



CIVICUS

Terms of Reference

External End-of-Phase Evaluation of CIVICUS' Strategic Partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

June 2026

1. Introduction

CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, is commissioning an independent end-of-phase evaluation of its strategic partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (Netherlands MFA) covering the period 1 January 2021 to 30 June 2026. This Terms of Reference (ToR) sets out the rationale, scope, objectives, evaluation questions, methodological expectations and process for the evaluation, and provides prospective evaluators with the information required to develop a technical proposal. It is guided by the Evaluation Quality Criteria (2024) issued by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and reflects the OECD/DAC evaluation principles. The selected evaluator will be expected to: develop a full evaluation methodology and revised questions for the Inception report, deliver a final report; and deliver validation and final presentations. The evaluation is expected to commence in July 2026, with the final report submitted in January 2027.

2. Background and context

2.1 About CIVICUS

CIVICUS is a global alliance of organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening civil society and citizen action throughout the world. Founded in 1993, CIVICUS works globally, and has operational hubs in Johannesburg (since 2002), Geneva and New York. CIVICUS encompasses more than 17,000 members in over 180 countries. It operates with an inclusive definition of civil society that includes non-governmental organisations, activists, coalitions and networks, protest and social movements, volunteer organisations, advocacy groups, charities, faith-based organisations, trade unions and philanthropic foundations. CIVICUS's membership spans a wide range of thematic areas, with the strongest concentrations in capacity building and training (31%), events and networking (29%), campaigns (22%), community development (21%), gender equality and women's rights (20%), education and skills development (18%), sustainable development (17%), and civic participation and volunteerism (16%), reflecting the diversity of civil society action across human rights, civic space, climate, inequality and social justice.

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CIVICUS' work during the evaluation period has been guided by two consecutive strategic plans: the 2017–2022 Strategic Plan, which structured CIVICUS' work around three goals (defending civic freedoms and democratic values; strengthening the power of people to organise, mobilise and take action; empowering a more accountable, effective and innovative civil society); and the 2022–2027 Strategic Plan, which articulates five strategic objectives (generating timely knowledge and analysis; coordinating targeted advocacy; strengthening the civil society ecosystem; strengthening civil society narratives; and building counter power). Both share an underlying commitment to expanding civic and democratic space and amplifying excluded voices, particularly from the Global South.

2.2 Operating environment

CIVICUS implemented its core strategic work in a period of unprecedented stress on civic and democratic freedoms. Over the evaluation period, civic space conditions have continued to deteriorate globally. The CIVICUS Monitor's most recent assessment found that over 72% of the world's population now lives in countries where civic space is rated as repressed or closed, while under 4% live in countries where civic space is open.

Key contextual features have shaped the operating environment for CIVICUS and its members, including the consolidation of authoritarian power and democratic backsliding in established democracies; the normalisation of protest suppression through excessive force, mass arrests and restrictive legislation; the proliferation of 'foreign agent' and 'anti-money laundering' laws to control and silence civil society; intensifying crackdowns on those mobilising for women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, labour rights, climate justice, environmental protection and Indigenous peoples' rights; the COVID-19 pandemic and its long aftermath on civic engagement and resourcing; rising militarisation and weakening of rules-based global governance; the rise of digital threats including disinformation, deepfakes and the alignment of large technology platforms with political power; and politically motivated funding cuts and constraints affecting the financial sustainability of civil society.

At the same time, civil society has continued to record significant victories in this period, including the decriminalisation of same-sex relations in Dominica and Namibia, the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Greece and Thailand, sustained civic defence of democratic institutions in Guatemala and South Korea, and continued contestation and advancement of climate, democracy and gender rights reforms in Colombia, Kenya, Poland and elsewhere. Understanding CIVICUS' work requires holding both these dynamics (escalating constraint and continued civic achievement) in view.

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2.3 The CIVICUS–Netherlands MFA partnership

CIVICUS and the Netherlands MFA have maintained a strategic partnership since 2016. The partnership currently under evaluation was established under the Power of Voices Partnerships framework (1 January 2021 to 30 June 2026) and supports CIVICUS' core work in pursuit of a shared objective to support civil society in its essential role of protecting and promoting human rights and democratic freedoms. The Netherlands MFA's flexible core funding has been a critical enabler of CIVICUS' capacity to invest in high-impact public goods such as the State of Civil Society analysis, the Monitor, and campaigns and solidarity actions to respond rapidly to civic space emergencies.

2.4 Baseline data

This evaluation does not have a single quantitative baseline. Instead, baseline information is distributed across several CIVICUS reference points that the evaluator will be expected to use and reconstruct as needed:

- CIVICUS Monitor civic space ratings and indicators for each of the 198 countries and territories at the start of the evaluation period compared to the most recent data.
- CIVICUS membership figures, geographic distribution and composition as documented in the 2021–2025 proposal, and regular Constituency Surveys.
- The CIVICUS Accountability Framework, Integrated Results Framework and the indicator dashboard, which together provide annual data on organisational outputs and outcomes.
- Mid-term Strategy Review (2019) and any subsequent internal strategy or organisational-level reviews conducted within the evaluation period.
- Annual reports, IATI reports, and Accountable Now reporting.

Where baseline data is not available for specific evaluation questions, the evaluator is expected to set out an explicit strategy in the inception report for reconstructing a baseline or otherwise assessing progress.

3. Theory of change

This section sets out the current Theory of Change (ToC) for CIVICUS' approach to its work. The evaluator will be expected to validate, refine and where necessary reconstruct this intervention logic in the inception phase.

Overarching premise: CIVICUS' ToC rests on a foundational assumption: *we are stronger when we work together*. Expanding civic and democratic space is not achievable by any single actor, it requires collective effort across the alliance and beyond. CIVICUS acts as a convener, connector and amplifier, mobilising its global

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network of over 17,000 members in 180 countries to design, test and scale sustainable solutions, while sharing learning across the broader civil society ecosystem.

The problem we are responding to: The ToC is situated in a context of accelerating civic space restriction. Restrictions are compounded by structural discrimination, the rise of anti-rights movements, digital repression, disinformation, economic inequality and democratic backsliding. At the same time, new forms of civil society action - fluid, movement-based, youth-led and globally connected, are emerging as powerful counterforces.

Our goal and theory of action: CIVICUS' single overarching goal is *to strengthen civil society and civic action for expanded civic and democratic space*. This is pursued through a combination of influencing, organising and solidarity interventions, not just defending existing freedoms, but actively improving them. The strategy explicitly centres groups most affected by the combined impact of civic space restrictions and structural forms of discrimination, with an emphasis on being led by and accountable to these constituencies. Five strategic objectives operationalise the goal: 1) generating knowledge and analysis on civic space; 2) coordinating targeted advocacy; 3) contributing to emergency and sustained support ecosystems; 4) strengthening public discourse and civil society narratives; and 5) building counter power with the most affected groups and movements.

Long-term outcomes: CIVICUS' [Integrated Results Framework](#) (IRF) articulates four interconnected long-term outcomes that CIVICUS' work contributes to, recognising that change is non-linear, complex and context-dependent:

1. Improved ability of excluded groups to challenge oppressive power and transform policy making
2. Improved public discourse that reflects greater value for civic and democratic space, social and environmental justice, and the sustained impact of civil society
3. Improved accountability by decision makers to uphold fundamental civic freedoms (association, peaceful assembly, expression)
4. Increased and more effective civil society action that moves decision makers to safeguard and expand civic and democratic space.

Measurement philosophy: CIVICUS grounds its accountability approach in developmental evaluation theory and dynamic accountability, methods suited to non-linear change in contested spaces. The IRF tracks both emerging and systemic change against these outcomes, with proxy indicators per strategic objective and qualitative evidence gathered through outcome harvesting and annual reporting. CIVICUS explicitly does not claim sole attribution for these outcomes but positions itself as a catalytic contributor to a broader ecosystem of change.

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4. Scope of the evaluation

Period under review	1 January 2021 – 30 June 2026 (5.5 years).
Geographic focus	Global. The evaluation will pay particular attention to CIVICUS’ work across regions of the Global South and to its UN advocacy hubs in Geneva and New York. Case selection will be developed in the inception phase.
Expenditure	Netherlands MFA core grant disbursed to CIVICUS during the evaluation period. The evaluator will receive a financial summary disaggregated by year in the inception phase.
Included in scope	CIVICUS Monitor, Membership and Networks, #StandAsMyWitness Campaign, Advocacy and Campaigns, Solidarity actions including International Civil Society Week.
Excluded from scope	Restricted-purpose grants from other funders and project-level interventions not co-funded by the Netherlands MFA grant. These may be referenced as context but are not the subject of evaluation.

5. Objectives of the evaluation

The evaluation has both a knowledge objective and an action objective, articulated as follows.

5.1 Knowledge objective

To assess, in an independent and credible manner, the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of CIVICUS’ core work as funded by the Netherlands MFA between 1 January 2021 and 30 June 2026, and to generate a robust understanding of how, why and under what conditions CIVICUS’ work has contributed (or not) to results at outcome and impact levels.

5.2 Action objective

The findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation will be used to:

- Inform CIVICUS’ strategic planning, including the design of the next strategic period.
- Inform the Netherlands MFA’s future engagement with CIVICUS and with global civil society partners, including any successor funding instruments.
- Strengthen CIVICUS’ accountability to its members, the Netherlands MFA and other partners by providing an independent assessment of progress against commitments.
- Contribute to learning across the broader civic space and global civil society community.

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5.3 Intended users

Primary intended users are the CIVICUS Board, staff, membership and networks, partners, and the Netherlands MFA. Secondary intended users are civil society peers and the broader civic space and philanthropy community.

6. Evaluation questions

The evaluation is organised around one main research question and a focused set of sub-questions logically derived from the evaluation’s objective, scope and selected OECD/DAC criteria. Applicants are invited to refine these questions in the inception phase in consultation with the reference group, while preserving the core logic set out below.

Main research question

To what extent, how, and under what conditions has CIVICUS’ core work funded by the Netherlands MFA between 1 January 2021 and 30 June 2026 contributed to the protection and expansion of civic and democratic space worldwide, and to the resilience and effectiveness of civil society, and what does this imply for the next phase of CIVICUS’ work and the Netherlands MFA’s engagement with global civil society?

Sub-questions

OECD/DAC criterion	Sub-question
Relevance	How well have CIVICUS’ strategic objectives and core activities responded to the evolving needs and priorities of its members, partners and the wider civic space community during a period of intensifying civic space restrictions, and to what extent is the strategy grounded in context-specific evidence about what works?
Coherence	How coherent has CIVICUS’ work been internally across its five strategic objectives and in relation to other funded work, and externally with its membership, key partners, and other relevant actors in the civic space ecosystem?
Effectiveness	To what extent, and through what mechanisms, has CIVICUS contributed to observed results at output and outcome levels across its five strategic objectives and through the key areas supported by the Netherlands MFA?

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	<p>What unintended effects (positive or negative) have been generated, and how has CIVICUS responded to them?</p> <p>Where feasible, what plausible contribution has CIVICUS made to longer-term and broader changes in civic and democratic space, including effects on non-target populations and the wider civil society ecosystem?</p>
Efficiency	How efficient has the work been in terms of (a) the relationship between inputs and outputs/outcomes, and (b) timely and operational delivery within planned timeframes and budgets, including the management of delays and obstacles?
Sustainability	Which sustainability measures have been taken, and which factors have hindered/will hinder sustainability of results, especially in an increasingly constrained funding and political environment?
Cross-cutting	How has the work integrated and advanced gender equality and intersectional inclusion, localisation and decolonisation of resourcing, youth engagement, climate justice as it intersects with civic space, and digital civic space?
Learning / forward-looking	What lessons emerge for CIVICUS' next strategic period and for the Netherlands MFA's future engagement with global civil society partners, including on the value and modalities of flexible core funding?

These sub-questions are designed to be realistic given anticipated constraints, to avoid undue overlap, and to align logically with the evaluation's objective, scope and selected criteria. The evaluator will propose additional or refined questions, if necessary, in the inception report.

7. Methodology

The full methodology will be developed by the selected consultant in consultation with the Reference Group and the funder and will be set out in an inception report. This ToR sets the minimum methodological requirements and parameters within which the methodology must be developed.

7.1 Methodological requirements

The evaluation must:

- Employ mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, appropriate to validly and reliably answer the evaluation questions.

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- Include, at minimum, the following qualitative methods: outcome harvesting, contribution analysis, and a form of causal analysis (for example, process tracing or general elimination methodology) capable of substantiating causal claims about the effectiveness of advocacy and civic space interventions.
- Use quantitative methods where appropriate, including descriptive analysis of CIVICUS' internal data (Indicators, CIVICUS Monitor, membership data, financial data), surveys of members and stakeholders, and bibliometric or media analysis where useful.
- Enable robust triangulation using multiple research methods, data collection methods and data sources.
- Substantiate causal claims by following the five-step qualitative approach set out in IOB criterion 10.a: (i) formulate the cause-effect contribution question; (ii) (re)construct the intervention theory and its assumptions; (iii) formulate alternative theories and explanations for observed changes; (iv) collect data along the results chain and for the alternative theories, including data from stakeholders not directly involved in implementation; and (v) verify the causal chains in a step-by-step manner, including for intended results not achieved and unintended effects.
- Use a mix of information sources that minimises source bias, including not only CIVICUS staff, members and partners but also informed but non-engaged stakeholders, non-targeted populations where relevant, the evaluator's own direct observations, and validated secondary data sources.
- Apply sampling and case selection strategies with valid justification and transparent criteria, formulated independently from CIVICUS staff and member organisations actively involved in the work under review.
- Propose concrete indicators or qualitative descriptions of result areas linked to all levels in the results chain.
- Acknowledge limitations and biases transparently in the inception report and final report.

7.2 Participatory and co-creative approach

CIVICUS' identity is rooted in member voice, co-creation and participatory ways of working. The methodology must therefore include participatory evaluation methods that meaningfully engage CIVICUS members, partners and target stakeholders, particularly those in the Global South and those representing excluded groups, in shaping evaluation questions, interpreting findings and validating conclusions. Participatory methods will not replace the qualitative methods needed to substantiate causal claims, but will deepen contextual understanding, improve the data and facilitate downward accountability.

7.3 Phasing of the methodology

The methodology is expected to unfold in three phases:

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1. *Inception phase*: desk review of CIVICUS strategy, M&E and financial documents; refinement and validation of the ToC, evaluation questions, sampling and case selection; development of an evaluation matrix linking each evaluation question to methods, data sources and indicators; submission of an inception report.
2. *Data collection and analysis*: implementation of the agreed methods, including outcome harvesting workshops, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, document review and case studies.
3. *Reporting and validation*: drafting of the evaluation report; structured feedback from the reference group; final report; presentation of findings to CIVICUS (internal and external stakeholders) and the Netherlands MFA.

8. Reference group

A reference group has been established to guide the evaluation through all phases. The reference group will play an advisory role and will not have decision-making authority over the evaluator's independent judgement.

8.1 Composition

The reference group is composed of:

1. A representative of CIVICUS acting as evaluation commissioner
2. A representative of the CIVICUS Impact and Accountability (M&E) function
3. A representative of the CIVICUS Memberships and Networks function
4. An independent external member with expertise in: (i) evaluation methodology for advocacy, civic space and global civil society interventions, and (ii) the substantive areas covered by CIVICUS' work (civic space, multilateral advocacy, philanthropy).
5. Two southern member representative with deep contextual understanding of how CIVICUS shows up to its membership.

8.2 Role

The reference group will be involved in the following stages of the evaluation: Review of the ToR prior to issuance; Input into the selection of the evaluator; Review of and feedback on the inception report and elaborated methodology; Review of and feedback on the draft final report; Validation discussions following the presentation of preliminary findings.

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9. Independence of evaluators

The selected evaluator(s) and any affiliated organisations:

- Must not have been involved in the design or implementation of the strategies under evaluation, either with CIVICUS or with the Netherlands MFA.
- Must maintain complete impartiality, with no vested interest in the ultimate outcome of the evaluation.
- Must disclose any prior or concurrent professional relationships with CIVICUS, its members or the Netherlands MFA at the application stage. Such relationships do not automatically disqualify applicants but will be assessed for potential conflicts of interest.
- Must commit to following the IOB Evaluation Quality Criteria and applicable professional standards of evaluation practice (e.g. OECD/DAC, IEG, the African Evaluation Association guidelines, or equivalent).

10. Deliverables

Deliverable	Description	Indicative timing
Inception report	Refined evaluation questions, evaluation matrix, methodology, sampling and case selection, ethics and risk plan, work plan and revised budget.	Mid-Aug 2026
Interim briefing	Mid-process briefing to the reference group covering emerging findings, methodological issues and any required adjustments.	End-Oct 2026
Draft evaluation report	Full draft of the evaluation report, including findings, analysis, conclusions and recommendations.	End-Nov 2026
Validation workshop	Workshop with key stakeholders to discuss the draft, including a session with CIVICUS members.	End-Nov 2026
Final evaluation report	Final report (max. 60 pages plus annexes) addressing all evaluation questions and reference group comments.	Mid-Jan 2027
Executive summary	Stand-alone executive summary (max. 8 pages).	Mid-Jan 2027
Presentation deck	Slide deck summarising findings, conclusions and recommendations for use with CIVICUS Board, SLT and Secretariat, members and networks, and Netherlands MFA.	Mid-Jan 2027

All deliverables will be submitted in English. Anonymised raw data and analysis files (transcripts, coded data, evaluation matrix, sampling logs) will be submitted alongside the final report and treated in line with CIVICUS' data protection and safeguarding policies.

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11. Ethical considerations and safeguarding

The selected evaluator will be required to:

- Comply with CIVICUS' Safeguarding Policy, Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Policy, Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct, and to sign these on contracting.
- Apply a do-no-harm approach throughout, with particular care in contexts where human rights defenders, activists and members may be at risk. The evaluator must ensure that participation in the evaluation does not expose any individual or organisation to retaliation, surveillance or harm.
- Obtain informed consent from all evaluation participants, with clear information about the purpose of the evaluation, how data will be used, and how confidentiality will be protected.
- Apply appropriate data protection measures, including secure storage of recordings, transcripts and identifying information, and full anonymisation in reporting unless the participant has explicitly consented to attribution.
- Be transparent about the limits of confidentiality, particularly where mandatory reporting obligations may apply (e.g. disclosures of safeguarding concerns).
- Apply a feminist, intersectional and decolonial sensibility to the evaluation process, including in how power is navigated in interactions with members, partners and target stakeholders.

12. Evaluator profile and qualifications

CIVICUS is seeking an evaluator or evaluation team that demonstrates the following profile. Where the proposal is submitted by a team, these competencies may be distributed across team members.

12.1 Essential qualifications

- Demonstrable experience evaluating international civil society alliances, federations, networks or membership organisations, ideally with a global mandate and presence across multiple regions and substantive expertise on civic space and human rights.
- Demonstrated commitment to participatory, co-created and equity-centred evaluation practice, safeguarding, do-no-harm and ethics-in-evaluation frameworks.
- Track record of applying the IOB Evaluation Quality Criteria and/or strong working knowledge of the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria and demonstrated experience applying them thoughtfully.

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- Substantial experience with the qualitative methods named in this ToR: outcome harvesting, contribution analysis and process tracing (or another qualitative method recognised by IOB as suitable for substantiating causal claims about effectiveness).
- Strong written and spoken English; proficiency in other languages such as Spanish, French, Arabic will be an advantage.
- Independence: no prior involvement in the design or implementation of CIVICUS' Netherlands MFA-funded work.

12.2 Desirable qualifications

- Prior experience evaluating programmes funded by the Netherlands MFA or by other Dutch instruments such as Power of Voices, Dialogue and Dissent, Leading from the South or VOICE.
- Experience working at the intersection of civil society and philanthropy, including familiarity with debates on shifting power, localisation and decolonising aid.
- Direct experience evaluating advocacy, lobbying and campaigning interventions.
- Team composition that reflects diversity in geography (with strong Global South representation), gender, generation and lived experience.

13. Application process

Applicants are invited to submit a proposal of no more than five pages (excluding annexes) addressing the following five elements. Proposals exceeding the page limit may be returned without review.

1. **Why you are best placed to do this evaluation.** Articulate clearly why the applicant or team is best placed to conduct this evaluation, including the specific value the team brings; experience working with the Netherlands MFA or comparable bilateral/multilateral funders, including the nature, scale and outcomes of those assignments; and demonstrated familiarity with the IOB Evaluation Quality Criteria (2024) and the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, including concrete examples of how these have been applied in prior evaluations.
2. **Experience with similar organisations.** Describe experience evaluating organisations of a similar nature, i.e. global civil society alliances, networks, federations, membership organisations or international NGOs working on advocacy, civic space, human rights and philanthropy.
3. **Proposed methodology:** Outline your understanding of the ToR, especially the operational context, and your proposed methodology. Include the values and principles you will apply to the evaluation process to ensure that the fundamental principle of co-creation is followed while adhering to the IOB criteria. This

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should address how you will safeguard independence, rigour and credibility alongside meaningful, ongoing participation of CIVICUS members, networks, partners and target stakeholders, particularly those in the Global South and those representing excluded groups. Applicants are encouraged to address how they will navigate tensions that may arise between IOB requirements (e.g. independence of sampling decisions from actively involved stakeholders) and co-creation.

Required annexes

- CVs of the proposed evaluation team (please keep these concise).
- A draft budget in USD, including daily rates.
- Two writing samples from comparable assignments completed in the past five years.
- Two references from comparable assignments completed within the last five years (named contacts and a brief description of the assignment).
- A declaration of any prior or concurrent engagements with CIVICUS, its members or the Netherlands MFA, for conflict-of-interest assessment.

Submission

Proposals should be submitted by email to partnerships@civicus.org with the subject line “CIVICUS–Netherlands MFA Evaluation 2021–2026 [Applicant name]” by 23:59 South Africa Standard Time on 13 July 2026. Late submissions will not be considered.

14. Selection criteria for the evaluator

Proposals will be assessed by the reference group against the following weighted criteria:

Criterion	Weight
Demonstrated experience with similar funders (Netherlands MFA or comparable) and applying IOB and OECD/DAC criteria	10%
Demonstrated experience evaluating similar organisations (global civil society alliances, networks, membership organisations engaged in advocacy and civic space)	20%
Strength of the methodological approach, including expertise in outcome harvesting, contribution, causal analysis or other similar approach, and mixed-methods design	20%

HEADQUARTERS

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CIVICUS

Articulation of values and principles for co-creation alongside IOB-compliant rigour and independence	25%
Team composition, including diversity, Global South representation, and substantive expertise on civic space and philanthropy	10%
Prior experience with secure data collection in high-risk environments	5%
Value for money (budget against scope and level of effort)	5%
Quality of references and overall confidence in delivery	5%

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