

**USAID/UGANDA CIVIL SOCIETY STRENGTHENING  
ACTIVITY  
CONFERENCE REPORT**

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**The Enabling Environment for CSOs in  
Uganda: Opportunities and Challenges**

**VIRTUAL CONFERENCE**

**JULY 26 – 29, AND AUGUST 18, 2021**

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## About the Partners

**Chapter Four Uganda (CFU)** is an independent not-for-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to the protection of civil liberties and promotion of human rights for all in Uganda.

**The Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)** works to increase the capacity of East and Southern African stakeholders to participate in ICT policy-making.

**International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL)** is a global organization that works with partners from civil society, government, and the international community to improve the legal environment for civil society, philanthropy, and public participation.

**Legal Aid Service Providers Network (LASPNET)** is a national member-based NGO that provides a framework for coordination among Legal Aid Service Providers to enable them to share experiences, collaborate on research, and engage on key issues regarding to access to justice and legal aid at regional, national, international levels.

**National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders-Uganda (NCHRD-U)** is a membership organization that aims to promote and protect the work of human rights defenders in a safe and secure environment through working with national, regional, and international stakeholders.

## About the Project

The **USAID/Uganda Civil Society Strengthening Activity (CSSA)** is a five-year USAID-funded Activity implemented by East-West Management Institute (EWMI) in partnership with the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), Uganda's Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations (DENIVA), and Common Ground Consulting (CGC). CSSA will support the capacity strengthening of Ugandan civil society organizations (CSOs) to influence and contribute to improved development outcomes in 1) health, with particular attention paid to achieving the country's HIV/AIDS reduction goals; 2) education, youth, and child development; 3) agriculture and food security; and 4) democracy, rights, and governance.

To achieve its aim, CSSA will implement activities under three principal components:

- **Component 1:** Strengthen the advocacy capacity of CSOs to influence national and local development;
- **Component 2:** Improve the organizational capacity of advocacy and service delivery-oriented CSOs to sustainably fulfil their stated missions; and
- **Component 3:** Promote a more supporting enabling environment that sustains a vibrant civil society.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background and Context

Uganda boasts a fast-growing civil society with over 2,000 registered non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that contribute to national development, good governance and rule of law, and growth of the economy. Despite the positive contributions of Ugandan civil society and existing legal protections, civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to face new barriers to their existence and operations, as well as to the constitutionally guaranteed right to participation in governance. While “traditional” regulatory laws such as the NGO Act and the Public Order Management Act impede the right to associate and assemble, CSOs face more frequent restrictions through laws such as the Uganda Communications Act, 2013 and the Anti-Money Laundering Act, 2013. Regulatory authorities use their powers to issue regulations and directives that can impose invasive and burdensome financial disclosure and reporting requirements, or which otherwise broadly restrict the freedoms of association, assembly, expression and access to information for CSOs and the media. Finally, as digital technology advances, so does the threat of increased regulation and targeting of online space.

Against this background, the USAID/Uganda Civil Society Strengthening Activity, through its implementing partners, Chapter Four Uganda (CFU), The Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), Legal Aid Service Providers Network (LASPNET), and the National Coalition on Human Rights Defenders – Uganda (NCHRD-U), convened a National Conference on the Enabling Environment for CSOs. In response to restrictions on gatherings and movement between districts stemming from Covid-19 containment measures, the conference was adapted to an online format, and comprised four thematic cluster meetings aimed at creating action plans to address specific issues affecting the enabling environment in Uganda (July 26-29, 2021), followed by a validation meeting for all participants to agree upon a consolidated strategy and action plan (August 18, 2021).

Each virtual meeting was attended by an average of 280 participants, of which 46% were women, while 1% identified as non-binary. Approximately 30% of the participants were youth. Participants represented a diverse cross-section of society, including community-based organizations, law-based organizations and networks, youth activists, LGBTQI persons and organizations, climate defenders, women human rights defenders, and digital technology activists. To encourage participation and input, the meetings incorporated a range of methodologies, including pre-recorded videos, short online surveys, breakout groups, and interactive virtual meeting tools.

The conference aimed to help participants identify and explore current and emerging trends affecting civic space and how to anticipate and/or respond. Participants discussed key restrictions impacting the enabling environment for civil society in Uganda under four themes: (1) Freedom of association; (2) Freedom of peaceful assembly (offline and online); (3) Freedom of expression and access to information; and (4) Exercising rights in the digital space and through digital technology.

Participants collectively identified a range of strategic initiatives to address key issues that confront civil society under each theme, opportunities for engagement on each issue, and articulated key activities to counter the shrinking of civic space and better the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms online and offline.

## Key Achievements of the Conference

- Identification of the drivers and impact of restrictions on the civil society sector in the current context in Uganda.
- Sharing of experiences and increased awareness on the operating environment for civil society at local and national level, including better understanding of the challenges faced by marginalized and at-risk groups.
- Development of a practical action plan that lays the groundwork for strengthened collaboration among stakeholders to address enabling environment restrictions.

## Key Thematic Priorities and Recommendations for Action

### FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

- Advocate for reform of regressive legal and policy frameworks regulating CSOs (e.g., NGO Act, Computer Misuse Act, Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) Act, Regulation of Interception of Communications Act).
- Address capacity gaps that contribute to misinterpretation and misapplication of relevant legal frameworks by both government and CSOs.
- Strengthen CSO sustainability (e.g., issues of financial dependence on donors, low long-term program investment, and technical expertise).
- Develop a clear collaboration strategy for CSOs that can strengthen the push back against the restrictive environment.

## **FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY (ONLINE AND OFFLINE)**

- Develop advocacy strategies for reform of legislative restrictions on the freedom of assembly (e.g., Public Order Management Act (POMA), Police Act, Computer Misuse Act).
- Address deficits in the management of assemblies (e.g., lack of clear standards and tools; biased/selective application of laws; restrictions on media coverage).
- Increase CSO capacity to understand rights under the law; how to conduct online assemblies; community organizing online and offline).
- Expand strategies to navigate state harassment (e.g., targeting of organizers, reprisals during and after assemblies; cyberbullying & surveillance; internet disruptions).
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms for assembly rights violations (e.g., independent police oversight mechanism; evidence-gathering and monitoring).

## **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

- Advocate for reform of restrictive legal frameworks (e.g., UCC Act, Computer Misuse Act) and promote more enabling frameworks (e.g., on data protection).
- Build CSOs and journalists' knowledge on the relevant legal frameworks.
- Develop strategies to better address excessive state regulatory control (e.g., unjustified control over independent media; government surveillance; internet shutdowns and limiting access to media platforms).
- Expand protection mechanisms available to CSOs for state reprisals.
- Strengthen collaboration between CSOs and media to address restrictions.
- Center the experiences and support to CSOs representing at-risk and marginalized groups (e.g., LGBTQI, sex workers, women, and HIV+ persons)

## **DIGITAL RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACE ONLINE**

- Comprehensively map the legal frameworks affecting digital rights, and push back against existing restrictive laws.
- Develop tools and trainings to improve CSOs and HRDs' digital literacy (including digital security, privacy and data protection, use of digital tools for activities).
- Develop strategies to address the digital divide (accessibility, affordability, infrastructure) and advocate for the removal of the internet tax.
- Center the experiences and support to CSOs representing at-risk and marginalized groups for whom these challenges online are heightened (including women and persons with disabilities).

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## About the Conference

The conference brought together more than 280 civil society representatives who form a cross-section of society, including community-based organizers, lawyers, paralegals and law students, youth activists, climate defenders, LGBTQI defenders and allies, and digital technology activists, among others, to address pressing concerns surrounding civic space in Uganda. The conference took the form of four virtual thematic cluster meetings held from July 26 – 29, 2021, each focusing on restrictions of a particular right related to civic space: freedom of association, freedom of assembly (online and offline), freedom of expression and access to information, and civic space online/digital trends impacting civic space. Each cluster meeting incorporated a range of tools to discuss restrictions on civic space and enable interaction, including short, pre-recorded videos from expert panelists; online surveys and questionnaires such as Mentimeter; breakout rooms with small working groups; and a chat.

In breakout group sessions, the participants created action plans to address the identified restrictions and inform future civil society strengthening initiatives. These action plans were incorporated into a consolidated action plan that was adopted at the validation meeting, held on August 18, 2021.

## Setting the Scene and Developing an Action Plan

Prior to the conference, the organizers conducted interviews with several expert panelists on issues related to each of the four themes. These pre-recorded interviews were used by participants as jumping off points to identify issues relating to civic space in Uganda. Following the plenary sessions each day, participants joined breakout groups to discuss the issues in more detail. They identified several potential actions and strategies to mitigate the effects of these restrictions and advocate for their removal, producing a thematic action plan each day.

### DAY 1: FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

The first cluster meeting on July 26, 2021 focused on restrictions on the right to the freedom of association in Uganda. Florence Nakazibwe (Legal Advisor-Africa, ICNL) and Peter Magelah (Programs Manager, CFU) moderated this meeting.



In the plenary session, Margaret Sekaggya, the Executive Director of the Human Rights Centre Uganda (pictured left) presented an overview of key issues affecting freedom of association, and meeting participants joined the plenary discussion on several challenges to freedom of association in Uganda:

- **Restrictive laws** such as the NGO Act and POMA have been used by government to repress CSO activity and restrict core rights and freedoms. Stringent registration requirements under the NGO Act and double registration under the Companies Act impose unnecessary burdens on CSOs. Uganda's legal framework also enables financial and security intelligence officials to surveil CSOs.
- **CSOs are often characterized as political opposition** by the government, causing CSO representatives, human rights defenders, and activists to fear openly associating and assembling with certain groups.
- **Limited legal and strategic knowledge** by CSOs about the laws governing the freedom of association and methods of complying with the laws and advocating against restraints on the right to the freedom of association can unnecessarily bring CSOs into conflict with the authorities.
- **Sustainability of CSOs**, in the form of both human and financial resources, is precarious, posing risks of abrupt cessation of activities if these resources become unavailable.

## DAY 2: FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY (ONLINE AND OFFLINE)

The second cluster meeting took place on July 27, 2021 and focused on restrictions on the right to the freedom of assembly in Uganda, both offline and online. Aloys Habimana (Legal Advisor-Africa, ICNL) and Edward Serucaca (Advocacy and Networking Officer, NCHRD-U) moderated the session. In a pre-recorded panel segment, Zahara Nampewo, the chairperson of Chapter Four Uganda, James Nkuubi, the Policy and Strategic Advocacy Advisor from the Freedom of Expression Hub, and Dinah Kyasimire, Assistant-Commissioner of Police (all pictured below) discussed their perspectives on the key challenges in exercising the right to peaceful assembly as well as potential solutions and strategies.

Panelists and participants identified several restrictions and challenges:

- The **legal framework governing assemblies is repressive and unclear**, and there is a lack of political will to pursue reforms. The Government uses laws such as the POMA and the Computer Misuse Act (which regulates online content) to limit assemblies. This has been particularly evident during the 2016 and 2021 elections. Additionally, laws relating to how the Uganda People’s Defense Force (UPDF) may assist the police to regulate protests are unclear, allowing the UPDF broad discretion to self-regulate and act arbitrarily against civilians and CSOs without adequate oversight and accountability.
- Members of civil society have **limited understanding of the relevant legal frameworks**. Combined with the government’s **selective application of laws**, this creates a lack of accountability and enables security actors to act contrary to international standards for freedom of assembly without consequences.
- The government has used the Covid-19 pandemic to frame the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly as a national security threat. This continues the trend of **securitizing civic space**, in which governments categorize the use of public space as a threat to national security and respond to assemblies in a militarized way.
- **Freedom of assembly has been under threat in Uganda, particularly during the electoral cycle**. Participants noted that it is increasingly difficult to organize peaceful protests critical of government policy, and that the POMA enables the police and other government forces to suppress peaceful protests.



### DAY 3: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

The third cluster meeting took place on Wednesday, July 28, 2021 and centered on the right to the freedom of expression and the right of access to information in Uganda. Moderators Lily Liu (Legal Associate, ICNL) and Sheila Muwanga (Deputy Executive Director, Foundation for Human Rights Initiative and Vice-Chairperson of Board of Directors-LASPNET) moderated the meeting.

Catherine Anite, the Executive Director of the Freedom of Expression Hub (pictured right) highlighted several key issues in this area, such as the overregulation of online spaces, the slow death of legacy media, and the lack of participation in lawmaking by the media and CSOs. She also shared



recommendations on how civil society can better advocate for freedom of expression, including using strategic litigation to protect expression rights; forming broader advocacy coalitions; training media, civil society, and government officials on freedom of expression issues; and engaging the media in freedom of expression advocacy. In the plenary, participants identified the following threats to freedom of expression and access to information in Uganda:

- **Ugandan government institutions are overly involved in regulating the media.** Participants discussed examples of regulatory overreach that undermine the independence of the media, such as many directives issued by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC). The Uganda Police Force (UPF) also harass, arrest, and detain media practitioners in some instances without justifiable cause.
- **Existing regulation of the media does not accommodate the needs and realities of “new media.”** Current legal frameworks and laws such as the Uganda Communications Commission Act and the Computer Misuse Act were conceived for print and broadcast media; the government continues to apply these laws in manners that overregulate the media sector, particularly online media.
- **Accessing public information is a very onerous and bureaucratic process.**
- **There is a lack of public awareness** about the applicable human rights norms regarding freedom of expression and a **lack of public appreciation and support** for CSO work, with many having unrealistic expectations of impact. CSOs and journalists also have **inadequate awareness of the policy and legal framework.**
- The government **severely limits civil society’s expression**, including its ability to express dissatisfaction with government policies. The government also intensely **surveils, censors, and harasses** CSOs and investigative media, often labeling these groups as “anti-government.”

#### DAY 4: DIGITAL RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACE ONLINE

The final cluster meeting took place on July 29, 2021 and focused on restrictions on civic space online and digital trends impacting civic space. Irene Petras (Senior Legal Advisor-Africa, ICNL) and Edrine Wanyama (Legal Officer, CIPESA) moderated the session.

Dr. Wairagala Wakabi, the Executive Director of CIPESA (pictured) [discussed in his presentation](#) the opportunities afforded to civil society through online engagement as well as the issues that affect civil society's ability to freely exercise their rights online. The challenges and threats to online rights include:

- CSOs have limited awareness and knowledge of digital rights, information technology, and digital tools.** There is a lack of policy on digital technology and social media use, limited digital security capacities, and CSOs are vulnerable to attacks. CSOs are also often not fully aware of their rights online, and there are capacity gaps on technological issues as well as on the exercise of fundamental freedoms online.
- Government imposes barriers to internet access,** such as through internet shutdowns and social media blockages, particularly during election periods. These actions have hindered civil society's ability to access and impart information online, and to organize online. For example, despite the conclusion of the election period, Facebook remains only accessible via VPN.
- The state has **targeted CSO communications for surveillance**, an overstep of state authority that has a chilling effect on individuals' willingness to exercise their rights online. Government **interference and intimidation** of civil society consequently lead to self-censorship.
- Legal barriers and vague laws impede the exercise of rights online.** For example, the Government has used vague provisions on libel under the Penal Code and the Computer Misuse Act to persecute human rights defenders for their actions online.
- The digital divide and high cost of technology** makes it difficult for many Ugandans to participate in public decision-making, including through communicating with CSOs that might represent their interests. 75.5% of Ugandans live in rural areas with limited technological infrastructure and thus have low access to internet and other technology. Additionally, the new 12% internet tax poses substantial financial barriers to individuals' ability to access and share information online.
- Online cyberbullying leads to self-censorship.** In particular, **gender-based cyberbullying** leads to limited enjoyment of rights online by women. The state also contributes to self-censorship through intimidation and politicization of CSO expression online.



## Tools to Help CSOs Defend their Enabling Environment

The organizers prepared various materials for conference participants and disseminated them during the thematic cluster meetings. These include briefers and short videos that cover various aspects of advocacy and how to use the media in CSO work. The briefier on *Monitoring restrictions and effective communication* discusses methods of monitoring restrictions on civic space, including how to gather data to document restrictions and violations of the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. It shares tips on how to effectively communicate data to show to the public and government stakeholders the impact of restrictions on civic space. The briefier on *Strategic Litigation and the role of lawyers and paralegals in building an enabling environment* provides an overview of how to use litigation to build an enabling environment for civil society. Topics covered include the role of litigation in protecting fundamental freedoms; identifying and building the right case, extralegal considerations when undertaking litigation; successes and challenges when litigating.



Nicholas Opiyo, the Executive Director of Chapter Four Uganda [shares his experiences](#) in the CSO sector, as well as lessons on advocacy.



Participants hear from Sheila Muwanga, the Vice-Chairperson of LASPNET, who [provides information](#) on how to develop advocacy plans.



There is a [presentation](#) from Michael Aboneka (pictured left), the Coordinator, African Governance Architecture, ActionAid Uganda, who focuses on evaluating the environment and developing a strategy for advocacy.

Solomon Serwanjja, Executive Director, African Institute for Investigative Journalism (pictured right), presents a [lively session](#) focusing on ways that the media and civil society can work together to improve the enabling environment in Uganda.



The validation meeting also included two scene-setters – one provided more information on common regional trends affecting civil society, including digital developments, delivered by Lillian Nalwoga, the Programmes Manager of CIPESA (pictured below left), and the other on strategies to engage regional and international allies in support of a national enabling environment strategy for CSOs, presented by Donald Deya, the CEO of the Pan-African Lawyers Union (pictured below right).



## Validation Meeting: Consolidating the Action Plan and Next Steps

Following the cluster meetings, ICNL and partners worked to consolidate the strategies and action plans created by participants during each of the breakout sessions into a comprehensive action plan for strengthening the enabling environment for civil society in Uganda. This action plan was presented to participants at the validation meeting on August 18, 2021, and participants were given the opportunity to give feedback. The validation meeting was organized in two sessions: in the first session, participants chose a breakout room dedicated to one of the first two subjects of the cluster meetings: association or assembly. In the two simultaneous breakout sessions, the participants volunteered their thoughts on the action plan's strategies for each theme. Following a reconvening, the same process was repeated, with two simultaneous sessions on freedom of expression and digital rights. The participants confirmed the elements of the national action plan as well as a Communiqué describing the details of the conference and its outcomes.

## Conference Outputs

The specific outputs from the conference were:

- Participants identified the drivers and impact of restrictions on the civil society sector in the current context in Uganda.
- A wide range of local and national-level stakeholders, including state and non-state actors, academia, media, and marginalized and at-risk groups, shared knowledge and experience on the operating environment for civil society and peculiar challenges they face.

- A wide range of local and national-level stakeholders developed an action plan to lay the groundwork for strengthened collaboration among stakeholders to address the restrictions on civic space through strategic planning, advocacy and improved engagement with government.

Overall, participants identified the following broad issues and key areas for action that cut across all four of the conference's themes:

1. Reforming the legal frameworks governing the freedom of association, peaceful assembly, expression, and digital issues in compliance with constitutional and international legal standards, and the implementation of these laws to enhance space for civil society.
2. Building CSO collaboration and mutual support to address civic space restrictions. This includes through strengthening CSO coalitions, creating opportunities for established CSOs to mentor newer or smaller CSOs, and dialoguing with other relevant stakeholders such as the government and internet service providers to share strategies to support an enabling environment.
3. Addressing operational issues for CSOs, particularly those representing marginalized groups. This includes hosting resilience trainings for CSOs that teach organizations how to mobilize resources and adopt sustainable CSO practices, holding workshops for CSOs to strengthen their digital fluency, and dialoguing with internet service providers to take action to close the digital divide.
4. Strengthening CSO-government collaboration to build an enabling environment for civil society. This includes holding dialogues between CSOs and state officers to agree upon strategies to reform restrictions on civil society.

The cluster meetings and the validation meeting ensured a participatory process that highlighted the contributions of local actors and allowed them to take ownership of the process. The ultimate outcome is a strong action plan that many stakeholders have a responsibility and commitment to, which will aid in its success. CSSA will support the activities in the action plan through various activities in the coming months, including the disbursement of several small grants to Ugandan CSOs that attended the conference to implement innovative ideas arising from the action plan.

**FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION**

Issue Identified	Proposed Actions
<p><b>LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CSOS:</b></p> <p>Problematic legislation includes NGO Act, Computer Misuse Act, UCC Act, Regulation of Interception of Communications Act, Anti-Terrorism Act.</p> <p>Issues affecting CSOs include lengthy registration requirements and confusing procedures (often worse for marginalized groups such as LGBTQI associations); CSOs do not fully understand the legal framework; regulators misapply laws to curtail CSO operations; district-level civil servants do not implement enabling laws.</p>	<p>Analyze laws affecting civic freedom of association.</p> <p>Advocate to amend the problematic laws, or to pass enabling laws, or to promote enforcement of enabling laws and positive judicial rulings.</p> <p>Domestic and regional litigation.</p> <p>Track association rights violations.</p> <p>Train CSOs and government officials on legal frameworks governing freedom of association.</p>
<p><b>CSO COLLABORATION AND MUTUAL SUPPORT:</b></p> <p>Civil society not working together to address barriers to freedom of association</p>	<p>Strengthen existing CSO coalitions and support broader coalition-building with diverse actors.</p>
<p><b>OPERATIONAL BARRIERS FOR CSOS:</b></p> <p>Burdensome taxes are undermining CSO operations (e.g., Over the Top (OTT), Excise Duty Tax Act amendment). CSOs also have trouble with sustainability/ resiliency (human and financial).</p> <p>Location/accessibility barriers (CSOs having difficulty reaching rural/more remote stakeholders).</p>	<p>Diversify CSO resources and strengthen networks that allow for pooling of resources.</p> <p>Resilience training for CSOs.</p> <p>Engage authorities on location/accessibility barriers.</p>
<p><b>STATE ATTITUDE TOWARDS CIVIL SOCIETY:</b></p> <p>CSOs working in extractive industries and on LGBTQI issues are particularly repressed and treated with suspicion by state authorities. State institutions also politicize civil society, labeling CSOs as foreign agents.</p>	<p>Foster dialogue between civil society and relevant institutions.</p>

**FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY (ONLINE AND OFFLINE)**

Issue Identified	Proposed Actions
<p><b>LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CSOS:</b></p> <p>Legal restrictions on the freedom of assembly through the Public Order Management Act, Police Act, Computer Misuse Act.</p> <p>Law enforcement lacks capacity to apply laws governing assembly in a way that respects the right to peacefully assemble. Additionally, there is lack of state accountability for violations of freedom of assembly.</p>	<p>Strengthen legal aid support and protection mechanisms to respond to assembly rights violations.</p> <p>Develop programs and tools to monitor assemblies.</p> <p>Train law enforcement agents to guide interpretation and understanding of existing laws and management of assemblies.</p>
<p><b>CSO COLLABORATION AND MUTUAL SUPPORT:</b></p> <p>Lack of strategy by CSOs to work collectively and with other stakeholders to address assembly restrictions.</p>	<p>Strengthen existing CSO coalitions and support broader coalition-building with diverse actors.</p>
<p><b>OPERATIONAL BARRIERS FOR CSOS:</b></p> <p>Internet disruptions undermine the organizing of assemblies. High costs of data by telecom companies affect ability of CSOs to organize. There is also limited CSO awareness on online assemblies – what they entail, the legal framework and protections.</p>	<p>Build CSO capacity on technological skills, digital security.</p> <p>Coordinate within the NGO sector to build resilient and sustainable online movements/campaigns.</p> <p>Enhance knowledge on online assembly and its protections.</p>
<p><b>STATE ATTITUDE TOWARDS CIVIL SOCIETY:</b></p> <p>Minimal media coverage of restrictions on assembly or restrictions on media coverage of assemblies. Government also misperceives civil society as the "opposition," and subsequently cracks down (e.g., intimidation by state authorities when planning gatherings, harassment by state actors during gatherings).</p>	<p>Open dialogue between CSOs, media and government actors.</p>

**FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

Issue Identified	Proposed Actions
<p><b>LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CSOS:</b></p> <p>Repressive legal system governing expression, including excessive state regulatory control through laws like the Computer Misuse Act, regulatory overreach by the UCC, and criminalization of fake news.</p> <p>Lack of understanding by CSOs and state actors of norms governing freedom of expression, including the Access to Information Act, and a culture of secrecy in public institutions.</p> <p>Censorship and impunity for restrictions on expression.</p> <p>Law enforcement engages in arbitrary arrests and illegal detentions of media practitioners covering civic events and matters of public interest.</p>	<p>Advocate for repeal and amendment of repressive laws.</p> <p>Dialogue and engage state actors such as UCC and CSOs/media.</p> <p>Train media and CSOs on relevant legal frameworks.</p> <p>Navigation activities.</p> <p>Strengthen public interest litigation and legal support services for journalists and CSOs experiencing freedom of expression violations.</p>
<p><b>CSO COLLABORATION AND MUTUAL SUPPORT:</b></p> <p>Lack of strategy by CSOs to work collectively and with other stakeholders to address expression restrictions.</p>	<p>Strengthen existing CSO coalitions and support broader coalition-building with diverse actors.</p>
<p><b>OPERATIONAL BARRIERS FOR CSOS:</b></p> <p>Internet shutdowns, social media bans.</p> <p>Judicial harassment of CSOs and journalists.</p>	<p>Strategic litigation and legal support services.</p>
<p><b>STATE ATTITUDE TOWARDS CIVIL SOCIETY:</b></p> <p>Government surveillance of media practitioners and civic activists.</p>	<p>Train all stakeholders on data protection, data management and privacy rights.</p>

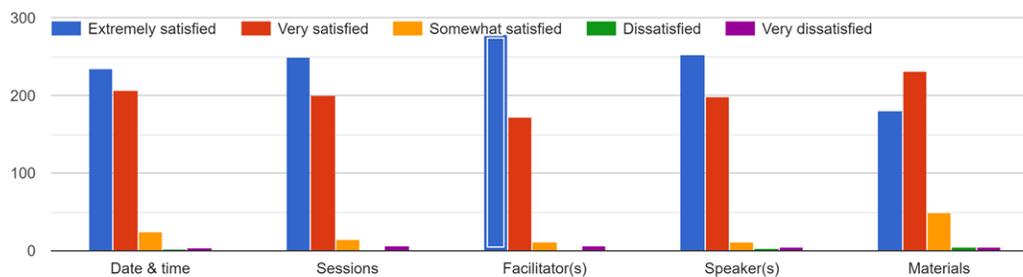
**DIGITAL RIGHTS AND CIVIC SPACE ONLINE**

Issue Identified	Proposed Actions
<p><b>LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CSOS:</b></p> <p>Legal barriers to exercising online rights (laws, policies either do not exist, or are restrictive).</p> <p>Limited awareness by all stakeholders of digital rights, remedies, and why these rights are important for CSOs in their work.</p>	<p>Form a pro-bono team to help individuals facing barriers to access their rights online.</p> <p>Hold discussions with state actors to encourage a human rights-based approach to regulating technology.</p> <p>Conduct trainings/workshops on how to protect data online and offline, and other digital issues, and trainings for various stakeholders (judicial officers, civil society, law enforcement) on digital rights and relevant legal frameworks.</p> <p>Produce IEC materials for a sensitization campaign on digital rights.</p>
<p><b>OPERATIONAL BARRIERS FOR CSOS:</b></p> <p>Gap in civil society capacity to use online/digital tools.</p> <p>Unequal accessibility by marginalized communities (e.g., women, people with disabilities, and rural communities).</p> <p>State clampdown on exercise of rights online.</p>	<p>Baseline survey on CSO access to digital tools and capacity.</p> <p>Trainings on digital tools and digital security.</p> <p>Create sensitization materials on the access gap for technology.</p> <p>Conduct roundtables with the state and ICT actors to discuss expanding digital infrastructure in rural areas</p> <p>Use closed captioning and/or sign language interpreters when implementing activities.</p> <p>Maintain a team of advocates trained on digital rights cases and able to respond to violations of digital rights.</p>
<p><b>STATE ATTITUDE TOWARDS CIVIL SOCIETY:</b></p> <p>State targeting of civil society e.g., through internet shutdowns.</p>	<p>State-CSO engagement on digital rights and the state's obligation to protect them.</p>

## Evaluating the Conference

At the end of each day of the conference, participants were encouraged to respond to the evaluation survey to give their thoughts on the event, and 471 participants responded. The overall level of satisfaction with the activity was very high, with 87% of participants marking that they were either “extremely satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the materials, 96% with both the speakers and the facilitators, 94% with the date and time, and 95% were either “extremely satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the sessions overall.

Please rate your satisfaction with the following aspects of our event



These responses were reinforced by participants responding affirmatively to whether they would attend similar events in the future. On a 1-10 scale, with 10 being the most likely, 80.4% of participants gave a score of 10, and a further 12.8% gave a likelihood score of 9.

Additionally, participants gave very positive comments on the conference. Some examples are provided below:

- One participant noted that (s)he has attended many Zoom meetings in the past year, but that “*this has been different, since in a short time [we] learnt a lot and came up with an action plan.*”
- Another participant commented that “*everything was just perfect. I learnt a lot of new things. The summary conclusion was spot on for a week’s engagement.*”
- Still another participant stated that the issues discussed were “*very pertinent areas for the future of civil society in Uganda.*” Overall, participants were very satisfied with the event.

Some commented on their preference that future meetings be in person or that their internet was experiencing connectivity issues that impeded their enjoyment of the conference, but participants responded well to those areas of the conference that were controllable:

- For example, one participant commented favorably on the conference’s action-oriented approach, stating, “[t]he meeting was very satisfactory because within a very short time we were able to come up with a clear way forward. this means the facilitator and speakers were very good.”
- This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who noted that “[t]his Meeting has brought back hope for us after going through a number of intimidations where we were even fearing to do any advocacy anymore. Now [I] am seeing a synergised team willing to work together again.”

## ANNEXES

### Communique: The Enabling Environment for CSOs in Uganda: Opportunities and Challenges

**August 18, 2021 (Kampala, Uganda)** – Over 200 representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs) throughout Uganda attended a two-part virtual national conference on the theme: *The Enabling Environment for CSOs in Uganda: Opportunities and Challenges*. Five organizations convened the conference, which comprised a four-day consultation series from July 26 – 29, 2021 and a validation meeting on August 18, 2021. The conference was held under the USAID/Uganda Civil Society Strengthening Activity (CSSA) supported by the United States Agency for International Development.

Participants represented a cross-section of society, including community-based organizations, law-based organizations and networks, youth activists, climate defenders, women human rights defenders, and digital technology activists, among others. They discussed key restrictions impacting the enabling environment for civil society in Uganda under four themes: (1) Freedom of association; (2) Freedom of peaceful assembly (offline and online); (3) Freedom of expression and access to information; and (4) Exercising rights in the digital space and through digital technology.

Participants collectively identified a range of strategic initiatives to address the key issues that confront civil society under each theme. Some of the key opportunities for action include:

- (i) Reforming the legal framework governing associations, assemblies, expression, and digital issues in compliance with constitutional and international legal safeguards, and the implementation of these laws to enhance space for civil society;
- (ii) Improving access to diverse information for the public to foster public oversight and public participation in governance;
- (iii) Bridging the digital gap, particularly for marginalized, at-risk and rural populations, including through expanding internet infrastructure and training civil society representatives on digital technologies and security; and
- (iv) Strengthening CSO-government collaboration to build an enabling environment for civil society.

In all the identified priorities for action, participants emphasized the need to promote strong collaboration among civil society groups through effective, inclusive and

sustainable networks and coalitions at national and local levels, and to prioritize the needs of women, youth, and persons with disabilities.

The issues were consolidated into a national action plan which was validated by participants on August 18, 2021 and which will provide a foundation for various initiatives to be supported under CSSA in the coming months.

**ENDS**

## Agenda for the Cluster Meetings

The CSSA will host four separate cluster meetings on the following themes:

- (1) **July 26:** Continued restrictions on the freedom of association and barriers to civic space against CSOs, including using anti-money laundering and countering terrorist financing justifications;
- (2) **July 27:** Restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly (offline and online);
- (3) **July 28:** Restrictions on the freedom of expression, and access to information;
- (4) **July 29:** Restrictions on civic space online and digital trends impacting civic space.

Participants will indicate their cluster of choice on their registration form, and should plan to join all cluster meetings. The meetings will be held virtually.

**14:00 Pre-recorded introduction video and welcome**

**14:05 Pre-recorded Videos on Context and Perspectives on Civic Space Restrictions in Uganda**

For each cluster, the pre-recorded interview with an expert or experts on the cluster's assigned theme will summarize major concerns, challenges and opportunities, and how to navigate civic space restrictions. The cluster themes and interviewees are:

- (1) Regulatory restrictions on civil society, with a focus on the freedom of association, including using anti-money laundering and countering terrorist financing justifications – *Margaret Sekaggya*
- (2) Restrictions on the freedom of assembly – *James Nkuubi, Zahara Nampewo; IGP rep?*
- (3) Restrictions on the freedom of expression – *Catherine Anite*
- (4) Restrictions through laws governing digital space – *Dr. Wairagala Wakabi*

- 14:15 Quick Reactions to Pre-recorded Videos**  
Cluster participants will share reactions to the pre-recorded videos through dialogue, the Zoom chat function and Mentimeter.
- 14:50 Group work: Crafting Action Plans**  
In small groups, participants will work on pre-prepared activity sheets to create an action plan to address one or more of the issues or restrictions identified in the previous session.
- 15:50 Screen break**
- 16:00 Synthesizing an Action Plan for the Thematic Cluster**  
Participants will reconvene to provide feedback that will help to create a consolidated action plan for the cluster.
- 16:40 Next Steps and Evaluation of Meeting**
- 16:50 Closing Remarks**

## Agenda for the Validation Meeting

*Overall Moderators: Sheila Muwanga and Florence Nakazibwe*

CSSA partners will consolidate all thematic action plans into one action plan covering all 4 key issues, and present to a validation meeting with the original participants from all cluster meetings to formalize the action plan. The meeting will be held online.

- 14:00 [5 minutes] Welcome and Overview of Agenda**
- 14:05 [5 minutes] Opening Remarks - Fern Teodoro, Chief of Party, East-West Management Institute**
- 14:10 [25 minutes] Scene-Setters - Mr. Donald Deya and Ms. Lillian Nalwoga**  
Short presentations on common regional trends affecting civil society, including digital developments, and strategies on engaging regional and international allies in support of a national enabling environment strategy
- 14:35 [5 minutes] Recap of the cluster meetings**  
ICNL will provide a recap of the process so far and introduce the issues discussed during the cluster meetings.

**14:40**

**Group Work: Overview of the consolidated action plan**

Four groups will be set up, one for each theme. The cluster lead for each group will present a brief overview of the consolidated action plan relating to the particular theme. Participants will choose which group they wish to join for each session (2 groups will run concurrently) – either Group 1 or 2 for the first session, and either Group 3 or 4 for the second session. The organizers will consolidate feedback in the final plan.

**Concurrent group work session 1:**

**14:40**

**[40 minutes] Group 1: Freedom of Association - Chair: C4U**

**[40 minutes] Group 2: Freedom of Assembly – Chair: NCHRDU**

**15:20**

**[5 minutes] Screen Break**

**Concurrent group work session 2:**

**15:25**

**[40 minutes] Group 3: Freedom of Expression and Access to Information: Chair: LASPNET**

**[40 minutes] Group 4: Digital Technology and Civic Space: Chair: CIPESA**

**16:05**

**[40 minutes] Report back to Plenary**

Participants will report back on the discussions from the group sessions, focusing on any additions, clarifying issues, etc. to complete the validation. At the end of the session, participants will have agreed upon a concrete National Action Plan.

**16:45**

**[10 minutes] Next Steps**

This session will present the draft *communiqué* for review and approval, and provide participants with information about follow-up opportunities.

**16:55**

**[5 minutes] Closing remarks**