unconditional support reduces leverage for governance reform and reinforces restrictive information environments.

Finally, the limitations of the NGO-led democracy

support model require reassessment. Fragmentation, donor dependency, and visibility have made formal civil society both less effective and more vulnerable. Future approaches should prioritize broader civic ecosystems that connect independent media, institutions, and citizen-led networks capable of operating under conditions of constraint.

See Appendix 1 for case study references.

Protect journalists with robust safety training, legal defense, and alternative operating models

One of the most pressing areas of concern that emerged at the convenings was press freedom and the need to invest in the protection of journalists and local media actors. Journalists face diverse and challenging contexts—from legal harassment in the United States; to judicial and regulatory battles over platform accountability and media freedom in Brazil; to political risk, isolation, and assassinations in Gaza. Participants called for alternative operating models and robust safety training, noting that demand for such support has “gone through the roof,” including in contexts once considered safe. In an era of limited resources, the DRG community must prioritize these frontline defenders of democracy.

Invest in investigative reporting, digital forensics, and early warning systems

Local reporters and advocates need stronger capacities to debunk false narratives, trace coordinated influence operations, expose illicit networks, identify legal and regulatory threats earlier, and document manipulative tactics in ways that are accessible to the public. In an era where traditional democratic media actors (e.g., Voice of America) are retreating, and nondemocratic media is filling the gap (e.g., Middle Eastern and Chinese media, etc.), the need for well-capacitated local information infrastructure is even more vital. The demand for these capabilities is especially acute in frontline states facing sustained foreign interference, as well as in tipping-point democracies, where manipulative narratives can reshape political trajectories quickly.⁵⁰

Fund subnational champions for information resilience

In many contexts, national governments are either unwilling, politically constrained, or too polarized to act

as credible defenders of information integrity. This makes subnational actors particularly important. Mayors, state legislatures, school systems, neighborhood associations, libraries, religious organizations, veterans' groups, and community-based institutions can often move more quickly, build more trusted partnerships, and pilot more innovative responses than national governments. Information resilience is inseparable from social trust, and where national consensus is weak, local institutions may serve as the most realistic sites for information integrity and trusted intervention. In a notable parallel, Reuters Institute found that local TV news and local newspapers remain among the most trusted brands in the United States.⁵¹ The DRG community should also be willing to meet citizens in spaces where they already feel comfortable—for example, in a church, a parent-teacher group, a union hall, or a local sports community—rather than a formal democracy event or civil society workshop. The DRG community should leverage the cultural and moral affinity of these institutions, investing more deliberately in engaging these nontraditional actors as democratic communicators—not merely as amplifiers of externally produced messaging, but as genuine partners in shaping narratives and rebuilding trust.

A Flawed System

Even prior to 2025 cuts, only about 41% of media assistance funding reached local organizations directly, while just over 10% of projects were locally led. The majority of resources flowed through intermediary organizations, reflecting a system that prioritized oversight and compliance over local ownership. This structure not only dilutes impact but increases fragility. When funding was withdrawn, entire implementation chains collapsed simultaneously.⁵²

50 Atlantic Council experts, “Romania Annulled Its Presidential Election Results amid Alleged Russian Interference. What Happens Next?” *New Atlanticist* (Atlantic Council), December 6, 2024.

51 R. Nic Newman, Amy Ross Arguedas, Craig T. Robertson, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025*, (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025).

52 Daniel Sabet and Susan Abbott, *The Impact of Ending U.S. International Media Assistance* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026).

Digital Mobilization, Information Cascades, and Institutional Counterpressure: Guatemala Case Study

2015
Peak #RenunciaYa
mobilization begins

21
Consecutive weeks
of protests

30,000
Initial turnout in
La Plaza call

Context

In 2015, Guatemala experienced a rapid escalation of civic mobilization under the hashtag #RenunciaYa, meaning “Resign Already,” following investigations by the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) into a presidential corruption network known as “La Línea.”¹ The revelations functioned as a high-impact information shock, rapidly converting latent public frustration into coordinated mass protest.

The country’s post-conflict context—marked by entrenched impunity, weak institutions, and high inequality—shaped how information traveled and how quickly it translated into collective action. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, became the primary infrastructure for dissemination, enabling rapid scaling of participation without formal organizational intermediaries.

Information Environment, Movement Dynamics, and Tactics

The initial mobilization was triggered by a single social media call to assemble in public plazas, which rapidly propagated into sustained weekly demonstrations under the #RenunciaYa hashtag. Participants included urban middle-class groups, students, professionals, and small business owners, while Indigenous communities organized parallel, but less digitally mediated, mobilizations outside the capital.

In information ecosystem terms, Facebook functioned as both a coordination layer and a narrative amplifier, compressing the time between exposure to corruption revelations and mass collective action. Over 21 consecutive weeks of mobilization, tens of thousands of participants sustained pressure that culminated in the resignation and prosecution of President Otto Pérez Molina.

However, the same digitally accelerated structure that enabled rapid scaling also limited organizational depth. The movement lacked a durable institutional vehicle capable of translating protest energy into sustained governance reform. This gap became more visible in the subsequent period, as entrenched

political and economic networks regained influence over state institutions.

Between 2016 and 2023, anti-corruption infrastructure—including CICIG—was dismantled, judicial independence weakened, and journalists and prosecutors faced exile or criminalization.² This reflects a broader DRG pattern. Information-driven mobilization can outpace institutional resilience, particularly when counter-elites retain control over coercive and legal systems.

A contrasting model emerged in 2023, when Indigenous authorities, most notably the 48 Cantones of Totonicapán, used territorial coordination and roadblock strategies to defend electoral outcomes.³ Unlike digitally networked protest, this mobilization relied on long-standing, offline governance systems with embedded legitimacy.

Lessons Learned

This case illustrates both the strengths and limitations of digitally accelerated civic mobilization. Social media platforms can rapidly convert investigative disclosures into mass participation, but they do not inherently generate the organizational structures required for sustained institutional defense.

For DRG programming, the key implication is the need to differentiate between information amplification mechanisms (e.g., social media virality, narrative cascades) and institutional conversion mechanisms (e.g., political organizations, territorial governance systems, and long-term civic infrastructure). Support that focuses only on the former risks producing high-intensity, but low-durability, mobilization.

Effective engagement should therefore prioritize hybrid ecosystems that combine digital coordination capacity with territorially grounded institutions capable of sustaining pressure over time. This includes recognizing Indigenous governance systems as core actors in information and legitimacy networks, not peripheral stakeholders. Successful democratic defense depends not only on information exposure, but on whether that information can be anchored into durable organizational forms capable of resisting elite countermobilization.

See Appendix 1 for case study references.

'Flood the zone' with compelling content through locally trusted messengers

This recommendation reflects a recognition that falsehoods do not gain traction merely because facts are absent, but because manipulative narratives are often more emotionally compelling, culturally resonant, and widely distributed than factual corrections. DRG actors need more proactive communication strategies that combine credibility with relatability, using storytelling, humor, identity, values, and narrative fluency to compete more effectively in contemporary media environments. Static fact sheets and technical messaging are not sufficient. Participants stressed the importance of producing content that is compelling, accessible, and delivered through messengers people already trust, including influencers, podcasters, sports figures, veterans, faith leaders, and local cultural voices. The recommendation to prioritize issue-based movements highlighted in the civil society resilience section of this report is also relevant here: Anchoring communication strategies and institutions around specific societal issues is an innovation that should be scaled.

Messaging Strategies at Work

- In the United States, right-leaning online shows, podcasters, and influencers hold a dominant position in the digital attention economy, with a combined following roughly five times larger than their left-leaning counterparts as of early 2025. Conservative-leaning individuals and channels prioritized issue-based platforms and the development of an independent media ecosystem in large part due to perceived bias in mainstream media. They also pioneered approaches such as long-form, unscripted content that is perceived as more authentic.
- In Taiwan, the government's "humor over rumor" strategy—implemented through rapid-response messaging, in partnership with trusted civic partners—has been used to debunk viral misinformation through shareable memes and plain-language graphics.
- The Ukrainian government has leveraged digital platforms and culturally resonant messaging, including regular video addresses by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to sustain public trust and national cohesion under conditions of sustained information warfare from Russia.

Build a centralized knowledge hub/ 'DemocracyGPT' for practitioners and activists

Despite the unprecedented access to information in an age of AI and digitalization, the convenings noted that the drastic structural shifts of the DRG sector, over the last year, have resulted in an unprecedented loss of institutional knowledge, best practices, and historical records among the DRG community. Participants thus recommended that the DRG community should employ more structured knowledge-sharing and coordination moving forward. As many of the informal networks through which the community previously exchanged lessons and tools have now been lost, the creation of a new centralized knowledge hub or clearinghouse could consolidate research, methodologies, digital tools, communication strategies, and resources in order to reduce duplication, restore continuity, and provide a practical entry point for new actors entering the community. The DRG community should also consider developing a parallel "DemocracyGPT" that could be utilized by practitioners, academics, activists, and other key stakeholders. One particularly useful model to build upon may be the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, a web portal with information on elections designed to meet the needs of election practitioners that aims to foster inclusive, credible, sustainable, and professional electoral processes.

Promote and protect the fundamental right of access to information through strong legislation, effective implementation, and robust enforcement

In supporting accountability, participation, and trust, access to public information serves as a core defense against democratic backsliding. With a free flow of information, communities are more aware of government activities, and citizens can more fully participate in priority setting and decision-making processes. Information is essential for independent media, and as a transparency and accountability tool, it can serve to retain or expand civic space. Importantly, as mis- and disinformation flourishes, access to reliable and timely information can serve as an antidote and help rebuild trust in public institutions. Continued focus should be directed toward ensuring that access to information laws remain effective and enforced. In addition to the promotion of the general right, emphasis must be placed on assuring that all persons can access the information and that it is reaching even the most marginalized.

Defending The Information Space Against Democratic Backsliding: Moldova Case Study

178
Russian TV channels
flooding Moldova's
information space (2025)

80%
Estimated AI-generated
comments on government
social media

5.7M
Citizens reached
by civic prebunking
campaign

Background

Moldova's September 2025 parliamentary elections were among the most consequential in its post-Soviet history, presenting a binary choice between continued European Union integration and renewed alignment with Russia. The elections became a test of democratic resilience against an intensive Russian hybrid interference campaign.¹

During the campaign, the Kremlin funneled significant financial resources into political influence, while more than 178 Russian television channels flooded the media environment. Coordinated Telegram networks incentivized citizens to disseminate disinformation on social platforms, while even religious institutions were leveraged to amplify anti-EU messaging. Approximately 80% of comments on government social media pages were assessed as AI-generated, contributing to an environment of manufactured consensus.²

Authorities also reported cyberattacks on electoral infrastructure, false bomb threats targeting overseas polling stations, and planned postelection destabilization efforts. Despite these pressures, the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity secured over 50% of the vote and 55 parliamentary seats, while pro-Russian blocs declined significantly.³ This outcome reflected the effectiveness of sustained efforts to defend the integrity of the information space.

Movement and Tactics

Civil society and independent media adapted rapidly to the scale and speed of disinformation. Organizations shifted from reactive fact-checking to proactive "prebunking," monitoring emerging narratives and deploying preemptive responses through short-form, accessible content.⁴

Initiativa Moldova combined digital and in-person engagement, mobilizing 140 youth volunteers across 25 districts, while producing viral content featuring trusted community figures. The campaign reached 5.7 million citizens. At the same time, Realitatea's "Moldova Unites Us" initiative emphasized narrative construction over rebuttal, using shared national identity to counter divisive messaging and achieving more than 16 million views.

Innovations in format proved critical. Media outlets integrated humor and satire into disinformation exposure, while tools such as instant-verification chatbots enabled users to validate content in near real-time. Election-focused organizations strengthened trust by facilitating direct engagement between journalists and electoral authorities.

Investigative journalism also played a central role. A NORD News investigation infiltrated a coordinated Russian influence operation, documenting psychological warfare trainings, financial flows, and operational structures before transferring evidence to authorities, leading the associated political party to lose its electoral rights.

Lessons Learned

Moldova's experience highlights several priorities for strengthening democratic information ecosystems. First, narrative development should complement disinformation response, with emphasis on culturally resonant and affirmative messaging.

Second, format and delivery—particularly short-form, relatable, and digitally optimized content—are critical to audience reach and engagement.

Third, maintaining local media presence in information-restricted areas is essential to counter dominance by malign actors.

Fourth, investigative journalism should be supported as a form of democratic defense infrastructure capable of exposing and disrupting influence operations.

Fifth, cross-border collaboration among civil society and media actors is necessary to address transnational disinformation flows. Regional exchanges demonstrate the value of shared tools and methodologies in tracking and countering narrative spread.⁵

Finally, sustained external support remains a critical enabler. Reductions in funding for independent media and civil society risk weakening resilience and amplifying adversarial narratives, underscoring the importance of continued investment in democratic information ecosystems.

See Appendix 1 for case study references.

Prioritize tipping-point democracies, traditional bulwarks, and frontline states

The convenings also identified several country typologies for the recommendations listed above. The DRG community should prioritize tipping-point democracies (such as Moldova, Nepal, and Bangladesh), where relatively rapid-response interventions can help mitigate manipulation and prevent backsliding; traditional bulwarks (such as Germany and Finland), which offer opportunities to codify best practices in platform accountability, civic education, and democratic innovation for adaptation elsewhere; and frontline states (such as Romania), where acute risks from foreign interference and information warfare require a combination of digital forensics capacity and trusted community-based messaging. Across all typologies, localization emerged as the central principle. Interventions will only be effective if they are adapted to local political realities, cultural norms, media environments, and civic infrastructure.

Civil society resilience and healthy information ecosystems are not peripheral concerns within DRG assistance; they sit at the epicenter of any credible response to democratic backsliding. As authoritarian and illiberal actors increasingly apply pressure by repressing civic space and weaponizing information systems, the decisive test for the DRG community will be less about preserving legacy organizational structures than about whether it can help reinforce civic and informational ecosystems that are politically grounded, socially legitimate, resilient under strain, and capable of operating across fractured formal and informal terrain.

Section Three:

Challenges and Opportunities in Resourcing the DRG Community

Section Three explores how the DRG community can re-anchor funding and resourcing strategies in the wake of donor funding shocks, with particular attention to sustaining civil society and information ecosystems amid diminishing bilateral and multilateral support.

Summary

Since late 2025, the seismic shift in global funding for democracy, rights, and governance (DRG) has moved from episodic to structural. Official development assistance (ODA) from donor nations fell by 23.1% in 2025, with total ODA from OECD Development Assistance Committee members amounting to approximately \$174.3 billion.⁵³ U.S. foreign assistance alone dropped from an average of \$51.4 billion down to \$13 billion in 2025, but global aid totals also owe to significant cuts by France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, among others.⁵⁴ This global shift marks the largest annual development assistance decline on record, and has been driven by a convergence of political, fiscal, and ideological forces across major donor nations.

The DRG community has been significantly impacted by these cuts. Donors are confirming multiyear reductions in CSO funding; organizational closures are cascading across regions; and independent media ecosystems, in fragile and authoritarian contexts, are collapsing without replacement financing. While stabilizer donors help slow ecosystem collapse in some specific regions, the widespread erosion of civil society and information ecosystem capacity risks becoming a defining constraint on global foreign policy, democratic integrity, and peacebuilding efforts through the 2026–2028 cycle. The cumulative global pressure is now creating a widening gap between political commitments to democratic values and the resources available to sustain the institutions and actors that uphold them.

In response, this section identifies a range of resourcing opportunities that can strengthen long-term resilience, including social enterprise, reader revenue and membership models, digital philanthropy, diaspora giving, pooled and intermediary funds, traditional philanthropy, corporate social responsibility, and values-aligned investment. When conditions allow, these approaches can reduce single-donor dependency, deepen local legitimacy, and anchor democratic institutions more firmly in their communities.

Critically, creative resourcing cannot replace core grant funding, particularly in low-income, repressive, or conflict-affected environments where legal space is constrained and markets are weak.

Critically, creative resourcing cannot replace core grant funding, particularly in low-income, repressive, or conflict-affected environments where legal space is constrained and markets are weak. Diversification should therefore be understood as a complement, not a substitute, for public and philanthropic funding.

Official Development Assistance (ODA) and DRG Funding Trends

Table 1 summarizes 2026 general ODA and DRG funding postures for major bilateral donors based on publicly announced budgets, legislation, and OECD projections as of early 2026.

DRG funding represents one of the most acutely exposed sectors within ODA. Reports in early 2026 indicate a significant directional shift away from DRG programming in allocations, compounding the contraction of ODA as a whole.

⁵³ OECD, "International Aid Fell Sharply in 2025, Says OECD," Press Release, April 2026.

⁵⁴ Mike Pearson, Fran Girling-Morris and Suzanna Nelson-Pollard, Global Humanitarian Assistance, (ALNAP, 2025) ; OECD, "A Historic Decline in Foreign Aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA Data," OECD Data Explainers, April 9, 2026.

Table 1. Official Development Assistance and DRG Funding Trends⁵⁵

Country	Est. 2026 ODA	ODA/GNI Target	ODA Direction	DRG Direction	Key Developments
Germany	~0.52% GNI	No statutory target	↓ Declining	↓↓ Cutting	- Overall ODA cut 8% in 2025. - Humanitarian aid halved. - The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development rhetoric remains supportive, but GIZ restructuring is materially reducing DRG funding (particularly funding routed through civil society partners).
United States	<0.15% GNI	No statutory target	↓↓ Cutting	↓↓ Cutting	- United States ODA fell by 56.9% in 2025, the largest drop of any donor on record. - Funding cuts forced rapid suspension of DRG programming at scale with destructive effects for fragile contexts globally.
United Kingdom	~0.32% GNI	0.5% (frozen to 2030)	↓↓ Cutting	↓↓ Cutting	- Labour Party locked in 0.5% as an acceptable ceiling until 2030, but Parliament plans to cut ODA down to 0.3% in 2027. - Humanitarian aid, migration, security, and Ukraine prioritized over DRG work.
Japan*	~0.34% GNI	No statutory target	→ Stable	→ Stable	- Japan's ODA for 2026 expected to remain relatively stable, but shifts in political control could mean cuts beyond 2026. - ODA fell by 1.7% between 2024 and 2025. - DRG funding is stable, but narrowly defined, primarily in governance reform for economic development.
France	~0.39% GNI	Aspires to 0.7%	↓↓ Cutting	↓↓ Cutting	€2.3B cut in 2025, plus projected €700M more in 2026. - Discursive rollback of feminist foreign policy. - Contraction of flexible, CSO-facing funds in favor of state and security cooperation with major implications for Africa programming.

55 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Development Assistance Committee (DAC), Preliminary Official Development Assistance (ODA) Data for 2024 (Paris: OECD, 2024); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Cuts in Official Development Assistance: Trends, Drivers, and Implications (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025); CONCORD Europe, AidWatch 2025: Challenging the Crisis Narrative in European Development Cooperation (Brussels: CONCORD, 2025); DonorTracker, European Union and Country Aid Profiles (Berlin: SEEK Development, updated 2024–2025); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), DAC Peer Review of the European Union (Paris: OECD Publishing, December 2025); Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, European Democracy Support: Annual Review 2025 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025); Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI), Sectoral Analysis of Official Development Assistance Impacts (Paris: IDDRI, 2025); ALNAP, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2025 (London: ALNAP/Overseas Development Institute, 2025); Internews Europe, Assessing the Impact of USAID Support to Independent Media in Europe (London: Internews, 2025); Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), Policy Briefings and Sector Updates on Media Development (Brussels: GFMD, 2024–2025); Reporters Without Borders (RSF), World Press Freedom Index and Country Reports (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2024–2025); Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), Research and Briefings on Investigative Journalism Ecosystems (Washington, DC: GIJN, 2024–2025); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "A Historic Decline in Foreign Aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA Data," OECD Data Explainer, April 2026.

Country	Est. 2026 ODA	ODA/GNI Target	ODA Direction	DRG Direction	Key Developments
Netherlands	~0.49% GNI	Abandoned goal of 0.7%	↓↓ Cutting	↓↓ Cutting	- Reduced from 0.58% (2025) CSO funding cut by ~66% for 2026-2030. - Positive step: IDRC capped at 10% from 2026, improving net ODA predictability.
Italy	~0.28% GNI	Aspires to 0.7% (at risk)	↓ Declining	↓ Declining	2030 ODA commitment to 0.7% GNI is unlikely to be met with declines under fiscal pressure. - DRG programming not a priority of current government.
Canada*	~0.29% GNI	No statutory target	↓ Declining	↓ Declining	- DRG spending is moderately decreasing year-over-year from 2022 high. - CFLI continues to fund grassroots civil society and governance. - Feminist and inclusion framing persists as a focus for DRG funding.
Sweden	~0.73%+ GNI	0.7% (at risk)	↓ Declining	→ Stable	- Overall, ODA will fall 5% in 2026-2028. ~€76M/yr human rights and democracy budget; maintained gender equality focus; increased EED funding. - Ukraine and migration priorities increasingly dominate programming.
Norway	~0.94% GNI	Committed to 1.0%	→ Stable	→ Stable	- One of global ODA's most reliable overperformers. - DRG funding maintained but competing with humanitarian and climate envelopes.
Spain	~0.26% GNI	Aspires to 0.7%	→ Stagnant	→ Stagnant	- Stagnant since 2023 near 0.25%. - Parliamentary minority government has blocked passage of General State Budget since 2023.
Switzerland*	~0.44% GNI	No fixed target	↓ Declining	→ Stable	- Announced ODA reductions for 2025-2027. - SDC (Swiss development agency) portfolios under review for geographic consolidation, but largely shielding DRG work from cuts.
South Korea	~0.16% GNI	Aspires to 0.3%	↓ Declining	↓ Declining	- Approved record ODA budget of ~\$4.8B (USD) in 2025. >14% cuts expected in 2026. - Limited/technocratic DRG programming.
Denmark	~0.71% GNI	Committed to 0.7%	→ Stable	→ Stable	- Stable 0.7% ODA commitment. - Increasing defense outlays to 3% of GDP create medium-term budget tension.

Country	Est. 2026 ODA	ODA/GNI Target	ODA Direction	DRG Direction	Key Developments
Australia*	~0.18% GNI	No statutory target	→ Stable	→ Stable	- Delivered ~\$5.01B (AUD) of ODA in 2025. - Strong emphasis on Indo-Pacific region. - Implementing policy of 2.5% annual ODA increases starting in 2026 (slightly slower than inflation).
Belgium	~0.37% GNI	Aspires to 0.7%	↓ Declining	→ Stable	- Coalition negotiations include some ODA cuts. - Development agency Enabel advocates for cooperation framing of security-linked aid.
Ireland	~0.38% GNI	Aspires	→ Stable	→ Stable	- Current government pledge to increase toward ODA .7% of GNI. - Strong multilateral engagement via UN funds, governance is a programming priority.
Finland	~0.35%	Aspires to 0.7%	↓ Cutting	↓ Cutting	- Part of DAC 11-member group announcing multi-year cuts through 2027. - Domestic fiscal consolidation driving reductions.
EU Institutions	\$28 billion	EU and its member states aspire to 0.7%	→ Stable	→ Stable	- ODA expected to remain broadly stable under current multiannual financial framework.** - Studies report decreased attention to governance and human development in future financial allocations—a directional shift likely to affect DRG funding.

*A small group of OECD donors—notably Australia, Canada, Japan, and Switzerland—are acting as stabilizers, rather than substitutes, in the global DRG ecosystem, maintaining core commitments, and avoiding the sharper governance cuts seen in the U.S. and much of Europe. Their contribution lies in predictability and continuity, but their funding levels are insufficient to offset the systemic shock from U.S. withdrawal and major European CSO cuts.

**The European Commission's proposed 2028–2034 MFF would raise Global Europe funding to €200 billion, a 75% increase from the current €92.3 billion, to underpin the EU's Global Gateway ambition of mobilizing €300 billion for infrastructure as a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, experts warn that not all Global Gateway spending would qualify as ODA and that the least developed countries may not receive a proportionate share.

Spotlight: Civil Society Funding

Civil society organizations are the primary delivery mechanism for democracy support, human rights monitoring, anti-corruption accountability, and community-level governance work in partner countries.⁵⁶ In 2026, international CSO funding faces a structural—not merely cyclical—contraction, driven by simultaneous cuts from multiple European donors and the near-complete withdrawal of U.S. bilateral support for civil society globally. The dismantlement

of USAID removed the largest single bilateral funder of civil society globally, and European CSO support programs, themselves contracting, are under pressure to absorb a structural gap they are not resourced to fill.

For example, the Netherlands has seen a €1 billion (~66%) cut to CSO funding for 2026–2030, signifying a full reset on the Dutch funding model and the largest absolute CSO funding reduction by any European

⁵⁶ Marike Blanken, Felix Wiebrecht, and Adea Gafuri, "From Aid to Empowerment: The Impact of Democracy Assistance on Civil Society," *Journal of Development Studies* 61, no. 11 (2025).

donor. Dutch-funded civil society networks operating across sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America face organizational collapse, with cascading effects on local accountability structures.⁵⁷

In France, the reversal of discursive feminist foreign policy and CSO-facing programming lines compounds a ~19% overall ODA cut in 2025, with projected further reductions in 2026.⁵⁸ France historically directed ~60% of its sub-Saharan Africa government-and-civil-society channel toward public financial management and governance. The UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has also eliminated multiyear CSO funding frameworks and reduced predictable funding for civil society implementing partners. Effective program-mable ODA (~0.36% of GNI) is now both low and

highly volatile due to indonor refugee accounting and annual reprioritization.⁵⁹ The EU has mounted some institutional response, launching targeted programs such as Supporting Civil Society Empowerment in South Sudan⁶⁰ and Inclusive Lesotho⁶¹ (a €16M civic education and transparency program), but total EU direct CSO programming remains modest relative to the scale of bilateral reductions.

The irreversibility risk of these cuts is dire. Civil society organizations that close or radically downsize in 2025–2026 cannot easily reconstitute if funding returns in later budget cycles. Long-term partnerships between European donors and locally rooted civil society organizations, built over decades, are being severed, with no clear plan for reconstruction.

Spotlight: Information Ecosystem Funding

Independent journalism and media development represent one of the most critically underfunded and, now, most acutely exposed subsectors within DRG-focused ODA.⁶² Media assistance has historically represented approximately 0.3% of total ODA globally, with bilateral donors, primarily the U.S., providing ~92.5% of all official flows to the sector.⁶³

The U.S. Congress allocated \$268.4 million in 2025 to support independent media and the free flow of information.⁶⁴ Following the USAID freeze and dismantlement, the vast majority of this funding effectively disappeared, representing a loss of roughly 35% of global official media aid.⁶⁵ Internews Europe estimates this funding will vanish “potentially for good.”⁶⁶ The U.S. cuts have had serious implications for media organizations in fragile contexts. In Ukraine, an estimated 70%–80% of all foreign media assistance came from the U.S.⁶⁷ Investigative outlets operating on monthly budgets, with no reserves,

have been forced into staff cuts or closure, with Ukrainian journalists warning that Russian-backed influence operations will fill the resulting information vacuum. In South Sudan, Eye Radio, the country's only independent national FM station, reduced staff from 47 to 12 and faces potential closure ahead of the 2026 general election. In Afghanistan, 13 radio stations reported an average of 72% budget dependency on USAID, and 65% of staff have been affected by funding cuts.⁶⁸

European donors have not been able to mount a substantial response to the U.S. withdrawal. In one survey of media organizations, 48% of respondents reported decreased funding from non-U.S. donors in 2025, with only 21% reporting an increase.⁶⁹

Despite the lack of coordinated response, some bilateral donors have doubled down on commitments to information ecosystem funding. Ninety-seven press freedom organizations signed a Global Forum

57 Government of the Netherlands, First Development Budget Cuts Announced: Overhaul of Grants for NGOs, press release, November 11, 2024; and Wemos, Government Drastically Cuts Funding for Civil Society Organizations, November 11, 2024.

58 FemAction, “France’s Feminist Diplomacy: The Means to Achieve Its Ambitions?” (2025).

59 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), Official Development Assistance Programme Allocations 2026–27 to 2028–29: Equality Impact Assessment (London: FCDO, March 19, 2026).

60 European External Action Service (EEAS), “EU, Partners Launch Supporting Civil Society Empowerment in South Sudan (SUCCESS) Project,” July 17, 2025.

61 European External Action Service (EEAS), “Inclusive Lesotho: Strengthening Democracy through Enhanced Political Participation and Electoral Integrity,” May 6, 2025.

62 Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), Defending Independent Media: A Comprehensive Analysis of Media Aid Flows (Washington, DC: CIMA/NED, 2018).

63 OECD Development Assistance Committee and Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), donorprofile analysis summarized in Media Development Donor Profiles (Washington, DC: CIMA).

64 Reporters Without Borders (RSF), “USA: Trump’s Foreign Aid Freeze Throws Journalism Around the World into Chaos,” February 14, 2025.

65 Daniel Sabet and Susan Abbott, The Impact of Ending U.S. International Media Assistance (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026).

66 Internews Europe, Crisis in Journalism: The Impact of the U.S. Government Funding Cuts on Global Media (London: Internews Europe, June 2025).

67 Atlantic Council, “U.S. Funding Cuts Create Openings for Russian Disinformation in Ukraine,” April 15, 2025.

68 Internews Europe, Crisis in Journalism: The Impact of the U.S. Government Funding Cuts on Global Media (London: Internews Europe, June 2025).

69 Daniel Sabet and Susan Abbott, The Impact of Ending U.S. International Media Assistance (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026).

for Media Development letter urging European governments, multilateral institutions, and philanthropies to fill the gap.⁷⁰ Sweden has been the most proactive European donor. It has increased backing for persecuted journalists, doubled support for the Prague Civil Society Centre, increased EED funding, and launched new independent media programming for Venezuela.⁷¹ Norway also continues media and press freedom support via Norad, but neither can offset U.S. withdrawal at global scale.

Resourcing Opportunities

International grant funding has underpinned civil society and independent media in emerging democracies for decades. While this support has been invaluable, it carries structural weaknesses that threaten the long-term viability of the sector.

Organizations built around single donors or funding streams are highly vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities, foreign policy changes, or aid budget cuts, as has been very evident in the last year and a half. Additionally, as stated in the civil society resilience section of this report, government critics and the public in some contexts frame civil society as foreign-funded proxies, undermining their credibility and fueling restrictive NGO legislation.⁷² In many emerging democracies, legal restrictions on foreign funding, compulsory registration requirements, and harassment of civil society are tightening the funding environment.⁷³ Grant funding is also often short-term. Grant cycles rarely exceed three years, making it difficult to build lasting institutions, develop leadership pipelines, or pursue long-term advocacy goals. And finally, donor priorities do not always align with local needs, creating oversupply in some sectors and neglect in others.

Sustainable democratic infrastructure requires that civil society and media diversify their financial base. The recommended resourcing opportunities below emerged from the DRG convenings and combine earned income, social enterprise, community finance, traditional

philanthropic foundations, and corporate social responsibility funding to offer a practical pathway to reduce vulnerability, increase legitimacy, and deepen civic roots.

Social Enterprise Models

Social enterprises generate revenue through market activity while pursuing a social mission. For CSOs and media outlets, this can include:

- Fee-for-service training and capacity building offered to the private sector, government agencies, or peer organizations (e.g., journalism training academies, governance consulting, data analysis services).
- Publishing, research, and knowledge products sold commercially to think tanks, corporations, or governments, while retaining editorial independence.⁷⁴
- Event management, conferences, and convenings that generate ticket revenue or corporate sponsorship without compromising editorial integrity.
- Technology spin-offs: open-source tools, civic tech platforms, or data products developed in-house and licensed or sold commercially.

Earned Media and Reader Revenue Models

For independent media specifically, the global shift from advertising to direct reader support offers significant opportunities:

- Membership and subscription models (pioneered by outlets such as The Guardian⁷⁵, De Correspondent⁷⁶, and Africa-focused platforms like The Continent⁷⁷) generate predictable, recurring income from engaged audiences.
- Micropayment platforms allow readers to pay per article, lowering the barrier to contribution, while aggregating significant revenue at scale.
- Community ownership structures, including reader cooperatives and community shares, give audiences a stake in the outlet's survival and create advocates for its sustainability.

70 Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), Open Letter on the Global Journalism Funding Crisis Following U.S. Aid Cuts, (2025).

71 Government of Sweden, "Government Increases Support to Vulnerable and Persecuted Journalists," press release, July 16, 2024.

72 Laura Cristina Dib and Alex Bare, "Venezuela's New NGO Law and U.S. Funding Freeze Are a Death Blow to the Country's Civil Society," April 2, 2025; Maureen Meyer and Corie Welch, Curtailling Civic Space: Tightening Restrictions on Civil Society in the Americas, (Washington Office on Latin America, June 2025); Saskia Brechenmacher and Thomas Carothers, Defending Civic Space: Is the International Community Stuck? (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace European Democracy Support Annual Review, October, 22, 2019).

73 Daniel Hegedüs, "Anti-Foreign NGO Laws: A Tool to Repress Civil Society," (German Marshall Fund, 2025).

74 Peter Chiridza and Admire Mare, "Digital platforms and revenue generation strategies adopted by Zimbabwean mainstream news publishers," (Journalism: Theory, practice, and criticism 27, no. 4, 2026).

75 Jessica Davies, "The Guardian looks to its future as it makes first operating profit in 20 years," May 2, 2019.

76 Frederic Filloux, "De Correspondent's Successful Membership Model," November 30, 2017.

77 "All Protocol Observed," The Continent.

- Events, podcasts, newsletters, and premium content tiers create differentiated value that readers will pay for without compromising core public-interest journalism.

Digital Philanthropy and Crowdfunding

Technology has democratized philanthropy, enabling civil society and media to raise funds from large numbers of small donors, including the diaspora and domestic middle classes:

- Crowdfunding platforms (GoFundMe, Patreon, Kickstarter, and locally adapted equivalents) have enabled journalism and advocacy campaigns to raise significant sums quickly, particularly around moments of political urgency.
- Diaspora giving represents an underutilized resource. In many emerging democracies, significant diaspora communities abroad have financial means and political motivation to support democratic institutions at home.
- Digital giving campaigns, particularly those tied to specific and tangible outcomes, perform well on social media and can reach audiences that traditional fundraising cannot.
- Matching campaigns, where donor funds are matched by foundations or corporate partners, significantly increase the impact and appeal of digital fundraising.

Pooled Funds, Coalitions, and Re-granting Mechanisms

Rather than every organization managing its own donor relationships, coalition-based approaches can reduce transaction costs and increase collective resilience:

- Civil society coalitions that pool resources—sharing administrative infrastructure, legal support, and communications—reduce overhead costs and allow more funding to reach programmatic work.
- Intermediary regranting organizations can aggregate international funding and redistribute it through domestic channels, reducing the visibility of foreign funding for individual organizations and managing compliance burdens.
- Media development funds, modeled on examples like the European Endowment for Democracy's media program or the Fojo Media Institute's partnerships,⁷⁸ create structured, multiyear support that reduces boom-bust cycles.

- South-South solidarity mechanisms, where well-resourced civil society organizations in emerging economies support peers in less-resourced contexts, build regional networks and reduce dependency on Northern donors.

Traditional Philanthropy and Foundations

Private foundations and traditional philanthropic institutions represent a significant and relatively stable source of support for civil society and independent media, distinct from government-linked bilateral donors:

- Private foundations (such as the Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and MacArthur Foundation, and their regional equivalents)⁷⁹ offer multiyear, mission-aligned funding with greater flexibility than bilateral aid, and less political conditionality.
- Community foundations, which aggregate giving from local donors and redistribute to local causes, are growing across emerging democracies and provide a mechanism for building domestic philanthropic infrastructure.
- Family foundations and high-net-worth individual philanthropy within a country, particularly in middle-income emerging democracies, represent an underutilized resource that CSOs and media can cultivate through targeted donor engagement.
- Endowment contributions from philanthropic donors, whether to an organization's own endowment or to a community foundation, provide permanent income that is insulated from annual funding cycles.
- Diaspora philanthropy networks, including diaspora foundations and giving circles, channel the philanthropic instincts of diaspora communities into structured, sustained support for democratic institutions in countries of origin.

Corporate Social Responsibility Funding

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments have become a meaningful funding stream for civil society and independent media, particularly as business communities recognize their stake in stable democratic environments. That said, clear governance safeguards are essential when working with CSR and ESG programs. Transparent disclosure of corporate funding, robust conflict-of-interest policies, and structural separation between funders and editorial or advocacy decision-making protect organizational credibility and independence. Opportunities in CSR and ESG include:

⁷⁸ "This is Fojo," Fojo, <https://fojo.se/en/about/>.

⁷⁹ "The Open Society Foundations Work to Build Vibrant and Inclusive Democracies Whose Governments are Accountable to Their People," (Open Society Foundations, 2026).

- Domestic corporations increasingly seek credible civil society partnerships to fulfill CSR obligations, support community development goals, and demonstrate commitment to good governance in their operating environments.
- Multinational corporations operating in-country face growing investor and regulatory pressure to demonstrate positive social impact. Partnerships with CSOs and independent media can support their own accountability and sustainability commitments.
- Sector-specific corporate foundations, established by major companies to manage their social investment, provide structured grant funding distinct from commercial sponsorship and with longer time horizons.
- Industry associations and business councils can be engaged as collective funders of civic infrastructure, particularly in areas such as rule of law, anti-corruption, and media freedom that directly affect the business environment.

Community and Values-Aligned Investment

Beyond philanthropy, emerging financial instruments enable CSOs and media to access patient, values-aligned capital:

- Social impact bonds⁸⁰ and development impact bonds link funding to outcomes, attracting government or development finance institution support for proven models.⁸¹
- Community development finance institutions (CDFIs) and social investment intermediaries provide loans and quasi-equity to organizations with earned income models that cannot yet access commercial finance.
- Endowment building, even on a modest scale, can provide a permanent income base that insulates organizations from funding volatility. Foundations, community foundations, and diaspora trusts can all contribute to endowment development.

Enabling Conditions and Ecosystem Requirements

Creative resourcing does not happen in a vacuum. It requires a supportive ecosystem at multiple levels:

- **Legal and Regulatory Environment**
 - Enabling NGO and media legislation that permits earned income, commercial subsidiaries, and

domestic fundraising without triggering foreign-agent or anti-money-laundering restrictions.

- Tax incentives for domestic charitable giving, including gift aid, tax deductibility, and payroll giving, are critical to building a culture of local philanthropy.
- Proportionate regulation of crowdfunding and digital payment platforms that does not create disproportionate compliance burdens for small civil society organizations.

• Capacity and Organizational Development

- Civil society organizations and media outlets need investment in business model development, financial management, and audience/community engagement—skills that are distinct from programmatic expertise.
- Specialized support providers, including incubators, accelerators, and consultancies with civil society expertise, can play a critical role in building earned income capability.
- Peer learning networks that allow organizations to share models, failures, and innovations accelerate sector-wide learning.

• Donor and Funder Behavior

- International donors can catalyze creative resourcing by providing transition funding, multiyear investments in organizational development and income diversification, rather than project-specific grants.
- Foundations and bilateral donors should be willing to co-invest alongside domestic funders, corporate partners, and social investors, creating blended finance structures.
- Funders should support the development of intermediary organizations—including community foundations, regranteeing bodies, and civil society support organizations—that strengthen the wider ecosystem.

Risks, Tensions, and Safeguards

Creative resourcing is not without risk. Practitioners and funders must navigate several genuine tensions. Earned income and commercial partnerships carry the risk of distorting an organization's priorities toward revenue-generating activities at the expense of public-interest mission. Strong governance, editorial charters, and structural separation of commercial and mission activities are essential safeguards. Corporate sponsorship

80 "Social Impact Bonds," Social Finance, <https://socialfinance.org/social-impact-bonds/>; Center for Global Development, Investing in Social Outcomes: Development Impact Bonds, (October 2013).

81 "Outcome-based financing: Impact bonds and outcomes funds," Brookings, <https://www.brookings.edu/tags/impact-bonds/>; OECD, Social Impact Bonds, (2020).

and CSR partnerships can intensify this risk of mission drift. In fact, corporate sponsorship and CSR partnerships may create subtle or overt pressure on editorial independence or advocacy positions. Transparent disclosure of funding sources, clear partnership criteria, and robust conflict-of-interest policies can assist in protecting credibility. It is also important to note that diversified revenue requires more complex financial

Creative resourcing models tend to favor well-established, urban, and technically sophisticated organizations. Specific efforts are required to ensure that smaller, grassroots, and rural organizations can also access diversified income.

management and reporting. These more complex systems mean that creative resourcing models tend to favor well-established, urban, and technically sophisticated organizations. Specific efforts are required to ensure that smaller, grassroots, and rural organizations can also access diversified income, including through intermediaries and coalition models.

Organizations should phase income diversification gradually, build internal capacity progressively, and resist the temptation to pursue revenue streams that exceed their management bandwidth.

Practical First Steps

Based on this analysis, the following recommendations are directed at key actors in the DRG community. They are first steps toward stabilizing the DRG ecosystem in the wake of recent seismic shocks, while

also strengthening its capacity to absorb and adapt to future disruptions.

For Civil Society Organizations and Independent Media

- Conduct an income audit to identify current dependencies and vulnerabilities and develop a three-to-five-year income diversification strategy with clear milestones.
- Invest in audience and community development as a prerequisite for membership, subscription, and crowdfunding models.
- Explore social enterprise opportunities that leverage existing expertise and assets, with clear governance structures to protect mission integrity.
- Cultivate relationships with domestic philanthropic foundations, family foundations, and corporate CSR programs as part of a diversified funding portfolio.
- Engage in peer networks and coalitions to share costs, exchange learning, and strengthen collective advocacy for a supportive regulatory environment.

For International Donors and Foundations

- Provide multi-year transition funding, specifically dedicated to income diversification and organizational development, not tied to programmatic outputs.
- Support the development of domestic intermediary organizations, including community foundations, re-granting bodies, and civil society support organizations, that strengthen the wider ecosystem.
- Facilitate blended finance structures that bring together grant capital, social investment, and domestic philanthropy.
- Advocate for enabling legal and tax environments for civil society in bilateral and multilateral policy dialogues.

Conclusion

The Democracy, Rights, and Governance community is operating in a period of sustained strain that has exposed both the vulnerability of existing DRG support models and the urgency of strategic recalibration. The combined effects of democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space, rapidly evolving information environments, and structural contraction in traditional funding have made it clear that incremental adjustment is no longer sufficient. As this report has argued, navigating this moment will require shifting weight toward civil society

resilience and information ecosystems, redistributing power and resources away from centralized and compliance-heavy models, anchoring democratic legitimacy in lived experience, and investing for endurance rather than short-term stability. Whether the DRG community merely absorbs these aftershocks or uses this rupture to rebuild on firmer ground will determine its ability to move decisively—from pressure to purpose—in the contested democratic terrain ahead.

Appendix 1: Case Study References

Eswatini Case Study:

- ¹ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023: Eswatini (2023).
- ² Lungile Dube, "Absolutism and Civil Society in Eswatini," Journal of Southern African Studies 46(2), 2020.
- ³ Human Rights Watch, "Eswatini: Renewed Crackdown on Dissent" (2022).
- ⁴ Mlungisi Dlamini & Nokukhanya Mamba, "The TUCOSWA Experiment...", African Affairs 120(479), 2021.
- ⁵ International Labour Organization, "Eswatini: Labour Rights and Representational Structures" (2022).
- ⁶ Swazi Observer, "COSPE and PUDEMO Challenge Political Restrictions," 14 April 2019.
- ⁷ Amnesty International, "Eswatini 2022/2023 Annual Report" (2023).
- ⁸ Sipho Mabuza, "SWAGAA and Gender-Based Violence Advocacy in Eswatini," Gender and Development in Africa 9(1), 2021.
- ⁹ OSISA, "Civil Society and Media Freedoms in Eswatini" (2021).
- ¹⁰ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Eswatini: Journalists Face Harassment and Detention" (2022).
- ^{11, 12} Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, "Regional Civil Society Solidarity..." (2022).

Nepal Case Study:

- ¹ Gavin Butler, "Social Media is a Big Part of Nepali Life," BBC, September 9, 2025.
- ² Agence France Presse (AFP), "Over 800,000 New Voters Register For Nepal Post-uprising Polls," November 23, 2025.
- ³ Hindustan Times, "Nepal Election Results 2026 Live Updates," March 8, 2026.
- ⁴ Subina Shrestha, "Nepal's Discord Revolution and the Press," Nieman Reports, September 19, 2025; ICT Frame, "Discord Became Nepal's Protest Communication Headquarters," September 14, 2025.
- ⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Nepal: Balen Government Should Bring Human Rights Reforms," April 30, 2026.
- ⁶ Al Jazeera, "More Egalitarian: How Nepal's Gen-Z Used Gaming App Discord to Pick PM"; The World Mind, "Discord Elections and Youth Revolutions: Nepal's Gen-Z Protests," September 2025.
- ⁷ Shrestha, "Nepal's Discord Revolution and the Press."

Minnesota Case Study:

- ¹ Gemma Ware, "How Anti-ICE Organizing in Minnesota Reactivated Mutual Aid Networks Started After George Floyd's Murder," Ms. Magazine, February 23, 2026.
- ² Ware, "How Anti-ICE Organizing in Minnesota Reactivated Mutual Aid Networks Started After George Floyd's Murder."
- ³ Museum of Protest, "The Coalition Behind Minnesota's ICE Resistance: Labor, Faith, Immigrants," 2026.
- ⁴ In These Times, "Minnesota Union Fighting Federal 'Siege': ICE Local 17 and Operation Metro Surge," 2026.
- ⁵ Museum of Protest, "The Coalition Behind Minnesota's ICE Resistance: Labor, Faith, Immigrants."
- ⁶ In These Times, "Minnesota Union Fighting Federal 'Siege'."
- ^{7, 8} Museum of Protest, "The Coalition Behind Minnesota's ICE Resistance: Labor, Faith, Immigrants."

Kenya & Uganda Case Study:

- ¹ CIVICUS, "Kenya: New Report Describes a Year of Unprecedented Restrictions on Civic Freedoms," June 2025.
- ² Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2025: Kenya (2025).
- ³ Freedom House, "Uganda: Freedom in the World 2025" (2025).
- ⁴ UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), "Uganda: Repression and Impunity Impacting Right to Participation in Lead-up to Elections," January 9, 2026.
- ⁵ Congressional Research Service, "Uganda: Current Issues and U.S. Relations," April 2025.
- ⁶ Amnesty International Kenya, "Statement on the Communications Authority's Directive to Halt Live Broadcast of Protests," June 25, 2025.
- ⁷ Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 2025 World Press Freedom Index: Kenya (2025).
- ⁸ Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2025: Kenya (2025).
- ⁹ OHCHR, "Uganda: Repression and Impunity Impacting Right to Participation in Lead-up to Elections."
- ^{10, 11} Foreign Policy, "Museveni Will Win Reelection but Can't Rule Uganda Forever," November 27, 2025.
- ¹² ARTICLE 19, "Kenya: Suppression of Dissent Must Stop," July 10, 2025.
- ¹³ Arundhati Roy, "The NGO-ization of Resistance," Pambazuka News, 2004.
- ¹⁴ Congressional Research Service, "Uganda: Current Issues and U.S. Relations."
- ¹⁵ Capital News, "Two Models, One Continent: How India, China and Russia Engage Africa," August 28, 2025.
- ¹⁶ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "Rethinking African Youth," September 30, 2025.

Guatemala Case Study:

- ¹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "A Guatemalan Awakening: The Revolt for Justice and Change," June 8, 2015; Open Society Justice Initiative, Against the Odds: CICIG in Guatemala, 2016.
- ² Rachel A. Schwartz, "When Impunity Fights Back: The Legacies and Lessons of Guatemala's CICIG," LASA Forum; Amnesty International, "No Fear, No Gag: Criminalization of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala," October 18, 2024.
- ³ United States Institute of Peace, "Guatemala: Indigenous Leaders Take Democracy Campaign Nationwide," October 2023; Front Line Defenders, "Guatemala: Criminalisation of Indigenous Human Rights Defenders of the 48 Cantones," June 3, 2025.

Moldova Case Study:

- ¹ Foreign Policy, "Russia Isn't 'Influencing' Moldova's Election," September 22, 2025.
- ² McCain Institute, "Analysis: Pre-Election Mission to Moldova," September 18, 2025.
- ³ OSCE/ODIHR, "Joint Observation Mission Statement," September 29, 2025.
- ⁴ McCain Institute, "Analysis: Pre-Election Mission to Moldova."
- ⁵ McCain Institute, Democracy Workshop: Fortifying Democracy in Eastern Europe, November 2025.

THE
CARTER CENTER



One Copenhill
453 John Lewis Freedom Parkway NE
Atlanta, GA 30307
(404) 420-5100

www.cartercenter.org