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Civil Society Innovation Fund

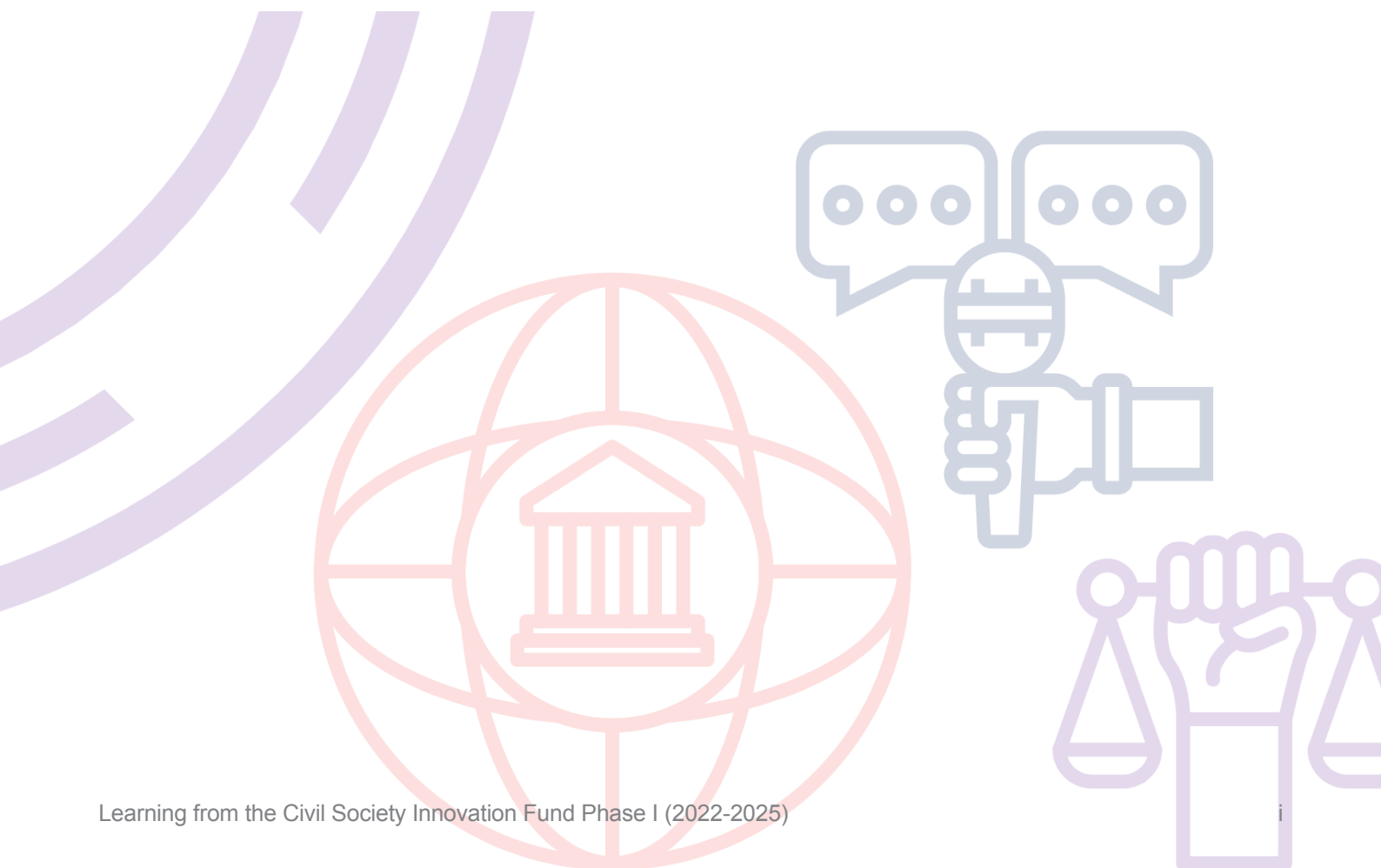


# Supporting strong, diverse, impactful civil society in Ethiopia

Learning from the Civil Society  
Innovation Fund Phase I (2022-2025)

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# Foreword

If support to civil society is a priority in the mandate of the French Development Agency (Agence Française de Développement – AFD), a programme as structured and comprehensive as the Civil Society Innovation Fund (CSIF) is not very common in AFD's portfolio.

This particular feature in Ethiopia can be explained by the willingness from the French government to support the Ethiopian government's drive to modernise the civic space, initiated in 2019. We have therefore opted for a twofold approach, providing support for the modernisation of the government agency responsible for civil society organisations (ACSO) on the one hand, and on the other hand, through CSIF, supporting projects led by consortia of emerging civil society organisations (CSOs) in order to strengthen their skills and make them more autonomous. This dual support enables AFD to offer a platform for frank and direct dialogue between civil society actors and the government.

This project responds to the demands of both the Ethiopian government and representatives of civil society, and is fully in line with AFD's strategy in Ethiopia, insofar as any support for the country's development will have limited impact without

a peaceful and stable environment. As a long-standing bilateral partner of Ethiopia, we are trying to play a useful role in this regard in a relationship based on trust and dialogue.

The overall positive outcomes of this first grant cycle of CSIF have led us to continue this support, learning from the shortcomings observed in this first phase to strengthen this platform and help create more synergies within this ecosystem of these CSOs, to improve the complementarity of these grassroots projects, and to strengthen the quality of dialogue and mutual understanding between civil society and the government.

I would like to extend my thanks to the CSOs and all the participants who have made CSIF I a success.

**Louis-Antoine Souchet**

Country Director for Ethiopia and  
Representative to the African Union  
of Agence Française de Développement



# ስሊሲቪል ማኅበረሰብ ፈጠራ ፈንድ

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የፕሮግራሙን ስኬቶች፣ ልምዶች እና የመጀመሪያ ሰነድ ዓመታትን የዕድገት ጉዞን ያስቃኛል።

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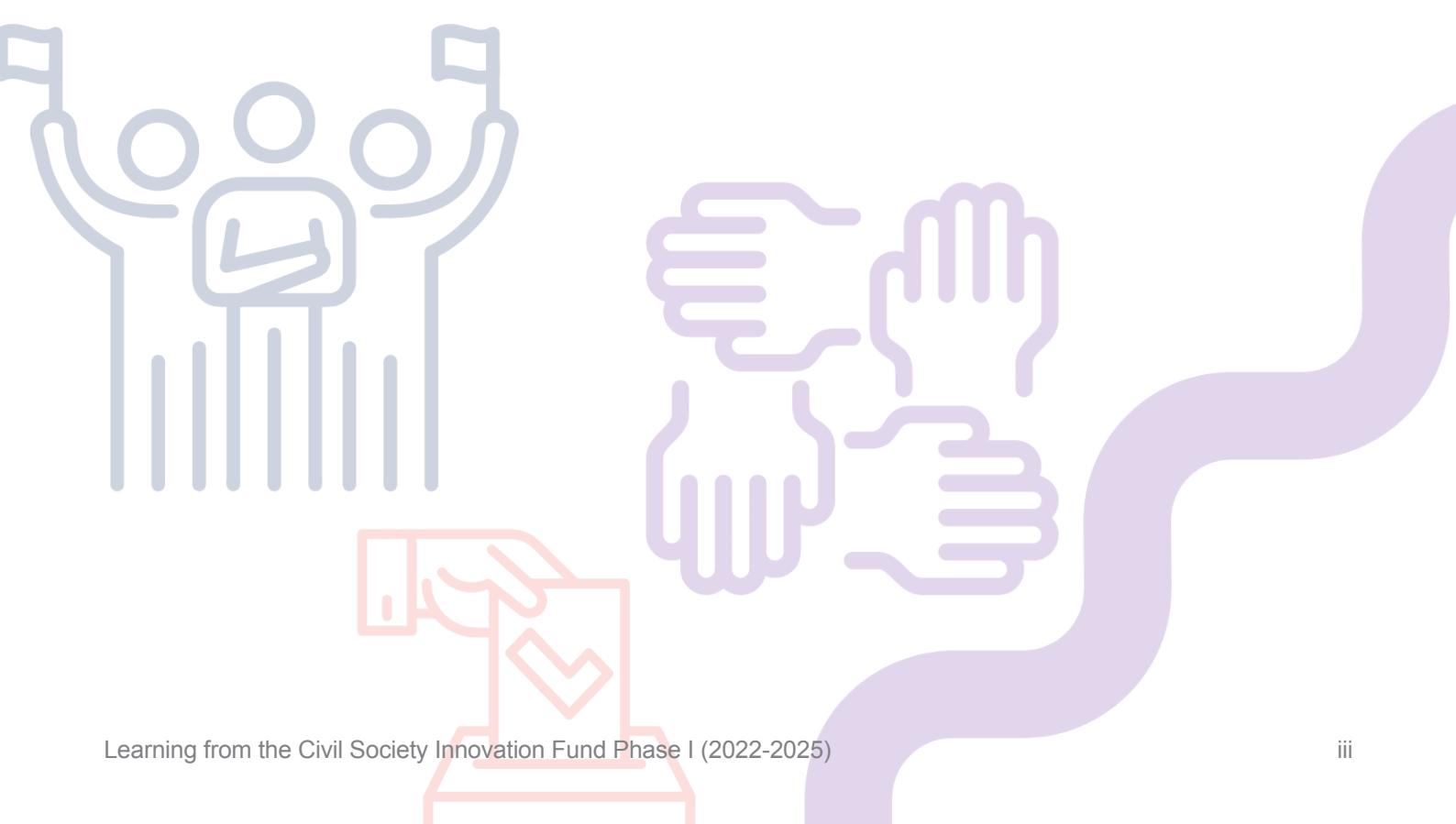
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A fireside chat hosted by CARD in Jimma

# 1. An introduction to three years of the Civil Society Innovation Fund in Ethiopia

The Civil Society Innovation Fund is a multi-year initiative to support civil society in Ethiopia funded by the French Development Agency. The first round of the programme, referred to as CSIF I, was launched in July 2022 and ended in June 2025.

After three successful years of programme implementation, CSIF will continue with a second three-year funding cycle. As partners are transitioning into CSIF II, there is an opportunity to meaningfully reflect on the first phase.

## Learning digest

This learning digest is a celebration of CSIF achievements and the progress made towards a stronger role for civil society in support of a democratic, peaceful, and stable Ethiopia.

It looks back at the challenges and draws lessons from programme implementation that can support partners involved with CSIF II and others that aim to support new and emerging civil society actors around the world.

## CSIF I

The main aim of CSIF I was to support new and emerging CSOs dedicated to the development of a more democratic, pluralistic, and innovative civil society sector.

The fund supported 15 Ethiopian CSOs, who in the formation of consortia worked on three main programmes.



## Programme 1: Promoting rights, inclusiveness, and peace

**Partners:** Led by the Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) in a consortium with Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE), Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC), Ethiopian Initiative for Human Rights (EIHR), East African Initiative for Change (I4C), Initiative for Peace and Development (IPD), and the Setaweeet Movement (Setaweeet).

**Objective:** To create robust, inclusive, and diverse civic and media space as well as to enhance the partnerships between civic organisations through research, capacity building of formal and informal civic associations and grassroots movements, and by creating human rights-based dialogue platforms.

One of the key achievements highlighted by the CARD consortium is the work around evidence-based advocacy and capacity development.

“The consortium developed manuals, conducted trainings, and supported participatory research on conflict-related sexual violence, civic rights, and democratic engagement. These tools enhanced local actors’ capacity to engage with sensitive issues in a constructive and rights-based manner.”

Moges Demissie (Director of CARD)



## Programme 2: Civil society engagement

**Partners:** Led by the Civil Society Resource Center (CSRC), in a consortium with the Digital Rogue Society Experiment Group (DRSE.G), Ethiopian Lawyers Association (ELA), Ethiopian Labour Rights Watch (ELRW), and Inclusive Vision for Democratic Ethiopia (IVIDE).

**Objective:** The creation of a vibrant civic space in Ethiopia through leadership, institutional capacity, access to information, and networking activities. Activities included an emerging civil society leaders fellowship, civil society monthly engagement series, an emerging CSO online network, digital activism training programme, and annual civil society awareness and activism campaigns. The programme also incorporated digital activism as a new and relevant concept, recognising the importance of digital actors to achieving programme goals.

“Under CSIF I, our consortium played a catalytic role in revitalising Ethiopia’s civic space by strengthening the leadership, digital capacity, and collaborative potential of emerging CSOs across regions. Key achievements include the Emerging Civil Society Leaders Fellowship, Civil Society Engagement Series, DERSHA Emerging Organisations Online Network, and Digital Activism Training. Collectively, these results laid a strong foundation for a more capable, connected, and visible civil society sector, which Phase II now aims to expand and safeguard.”

Henok Teshome (Director of CSRC)



CSRC fellows graduation

Technical support and management coordination for CSIF I was provided by [AGAR Development Partners Consulting](#) in Ethiopia and [INTRAC](#) in the UK – jointly taking on the role of Programme Management Consultant (PMC).



Lawyers and paralegals of Advocates Ethiopia providing legal aid services in Adama police station



## Programme 3: Advancing human rights through legal aid services

**Partners:** Led by Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) in a consortium with Advocates Ethiopia (AE) and Mizan Young Lawyers Center (MYLC).

**Objective:** To provide legal aid services in police stations in Addis Ababa, Adama and Hawassa with both stationed and mobile legal aid centres. Activities were targeted to make legal aid services accessible to detainees in the early stages of criminal proceedings in police stations, improving access to justice and minimising the risks of ill-treatment, wrongful detention and conviction.

“By availing free legal aid service at a pre-trial stage, our consortium has opened a new chapter providing an opportunity to coordinate an impactful support to access to justice. A pre-trial stage being a critical stage where numerous and basic principles of criminal justice are packed, the consortium’s service has become a catalyst for the judicial body to render the highest quality of justice.”

Ameha Mekonnen (Director of LHR)

The project achievements of the three consortia are further highlighted throughout this learning digest.

### Growing together under CSIF

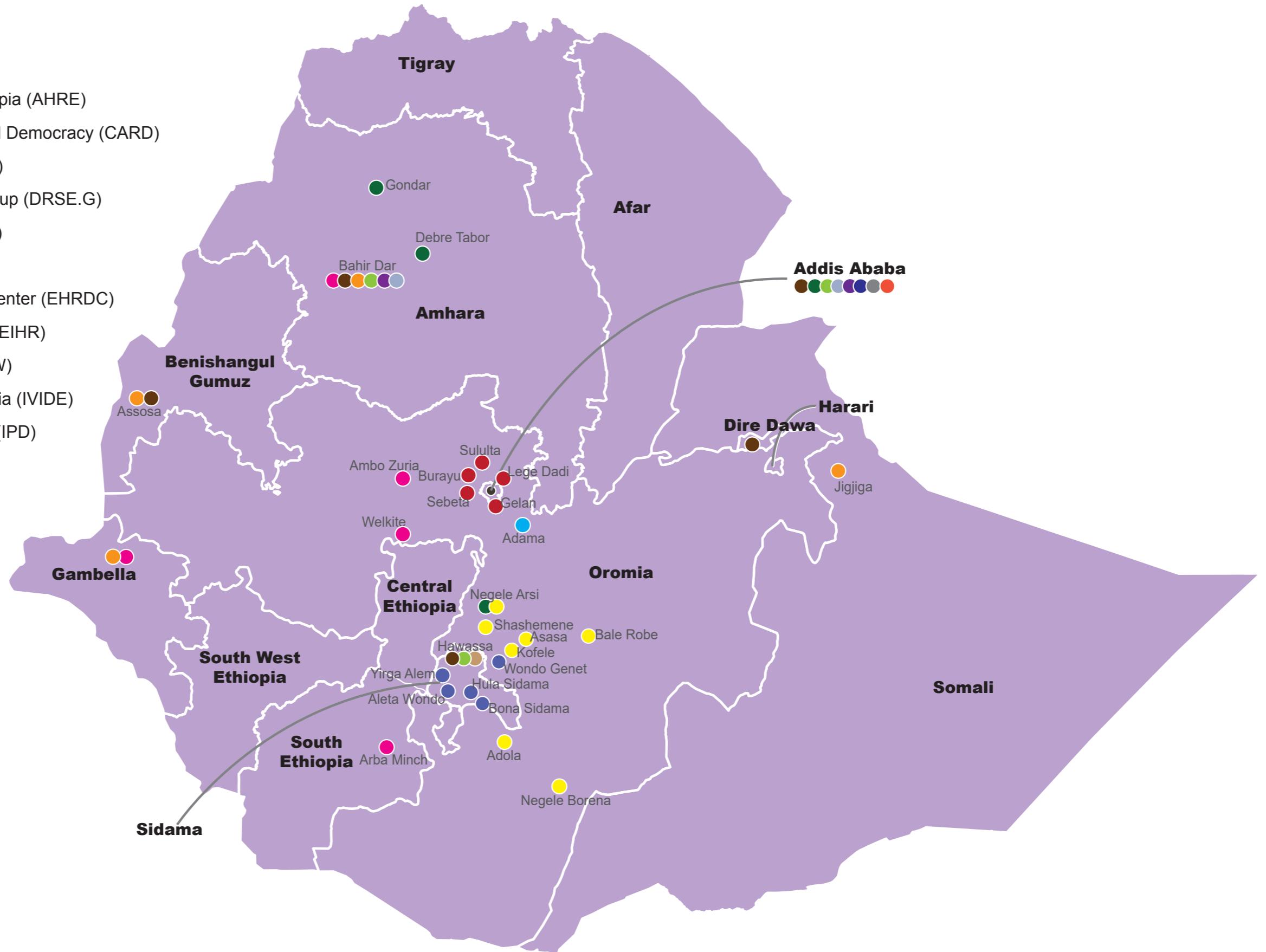
In addition to project delivery by the three consortia, CSIF was underpinned by two strategies:

- Capacity strengthening support for new and emerging CSOs working in gender, media and human rights. Delivered in the form of training, ongoing accompaniment and mentoring.
- Partnerships for research and learning, dialogue, and advocacy among CSOs and between CSOs and government.

# Project Locations

- Advocates Ethiopia (AE)
- Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE)
- Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD)
- Civil Society Resource Center (CSRC)
- Digital Rogue Society Experiment Group (DRSE.G)
- East African Initiative for Change (I4C)
- Ethiopia Lawyers' Association (ELA)
- Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Center (EHRDC)
- Ethiopian Initiative for Human Rights (EIHR)
- Ethiopian Labour Rights Watch (ELRW)
- Inclusive Vision for Democratic Ethiopia (IVIDE)
- Initiative for Peace and Development (IPD)
- Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR)
- Mizan Young Lawyers Center (MYLC)
- The Setaweet Movement (Setaweet)

Click [here](#) for an interactive map



## 2. CSIF's impact showcased

### Impact in numbers



**15**

Consortia partners directly supported



**30**

Emerging CSOs supported via consortia (10 registered)



**300+**

Diverse CSOs reached through trainings and events



**5,000+**

Individuals (over 1000 women) received legal aid services



**49**

CSOs registered on new digital platform DERSHA



**100+**

Organisations accessed learning on innovative approaches to advocacy and activism



**181**

Media professionals (over 100 women) empowered through dialogue on human rights, freedom of expression and more



**570+**

People engaged in dialogues and training resulting in new informal women's circles and youth partnerships



**68**

Community peace dialogues involving 2,000+ people, and 12 local peace committees established or strengthened

# Impact in stories

Throughout the learning digest we present short versions of change stories, like the ones below.

## **Legal aid plus: Stakeholders working in collaboration to create a holistic approach to justice**

This change story shows how the partnership between MYLC and public justice institutions has significantly improved the fairness and coordination of the local justice system in Hawassa and surrounding areas. As a result of joint legal aid missions, training, and collaboration, wrongful detentions have been reduced, human rights standards in detention centres have improved, and police and prosecutors now work together more effectively. Community legal awareness has increased, and detainees received timely legal support and referrals to rehabilitative services — marking a shift towards a more just, accountable, and holistic approach to justice delivery. As one police inspector reflected, *“It has become our culture to care for and handle our prisoners professionally. That’s how confident we are.”*

Click [here](#) for the full change story.

## **Beyond passion: Supporting viability of informal youth initiatives**

IPD promotes youth engagement in decision making processes on peace, democracy, social justice and rule of law. Youth bring passion, energy and activism, yet they can struggle to effectively engage government. IPD supports youth groups to form, register and establish themselves as CSOs, in order to operate more easily and actively in levels of government. IPD provides training which focuses on understanding regulation and technical aspects of organisational development and legislative support. Through CSIF I, IPD has supported 29 informal groups of which 10 are now registered as formal CSOs.

*“IPD’s training and technical support were useful,”* says Tatek Bashir, chairman of Tensalet Charitable and Youth Art Club based in Hawassa. *“We were able to gather and submit our registration applications with their help in connecting us with the justice office and giving us the information we needed on registration procedures. We are excited to plan our own projects and raise funds to carry them out,”* he added.

Click [here](#) for the full change story.

## **Creating safe and collaborative media spaces: CARD’s fireside chats**

This story highlights how CARD’s “fireside chats” helped foster a more collaborative, inclusive, and human rights-oriented media environment in Ethiopia. Held across seven cities and involving 181 media professionals, the chats provided a rare opportunity for journalists to openly discuss shared challenges, such as political interference, gender inequality, and regulatory barriers — while developing practical, locally grounded solutions. Participants proposed forming journalist associations, called for stronger newsroom gender policies, and reaffirmed the role of media in defending democratic values. CARD’s approach — rooted in dialogue, peer exchange and contextual relevance — helped reconnect fragmented networks and lay the foundation for a more resilient, rights-sensitive media sector.

Click [here](#) for the full change story.

# 3. Pathways to change and action

CSIF provided dedicated Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) support to help partners move beyond activity-based reporting and begin conceptualising broader pathways to change. For many newly established advocacy-focused CSOs, MEL technicalities — including developing Theories of Change, identifying appropriate indicators, and articulating assumptions — were entirely new and often daunting.


The Theory of Change (ToC, see page 7), Theory of Action (ToA, see page 8) and MEL tools were co-designed with the CSOs during CSIF’s inception to encourage ownership and understanding, supported by MEL training and accompaniment.

## A multi-level MEL approach

The MEL framework was designed to operate across different levels: the Fund, the three consortia, and the 15 individual CSOs.

- **The ToC spoke to change at Fund level.** It responded to the emerging civic space in Ethiopia, security challenges and limited access to resources for new CSOs, with pathways focused on flexible, context-specific capacity strengthening, partnership for research, learning and dialogue, and advocacy, to contribute to the Fund’s aims.
- **The ToA brought the ToC to life, by mapping how activities and aims of the three consortia contributed to shared outcomes.** Represented as a tree, it illustrated how the two core strategies led to programme outputs, which in turn yielded short- and medium-term outcomes. The model reflected the organic, non-linear nature of social change and reinforced the role of learning, adaptation, and innovation in nurturing a more active and inclusive civil society ecosystem.
- Conventional MEL tools like logframes and results frameworks were paired with more adaptive approaches such as change stories and a series of learning questions.


At the top of the ToA-tree are four intended impact areas. The following chapters of this learning digest are organised around these themes, highlighting progress made and key learning emerging in each area.

 This light bulb image indicates key learning from CSIF I.

## Capacity and continuity challenges

Capacity strengthening was an integral part of CSIF, including MEL (see Chapter 6). A MEL training in June 2023 aimed to familiarise partners with outcome-oriented approaches and story-based reporting, complemented by ongoing mentoring from the PMC. However, high staff turnover limited knowledge retention, and few partners were able to apply MEL tools consistently and meaningfully, particularly when it came to articulating outcomes and change. With adjusted tools and additional support some partners were able to capture their own change stories, while other stories were ultimately pursued and developed by the PMC.

## Learning for the future

 Our experience reiterates the importance of participatory approaches to ensure understanding, engagement, and influence of participants over the change pathways and the logic underpinning them.

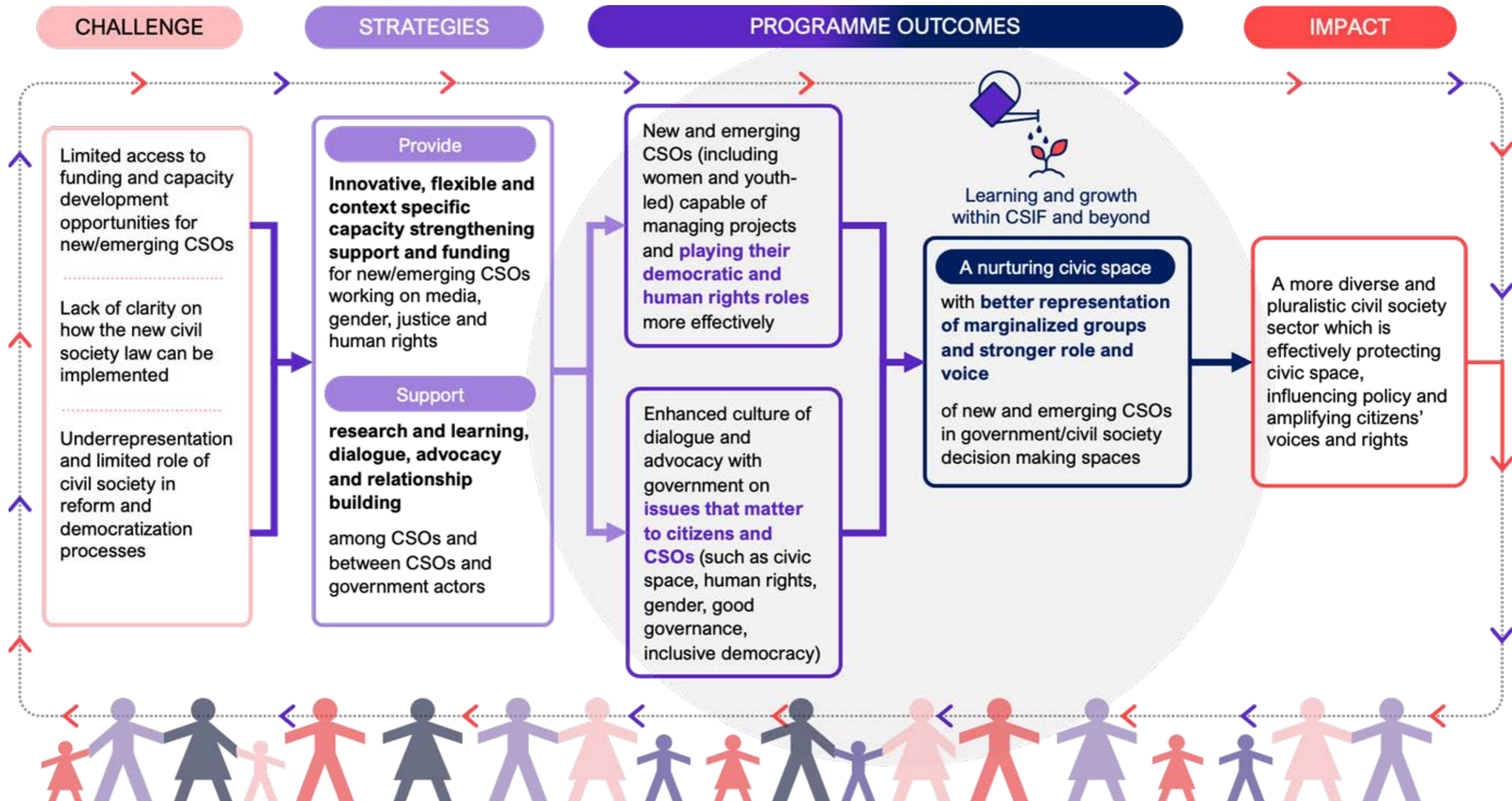
It also emphasised the need for stronger ownership and integration of MEL tools from the outset. This includes clearly communicating the purpose of each tool, building in moments for collective reflection and ‘feedback loops’, and agreeing how MEL will inform reporting and strategic learning. For example, better integration of development and reporting of change stories with regular project reporting by the consortia on activities and results would have benefitted the process.

We found that having both a ToC at Fund level and a ToA for the consortia programmes worked well to connect MEL at different levels. Still, these tools could have been used more and better as a framework to guide reflection and learning on combined achievements, beyond individual project reporting silos to encourage CSOs to reflect on the added value of collaboration under CSIF.

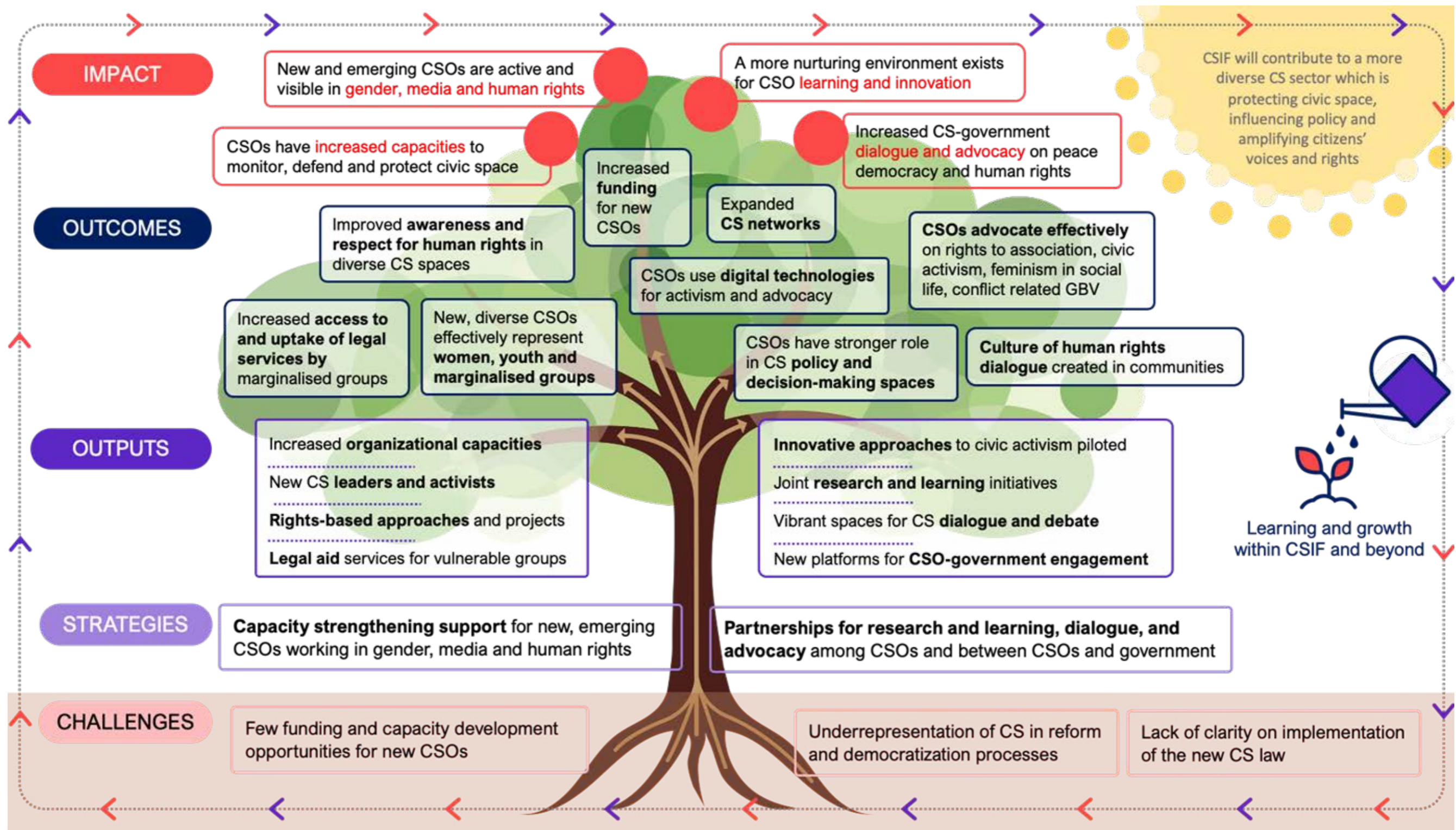
It was clear that ongoing accompaniment for CSOs, where these MEL concepts are new, is crucial to ensure that outcomes, impact and change stories are understood and can be told. Showing agility by adapting and simplifying MEL tools throughout the process also turned out to be crucial.

For CSIF II, prioritising clarity, process, and engagement around MEL — at all levels from Fund to projects, to partners — will be critical to ensure learning informs meaningful programme adaptation and impact.

# CSIF's Theory of Change



# CSIF's Theory of Action





Snapshot of the Meqenet show by Setaweet

## 4. New and emerging CSOs active and visible in gender, media, human rights

### Promoting gender equality and social inclusion

Several CSIF partners advanced gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) through targeted initiatives. Under the CARD consortium, IPD, Setaweet, and EHRDC supported the creation of women’s circles and youth partnerships, reaching over 570 participants through dialogues, training, and community outreach. Nearly 300 university students completed a six-week course on feminist human rights and soft skills, while Setaweet launched a widely viewed YouTube series to raise public awareness on gender justice and human rights, that included sign language for accessibility.

Partners were also intentional about representation. For example, the establishment of quotas for women and people living with a disability for the fellowship schemes of the CSRC, and dialogues hosted by EIHR purposefully set up to reflect community demographics and to ensure the presence and active participation of marginalised voices.

Other partners began embedding gender into work. For example, LHR supported the development of Elibat Charitable Organisation, a women-led CSO providing legal aid services to female detainees (see change story to the right); while EIHR and MYLC secured funding for research on gender-based violence, and gender-responsive justice training (see change story in Chapter 5).

Internally, GESI principles were introduced across the CSIF consortium through a five-day training on rights-based and gender-transformative project cycle management and MEL (June 2023), which emphasised inclusive planning, intersectional analysis, and participatory approaches. While some partners began to apply these methods, monitoring visits and partner reflections revealed that many new and emerging CSOs still face systemic barriers, including limited resources, inaccessible systems, and weak internal structures to challenge entrenched gender norms and exclusion.

### CSIF assistance turned into a springboard for an emerging CSO

With support from LHR through CSIF, the emerging civic initiative Elibat Charitable Organisation (in short Elibat) transformed from a volunteer-led effort into a fully functioning CSO providing vital legal aid and advocacy for female detainees in Addis Ababa. LHR is supporting Elibat to access funding, capacity-building, and networking opportunities. This has enabled the organisation to expand its services, secure office space, and increase its visibility. Elibat now delivers free legal aid, educates police on human rights, informs detainees of their rights, and engages in legal reform advocacy — marking a major leap in both impact and institutional growth.

Click [here](#) for the full change story.



Advancing gender equality and social inclusion requires deliberate, ongoing, and well-resourced action — not ad hoc efforts. For CSIF II, stronger GESI accountability at both fund and partner levels, flexible budgets to address access barriers (e.g. transport, translation, accessibility), and greater focus on safe spaces, inclusive organisational culture, and holistic service referral partnerships will be essential to deepen impact.

### Creating vibrant media and human rights sensitive media spaces

While work with media directly was more limited, there were significant initiatives. CARD focused their project on creating inclusive, vibrant media and human rights sensitive media spaces. They convened 181 media professionals, including 124 women, across multiple cities through “fireside chats” that addressed media freedom, ethics, gender parity, and safety. These engagements stimulated the formation of informal media networks and advocacy on gender equity in the media sector. (See change story in Chapter 2).



While regulatory restrictions and political dynamics can affect media freedom, the Fireside Chats show that dialogue, peer support and collective action can lead to action and change. Providing safe spaces to build relationships and trust are essential.

### Upholding human rights

Of all CSIF’s thematic focus areas, human rights emerged as the most prominent and

widely addressed. Nearly all of the 15 CSIF partners engaged directly in human rights work, demonstrating the centrality of rights-based approaches to the Fund’s impact.

Across Ethiopia, partners delivered a diverse and ambitious range of human rights initiatives. These included providing legal aid and human rights education (e.g. AE, MYLC, LHR – see change story below), challenging unlawful pretrial detention and prison conditions, supporting the rights of detainees, and engaging communities on issues such as inter-religious and inter-communal conflict (e.g. I4C’s dialogue work). Others, like EIHR, promoted police accountability through community trust-building platforms, EHRDC focused on human rights movements in universities, while AHRE and ELRW addressed labour rights violations.

These efforts, despite a volatile and often challenging environment, illustrate the courage, reach, and relevance of Ethiopia’s emerging CSOs in protecting fundamental rights and freedoms.



Upholding human rights in fragile civic spaces requires more than technical and financial support. It demands conflict-aware programming, proactive risk management, and flexible, responsive systems. As new and emerging CSOs became more visible, many also faced increased exposure to legal and political risks. This highlights the importance of embedding protection measures and fostering cross-sector solidarity to sustain rights-based work over time. Expert legal advice and compliance support for CSOs can be an important way to help CSOs navigate complex and challenging contexts.

### Voices of the imprisoned: legal aid services in Adama

LHR, MYLC, and AE provide legal aid services benefitting over 5,000 people to date. Here are the stories of two men from Adama:

Tesfaye Feseha, 42, was imprisoned at Gada police station after a physical quarrel. He was held with no support and with no money to hire a lawyer. He was alone. AE helped him prepare for his court appearance and provided legal representation, which ultimately led to his bail release on the 18th day of detainment. *“Thank God, I was able to acquire support from AE during court proceedings and challenging circumstances. My release on bail was made possible by them. They saved my life.”*

Demoz Lemma, 30, was detained for three months after an altercation with a client of his taxi business. Demoz was not permitted his right to a court appearance within 48 hours of detainment. He was kept in a room with 50 prisoners, missing the birth of his child. *“One day, I realised that AE promote free legal aid services”* he explains. *“As soon my wife arrived at AE’s office, they began investigating my case. They were able to arrange my release at last, and quite fast.”* Demoz’s release allowed him to return to work and take care of his wife and newborn. *“I’m so happy!”* Demoz said, adding *“I prefer starvation than my justice being denied”*.

Click [here](#) for the full change story.

# 5. Increased capacities to monitor, defend and protect civic space

CSIF I emphasised the importance of capacity strengthening to creating a more diverse, pluralistic, effective civil society sector. Despite contextual challenges, many CSOs demonstrated resilience and growth, ultimately increasing their institutional capacity to monitor, defend and protect civic space.

## A unique approach to capacity strengthening

1. AFD deliberately chose to support new and emerging CSOs, accepting the risks this entails and demonstrating flexibility throughout implementation.
2. The PMC adopted a tailored, partner-owned approach, starting with baseline Organisational Capacity Self-Assessments to identify priorities. These informed both collective trainings and individual development plans.

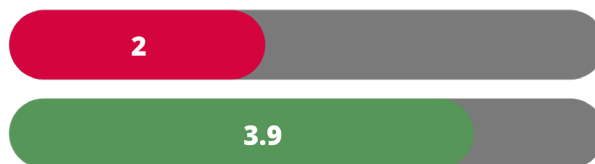
### Collective development themes:

- Staffing and Human Resources
- Leadership and organisational culture
- Policy and systems development
- Financial management
- Safeguarding and inclusion
- MEL
- Strategic planning and governance
- Programme and project management
- Stakeholder engagements and visibility

3. Beyond training, capacity strengthening was supported through an ongoing, accompanied journey of peer learning, coaching, mentoring, and hands-on support across all aspects of delivery.
4. Fund-level learning combined with project-level capacity initiatives. In some cases, CSOs fed and cascaded Fund-level learning to their own partners, creating a ripple effect that extended the programme's impact.

## Applying and cascading learning

Transformative changes included – amongst other things – organisations transitioning from volunteer-driven models to professional teams with paid staff;



*At baseline: organisations rated themselves 2 out of 5 when using a non-financial organisational capacity framework. At endline, they rated themselves 3.9 out of 5.*

the establishment of core operational systems across HR, finance, procurement, MEL, and communications; strengthened project management capacities; improved visibility and growing advocacy efforts; as well as financial growth and enhanced fundraising.

“Financial management has seen a dramatic improvement, going from zero to 100.”

Advocates Ethiopia

## Sustainable capacity support and learning



CSIF I shows that capacity support delivers lasting value when it is tailored, it addresses practical needs, and it is sustained. The accompaniment and mentoring model – marked by consistent, tailored, and context-sensitive guidance – had a transformative impact (see change story in this chapter). From navigating operational challenges to meeting donor compliance standards, this approach enabled CSOs to build systems and skills that will play a crucial role during CSIF II and extend well beyond the life of the Fund.

“Mentoring was more useful than any hotel-based training we attended. It helped us build trust and practice what we learned.”

IVIDE

Sustained coaching, rather than one-off trainings, proved effective in embedding new practices. This helped organisations apply learning across projects and funding streams, leading to broader organisational strengthening.

However, several key areas for improvement emerged. Staff turnover was high throughout CSIF I, which affected the application of learning at an organisational level. In some cases, CSOs need to enhance their organisational culture, along with competitive salaries and career development



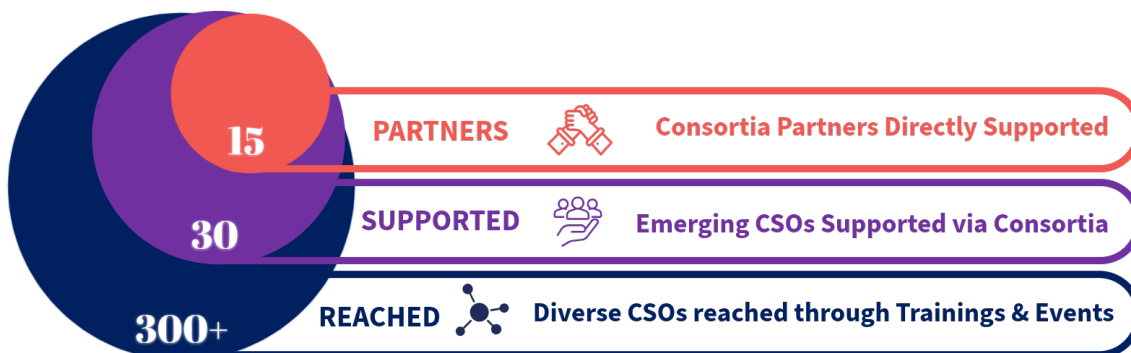
Rights-based and gender transformative project cycle management and MEL training (June 2023)

pathways, to encourage staff retention; they also need to cascade learning internally and increase institutional memory. CSOs can make better choices around internal culture and development when supported through flexible, core donor funding.

Organisations also asked for more in-house training for junior staff, deeper technical mentoring, leadership development, and continued support

for strategic planning and digital transformation. Standardised reporting tools and onboarding support for new staff were also recommended to ensure continuity and consistency.

AFD's support for new and emerging CSOs, which included them with more established consortia leads and enabled the longer-term training and accompaniment support, should be replicated by other funders to minimise risk.



Infographic showing the ripple effect of capacity strengthening under CSIF I

### Capacity building support enables new funding

At the start of CSIF, EIHR, MYLC and I4C were among the organisations that lacked functional financial management systems, financial or procurement policies, HR manuals, and limited programme and financial management capacity. Following CSIF's training and accompaniment, all three organisations have established robust financial systems and enhanced programme management practices. These improvements have boosted donor confidence, enabling the three organisations to collectively secure over USD 300,000 in new funding — demonstrating the powerful impact of sustained, targeted capacity development.

According to MYLC's Executive Director, Ato Amanuel Dibabe: *"The skills and expertise of the personnel have been much improved by this intervention. Thanks to AFD's specific capacity building methodologies emerging CSOs can execute projects successfully and might exhibit significant activities. And this is a model worth imitating."*

Click [here](#) for the full change story.



*'The role of CSOs in harnessing indigenous wisdom for peace' event by CSRC, Addis Ababa*

## 6. A nurturing environment for CSO learning and innovation

CSIF emphasised the importance of nurturing environments for CSOs, to apply learning, carry out activities, and to increase impact. Central to this is the role of innovation and creativity, with CSOs well positioned to enhance and amplify alternative approaches to bring about change, drawing on their communities and constituents, and their activist roots.

While it is difficult to say if a more nurturing environment exists for CSOs in Ethiopia given increasing restriction on civic space, CSIF provides insights for enabling learning and innovation in similar contexts.

### Innovation in conception

CSIF I demonstrated that innovation is not only possible but essential, especially in emerging or restricted contexts.

In its conception, CSIF responded to new legislation enabling CSOs to assemble and register, focusing on new and emerging CSOs. By bringing them into consortia with established CSOs and providing intensive financial and organisational accompaniment from the outset, AFD minimised risk and set the foundation for a nurturing environment at Fund level.

### Innovation and creativity as pillars of impact

From the outset consortia projects focused on innovation-based approaches. Partners introduced novel advocacy formats, explored using local wisdom, creative arts and informal safe spaces to discuss sensitive issues of mutual concern.

Examples of creative and innovative approaches include:

- Working through and strengthening community-based peacebuilding structures promoting indigenous wisdom in peacebuilding, and amplifying minority voices by I4C.
- Fireside Chats for journalists by CARD (see Chapter 2).
- 'Artivism' – activism through art used as an innovative advocacy approach on gender-based violence (GBV) and women's rights by Setaweet.
- Referral services responding to gaps in state provision, such as mobile and office based legal aid, by LHR, AE and MYLC (see Chapters 2 and 4) as well as onward referral to other services, e.g. safe houses for those affected by GBV.
- Digital activism and a digital platform to connect CSOs by DRSE-G (see change story in this chapter).

### A culture of learning, collaboration and experimentation

CSIF's focus on consortia working, the cross-Fund governance and learning spaces, and MEL approach enabled a culture of learning and experimentation.

The governance and learning structure brought peers together through training, workshops, and biannually to learn from each other. Participants were encouraged to share updates and, increasingly as the projects developed, examples of change and impact from their projects.

Quarterly learning and reflection spaces enabled more inter- and intra- consortia collaboration.

By bringing together CSOs of varying size and experience, CSIF created opportunities for newer organisations to strengthen their capacity while leveraging the systems and relationships of more established partners. This collective and supportive approach helped broaden engagement and impact across regions. For example, when the operating context became too restrictive for Setaweet's project in Oromia, they moved project location to Hawassa to be hosted and join up with MYLC's complementary work and leverage existing relations with relevant government offices to increase dialogue around GBV.

At project level, CSIF partners also built new networks and learning spaces for CSOs and groups they had supported, such as CSRC's CSOs network in Adama.

### Building nurturing environments



CSIF I showed that innovation and creativity must be nurtured intentionally in the civil society sector, providing lessons that can be built on by CSIF II and similar initiatives.

The examples and change stories, highlighting innovative approaches at project level, have in many cases led to productive and stronger relationships with regional governments and partners, enabling CSOs to increase their impact.

While nurturing environments for civil society at national level have been more challenging, there are positive signs for the future. With support from AFD, CSIF CSOs and government have met and are planning a retreat to showcase impact, how this benefits Ethiopian society, and to build relationships.

CSOs reflected on broader opportunities to leverage the existing government partnerships through AFD, other international actors, and among national level dialogue spaces. Through effective collaboration and partnerships, nurturing environments can be built.

Programme flexibility should be preserved to allow adaptive innovation.

Further learning relates to identifying opportunities and planning for scaling successful pilot innovations, providing catalytic funding for arts-based, multimedia, and tech-enabled advocacy, and building platforms to share innovations across the CSO ecosystem.

### Innovation, mindset and trust

A key take-away from Ameha Mekonnen (Director of LHR) is that for innovation to take place, there needs to be dedicated effort and commitment to innovative mindset and trust from donors:

“One learning area that may be derived from CSIF I is that designing and implementing innovative projects requires multifarious efforts including creative advocacy mechanisms and engagement of relevant stakeholders. This is because innovation by itself requires creative and new ways of approaching problems which are different from the usual ones. Secondly, innovation always requires some level of trust in front of stakeholders and a continuous promotion of the change theory is important to remedy the deficit in trust.”

Henok Teshome (Director of CSRC) reflected that in order to build nurturing environments digital connectivity and knowledge sharing matters:

“One of the strongest lessons from CSIF I is the power of digital platforms, like the DERSHA network, to overcome isolation and fragmentation among emerging CSOs. Many local actors operate with limited peer support, DERSHA created a trusted, practical space to share tools, training, and collaboration opportunities. This digital backbone will be scaled in CSIF II with new features like the donor directory, crowdfunding, and prompt libraries, making it a cornerstone for sustained innovation.”

### DERSHA: Promoting CSO pluralism, networking, and visibility virtually

DRSE-G has launched [DERSHA](#), an online platform aimed at enhancing the visibility and networking capabilities of CSOs in Ethiopia. This initiative aims to facilitate access to information and accountability among civil society, fostering collaborative efforts for advocacy. With 49 CSOs registered to date, DERSHA exemplifies the potential for digital tools to empower and connect diverse actors in the civic space. The platform has been well received by partners so far and is deemed informative and valuable for expanding work and collaboration as clearly articulated by various signees in the full change story.

Click [here](#) for the full change story.

# 7. Increased dialogue and advocacy on peace, democracy and human rights

Increasing dialogue between civil society and government at national, regional, and local levels has been a core aim of CSIF. Constructive engagement is essential for advancing human rights, peace, and democracy—and serves as a marker of civil society’s impact, resilience, and the openness of civic space supported by enabling legislation. As explored in this digest, it is also essential for nurturing an innovative and vibrant civil society.

## A challenging context we can learn from

CSIF started soon after the Ethiopian government’s CSO proclamation of 2019, that expanded CSOs’ freedom to associate and eased previous restrictions on the formation and operation of CSOs.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Ethiopia’s security situation has deteriorated, marked by ongoing conflict, inter-ethnic tension and violence. In the context of such ongoing conflict and political polarisation, civic space has also narrowed, constraining CSOs’ ability to operate effectively. Between December 2024 and March 2025, the leads of two of the three CSIF consortia were suspended by government. Yet, despite these challenges, important gains in civil society–government dialogue were achieved, particularly in local administrations at district and community levels, offering valuable insights into operating in restricted civic spaces.

## Enabling voice and agency that reflects community demographics and builds trust



CSOs can use their strong community connections, contextual knowledge, and influence to advocate for more inclusive and representative dialogue on a wide range of issues affecting their lives. This includes broadening participation in existing spaces to better reflect local demographics. For example, I4C identified a gap in local dialogue structures and established/strengthened inter-communal peace committees to enable engagement between religious groups and the state. These have played a meaningful role in conflict resolution and mitigation (see change story in this chapter).

In other contexts, EIHR recognised that dialogue platforms were not sufficiently inclusive and



*Intercommunal discussion hosted by I4C, Arsi Negele*

successfully lobbied government to ensure more representative participation in the Ethiopian National Dialogue Process, helping bring marginalised voices to the fore.

CSOs also played a key role in creating new platforms to connect communities and state actors where formal spaces were lacking. EIHR’s Koree Birmadummaa committees created safe environments for policy actors, civilians, and students to discuss rights issues and rebuild trust. By building on existing structures, such as Parent-Teacher-Student Associations, these committees increased local ownership and sustainability. Based in Lega Tafo and Shaggar sub-cities on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, they were praised by local police for pursuing greater trust and cooperation in community-police engagement (see change story in Chapter 8).

## Equipping civil society and government actors to engage in dialogue and enable communities

CSIF supported dialogue not only by creating spaces, but by equipping key actors, across both civil society and government, with the skills, tools, and understanding needed to engage constructively. A key barrier to meaningful dialogue is the inaccessibility of policy and legislation, which are often highly technical and not available in the various local languages. To address this, ELA translated a range of legal policies into local languages, helping communities better understand the laws that affect them.

<sup>1</sup> Proclamation No. 1113/2019 Organisations of Civil Society Proclamation

Another key contribution was the provision of technical expertise, capacity building, and the formalisation of collaborative arrangements. One notable example was the provision of legal aid support in police stations and through mobile legal clinics in Adama and Hawassa—an innovative approach that addressed a critical gap in services (see change story in Chapter 4). This work took a holistic approach, recognising that effective support for detainees requires the involvement of multiple actors across the justice system. CSIF CSOs built partnerships with both state and civil society actors, strengthened relationships with police and justice departments, trained paralegals, police, and officials, and established clear roles and responsibilities within legal aid clinics. At its core, the initiative centred on effective dialogue and practical collaboration:

“The project has enhanced our police’s awareness of human rights, improved their cooperation with prosecutors, and supported harmonisation in our legal system.”

Degife Bayato  
Head of Sidama District Justice Office

## Leverage and learning through collaboration

Participants noted that as CSOs have grown stronger through capacity support and as consortia have become more established, there is increasing potential to scale up national-level advocacy through joint initiatives and strategic partnerships. Some leading CSOs linked to CSIF have already

taken steps in this direction, including a joint call for peace with 34 other CSOs in 2022 and 2023.<sup>2</sup>

This learning was also articulated as hope and expectation for CSIF II, Moges Demissie (Director of CARD) reflected that with regards to strategic policy influence we are able:

“To move beyond ad hoc advocacy by embedding long-term engagement strategies with key governmental and civic institutions, amplifying civil society voices at both federal and regional levels”.

Participants also emphasised the role of the international community in leveraging influence and supporting constructive engagement. Organisations like AFD, which hold other programme and institutional relationships with government, were seen as valuable allies. AFD, in collaboration with CSO leads, played a critical role in advocating for the lifting of CSO suspensions and helping to re-open dialogue. Their relationship with ACSO has contributed to induction meetings to introduce CSIF II partners and projects, and the planning of a joint retreat.

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<sup>2</sup> [2016 New Year's Call for Peace](#) (2023)

## We call it peace: How a project impacted the peace building processes

Enabling spaces for dialogue and the pursuit of peace are closely linked. I4C trained local facilitators and held 68 dialogue sessions involving over 2,000 participants across 10 districts in Oromia region. These sessions identified key conflict drivers and opened space for honest communication, building trust and mutual understanding among diverse communities. The dialogues resulted in 12 peace committees in kebeles (local administrative units) being established/strengthened, thereby bringing together community members and government representatives.

Hamid Uke, Head of Administration and Security in Arsi Negelle, noted: *“There has been great mistrust among our 39 ethnic communities. Through inclusive, community-owned dialogue and strengthened peace committees, the project has been promoting peaceful co-existence.”* His office is now encouraging all kebeles in the district to replicate the model, based on the clear changes already observed.

Click [here](#) for the full change story.



Training for incarcerated women at Kality prison delivered by Elibat Charitable Organisation, August 2024

## 8. Thoughts for the future

CSIF I was launched in response to the need to revitalise and expand civic space in Ethiopia. It began shortly after the Organisations of Civil Society Proclamation of 2019, enabling CSO formation, operation, and greater freedom of association. Since 2021 CSIF has directly and indirectly supported hundreds of CSOs, youth groups, peace committees and others, to register, network, undertake diverse activities across the country.

During the last three years, Ethiopia's context has shifted with violent conflicts, polarised politics and government action against armed groups. CSOs operate in increasingly challenging environments, negotiating security risks, fluctuating inflation, and shrinking civic space. Despite the 2022 peace agreement, the outlook for civil society remains challenging and uncertain, with no sign of restrictions easing. Yet, as the learning digest highlights, CSIF activities are nonetheless contributing to the advancement of human rights, media freedom, and gender equality. There are examples of new and emerging CSOs playing their democratic and human rights roles more effectively; of enhanced culture of dialogue and advocacy with a range of stakeholders on issues that matter to citizens; and increased and better representation of marginalised groups with a stronger role and voice. Taken together all the initiatives add up to significant impact and positive outcomes for civil society in Ethiopia.

The following reflections drawn from across CSIF can support other civil society programmes operating in dynamic contexts:

### **Harnessing civil society passion and commitment**

Recognition must go to the 15 CSOs and partners for their quality work in challenging circumstances. This speaks to the enduring spirit and commitment that is at the heart of civil society in Ethiopia. CSIF shows that appropriate investment in CSOs and the civil society support ecosystem can lead to positive change. Programmes must enable locally determined and driven approaches that respond to the nuances and needs of communities that CSOs serve.

### **Flexibility and adaptability in dynamic external contexts**

Contexts aren't static and neither should programme conditions and systems be. Enabling flexibility and adaptability at programme and Fund level is essential for project continuity amid rapidly changing circumstances. In CSIF, projects relocated, merged with others, and were supported by budgets that could flex. Yet systems weren't perfect; loosening funding and disbursement restrictions further and allowing an unrestricted percentage of core funding, could increase impact.



## Supporting conflict sensitive approaches and reducing risk

Ethiopia's dynamic context underscored the growing importance of conflict sensitivity and proactive risk management. CSOs faced legal, political and reputational risks that required careful navigation and support. Conflict sensitive approaches should be cross-cutting, drawing on CSOs' contextual knowledge and best practice in mitigation.



## Collective approaches, with a legal grounding, can navigate challenging civil society contexts

The suspensions of two of the three consortia lead CSOs essentially halted all consortia operations from December 2024 to March 2025. Legal experts advised what could legally take place that was sensitive to potential individual and organisational security issues.

- **Strategic engagement as part of a longer-term response is essential:** International donors and partners can leverage connections and engage relevant government offices in constructive dialogue. This can be in tandem with civil society's own dialogue and lobbying efforts.
- **Adapting and continuing learning and change stories** as part of ongoing advocacy efforts can help raise awareness of the benefits of such activities to society.
- **Immediate operational measures, grounded in legal realities, can enable short term solutions and delivery:** in the Ethiopian context, restrictions are placed on organisations, not individuals. If not associating with the operation and project of suspended CSOs, individuals can take up short term contracts to support the Fund and other partners, for example through organisational development support. Core funding dispersed to all CSOs can avoid funding freezes.



## Enabling organisational development and learning while maintaining activism and innovation

It is important to balance essential organisational systems development with the space to learn and maintain the activist, creative roots that so many CSOs have. CSOs can be overwhelmed with too much training, reporting, and systems. CSIF's approach, that balanced in-person training with ongoing accompaniment and targeted support proved popular with CSOs.



## Increasing impact through consortia

Consortia bring benefits in delivery, reach, peer support and learning. Ultimately consortia can increase collective impact as CSIF has shown. They can also enable newer CSOs with weaker systems to share risk and benefit from peer learning and coordination. AFD took a strategic risk by funding emerging CSOs, many of whom had weak organisational systems. Yet, this has paid off as almost all CSOs showed increases in their organisational capacity, contributing to CSIF's collective impact. Further learning points to broader success of smaller consortia, that can be easier for the lead consortia to manage. Rotating leads periodically can reduce the burden of management and leadership responsibilities.



## Responding to common organisational development needs across CSOs

CSIF showed common areas of need across CSOs, some of which remain enduring challenges. The main challenge internally for CSOs throughout CSIF was staff retention. Positive organisational culture and staff wellbeing are key facets of leadership. CSOs should also build approaches to ensure institutional, rather than individual, memory to strengthen internal learning and application.

## Fostering the spirit of trust and collaboration among police and the public

This story focuses on EIHR's efforts to rebuild trust between police and the community in areas affected by violence. Through the "Koree Birmadummaa" social committee, community members engage in dialogue to address grievances and promote understanding, particularly among youth. These dialogues have fostered a sense of safety and cooperation, highlighting the importance of open communication in conflict resolution. The platform has been applauded for pursuing greater trust and cooperation in community-police engagement in the hopes of a better tomorrow – as reflected by a veteran police officer participating in the initiative.

Click [here](#) for the full change story.



Organisational strengthening with Mizan Young Lawyers Center

### **Gender equality and social inclusion need to be mainstreamed**

Although GESI was integrated into CSIF through capacity development and inclusive programming practices, deeper structural challenges persist. Many CSOs lacked the resources, systems, and frameworks to address entrenched gender norms or intersectional exclusion. As explained in Chapter 5, future civil society programmes should embed GESI accountability at both Fund and partner levels, provide flexible budgets for inclusion initiatives and adaptations, and promote partnerships for holistic service delivery and community referrals. Guidance and best practice for CSOs can be developed and shared.

### **Innovation and creativity can be pillars of impact**

Innovation and creativity must be nurtured intentionally, supporting conditions to harness civil

society's immense creativity and social capital. Flexibility is essential to enable innovation. Pilot innovation initiatives can be replicated and scaled. Core and catalytic funding can be provided for arts-based, multimedia and tech-enabled advocacy to develop and share learning and resources.

### **The benefits of equitable partnerships extend to Fund-level management**

Fund-level management and technical support brought together Ethiopian-based AGAR and INTRAC, a global CSO. Being clear about roles, areas of complementarity and value-added aspects were enabling factors for CSIF delivery and learning around equitable approaches that shared power and supported localisation (see following page).

## **Preparing the next generations of CSO leadership**

This story highlights how the Emerging Civil Society Leaders Fellowship, implemented by CSRC under CSIF, supported young people, primarily women, from three Ethiopian universities to build relevant skills, gain exposure to the sector, and take steps toward meaningful careers in civil society. Fellows benefited from targeted training, mentoring, and formal placements with CSIF partner organisations, helping them grow professionally and better understand Ethiopia's civic landscape. The story also reflects strong collaboration among partners, with organisations such as MYLC, EHRDC and Setawet hosting fellows and contributing to a shared investment in the next generation of CSO leadership. One of the fellows is Misganaw, who reflected: *"I was pleased to participate in two award-winning projects at MYLC that were successful. I am now more equipped and ready to face obstacles in the real world because of the (fellowship) opportunity"*, Misganaw is currently engaged as a part-time project officer at Setawet.

Click [here](#) for the full change story.

## Equitable partnership at the heart of CSIF

Technical support and management coordination for CSIF was provided by AGAR and INTRAC. This afterword reflects on effort to build equitable partnership between national and international organisations, and the conditions for this.

While the contract lead for administrative purposes was INTRAC, equal partnership was enshrined in the consortium agreement. This outlined each partner's strengths, complementarity and responsibility, and was periodically reviewed between them.

The partnership had been built in previous civil society strengthening programmes where trust had been established. Crucially, this agreement on complementary roles and a trusting relationship added value and enabled a more locally-led approach. For example, international expertise was brought in only if it couldn't be sourced in Ethiopia. In such cases, international consultants were paired with national peers to add contextual nuance and mutual learning.

The partnership placed clear and equal emphasis on contextual knowledge and experience alongside technical skills, and there was a mutual requirement for sense checking and quality assuring each other's work as part of a shared sense of accountability.



*CSIF II launch and strategic meeting, April 2025, Addis Ababa*

Donor:



PMC:



Partners:



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