

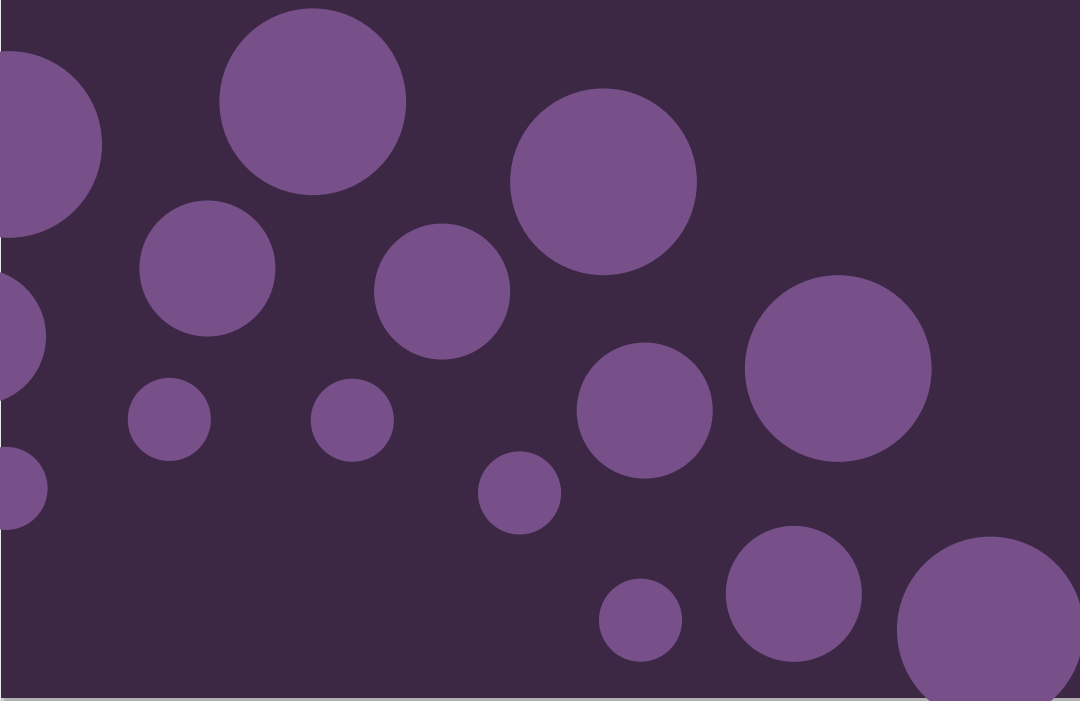
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**High-level landscape  
analysis of civil society  
support ecosystems:  
Colombia**



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Soledad Granada-Castañeda  
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# High level landscape analysis of civil society support infrastructure in Colombia

## Executive summary

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the complex support ecosystem for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Colombia. Armed conflict spanning over six decades, persistent socioeconomic and cultural inequalities, ongoing political violence, and pressing environmental challenges create a critical need for a robust and vibrant civil society. CSOs play a multifaceted and essential role in defending human rights, promoting local and territorial development, fostering peacebuilding initiatives, protecting the environment and advocating for sustainable practices, and influencing public policies at local, regional, and national levels promoting self-determination of territories, cultural and economic rights and reproductive rights. They act as crucial bridges between communities, the state, and other actors, contributing to social cohesion, democratic participation, and the construction of a more just and equitable society.

CSOs in Colombia face numerous obstacles that significantly limit their capacity for action, hinder their organizational development, and threaten their long-term sustainability. These challenges include the persistent difficulty in accessing stable and diversified funding sources, which forces many organizations to rely on short-term project-based funding from international cooperation. This creates instability and a lack of specialized technical and managerial capacities in critical areas such as financial management, project formulation and management. Proposal writing, budgeting, implementation and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are the most challenging factors when it comes to fundraising. As a consequence, strategic communication to effectively reach target audiences and influence public discourse are not assertive, and small organizations have to rely on others to voice them to have national and international visibility. These difficulties result from (and exacerbate) internal conflicts, for which CSOs don't have enough mechanisms for internal management to address internal disputes, psychosocial support to address burn-out syndromes in activists and leaders, which makes it very hard for them to maintain organizational cohesion and transparency, as trust is scarce.

Overall organizational development, including strategic planning, governance, and human resources management, limits their ability to effectively manage resources and demonstrate impact. Navigating a diverse yet fragmented support ecosystem, marked by power asymmetries between different actors, a lack of effective coordination mechanisms, and unequal access to information and resources, leaves many smaller and grassroots organizations marginalized. The ongoing threat of political violence, stigmatization, and persecution, especially for those organizations working on sensitive issues such as human rights, land rights, and environmental protection in territories affected by all sources of armed conflict, creates a climate of fear and self-censorship.

This report identifies the main needs of CSOs, provides a detailed analysis of the existing support offer from various actors, their traits and channels of distribution. Additionally, it presents recommendations for good practices to strengthen this ecosystem, enhance the effectiveness of the

support provided, and contribute to a better and more fair and sustainable development of CSOs in Colombia.

## 1. Summary of target audience and scoping/sampling strategy

This report is informed by research that engaged a diverse range of stakeholders within the Colombian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) ecosystem to develop a comprehensive understanding of their needs and the dynamics of the support landscape. The consultant's own experience as an activist-researcher in Colombia has allowed her to know many CSOs of different kinds, in particular grassroots organizations in different regions of the country. There was a particular interest of addressing CSOs in sectors such as the environment-energy space, as well as organizations which aggregate processes and have national to international scope, to map a high-level landscape. The research targeted key actors from various segments of the ecosystem, including CSOs Representatives at all grassroots, regional, national and international levels, International Donors and Cooperation Agencies, Government Officials, and Local Consultants. The organizations and individuals included in the sample cover most of the geographical regions of the country Colombia is a big country in which the rural areas are not accessible, however, many organizations keep a regional approach networking to cluster grassroots organizations and being able to support local processes. There are many CSOs who have grassroots work, but operate from Bogotá, given the characteristics of the professional consultants' market.

The data collection methods employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data collection techniques to gather rich and nuanced information, given the consultant's knowledge from within the CSOs spectrum. A total of 36 in-depth interviews and a focus group were conducted with key informants representing the stakeholder groups outlined above<sup>1</sup>. These interviews allowed for detailed exploration of individual experiences, perspectives, and insights related to CSOs needs, the support ecosystem, and the challenges and opportunities for organizational development. One focus group was conducted with representatives from various types of CSOs and government representatives working with CSOs. This facilitated a dynamic group discussion, allowing participants to dialogue and explore shared challenges and perspectives. This combined approach allowed for both in-depth individual insights and a broader understanding of shared experiences and perspectives within the CSOs' ecosystem.

## 2. "Setting the scene": CSOs' needs, development, and access to support

Since the 1991 Constitution, there has been a widening and strengthening of democratic participation rights. The peace processes, and in particular the 2016 peace agreement, have further

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<sup>1</sup> From sample 28 were interviewed as organizations and 12 as individuals. From the organizations 50% (20) have a national scope, 17.5% (7) international, 17.5% regional and 15% grassroots. Also, 40% (16) of the interviewees are founders and/or CEO or former CEO (1) of their organizations; 30% (12) have positions of responsibility over projects in their organizations, such as coordinators and researchers, 25% (10) are independent consultants or advisors, from which 2 are currently occupying public positions, however spoke as independent, 2 work internationally and 1 at the grassroots level; finally, 5% of the interviewees are openly part of government institutions, one national and another international. In the 37 interviews and the focus group a total of 22 women and 21 men participated. The geographical distribution of the addressed organizations and individuals covered wide parts of the country, as well as the most conflict affected ones, however, most of them 65% (26) are located in Bogotá D.C.,

propelled agendas addressing society's most fundamental needs for conflict resolution, creating new opportunities and challenges for CSOs operating within this evolving political landscape, from “fighting against” to “working for”, thus, CSOs engage in a more purposeful course of action and are more willing to engage with state institutions.

Social networks, in particular Facebook and WhatsApp, but also Telegram and Signal for more sensitive security issues, have been key in the articulation of CSOs and to achieve international visibility, especially during critical moments like the national strike of 2021, when strong censorship was experienced. However, the digital divide remains a significant challenge, particularly between urban and rural areas where access to electricity and internet connectivity is often scarce.

While macroeconomic indicators show a decrease in unemployment in Colombia (according to DANE, the unemployment rate in November 2024 was 8.2%, 0.8 percentage points lower than in November 2023), reflecting a positive trend over the past few years, 2025 will mark the year of the highest rise in the minimum salary. Nevertheless, the Colombian economy remains largely informal, In June 2024, the informal labour rate stood at 56% (DANE, 2024<sup>2</sup>). This high level of informality means that a significant portion of the population lives day-to-day, constantly seeking means for survival. Furthermore, Colombia continues to be one of the most unequal countries in the Americas in terms of income and land distribution, with an income and wealth Gini index of 0.55 (World Bank, N.D.<sup>3</sup>) and 0.89 for the land Gini coefficient within the agricultural frontier (IGAC, 2024<sup>4</sup>). A high incidence of monetary poverty persists, with 33% in urban areas and 41.2% in rural (DANE, 2024<sup>5</sup>). This context of economic precariousness has a direct impact on most grassroots CSOs and independent consultants, as unemployment, poverty and hunger strikes their lives and households. Professional workers strive with short term contracts, without social security; rural organizations depend on having stable weather conditions to crop their own food and some remnant for selling informally, facing very high transportation costs; gas prices continuously increase making all goods more expensive, while salaries don't rise so rapidly<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, two factors are key to understand the lack of funding of CSOs in Colombia in recent years, and their need to motivate national philanthropists to step forward in financing them. First is the signing of the peace agreement in 2016 contributed to the inclusion of Colombia as a middle-income country in the OECD. Secondly, the most recent global priorities in Ukraine and Gaza have diverted humanitarian and development funds.

Currently, socio-environmental conflicts proliferate, partly related to legal extractive activities, and partly the new wave of land grabbing and deforestation by armed groups at the service of Colombian and Mexican *narcos*. This exacerbates, the issue of land distribution and use, which has been the main root of Colombian conflict. This has led to a re-accommodation of remaining armed groups and the increase of urban violence. This has impacted the CSOs, in particular those working on environmental rights, and is making it generally more complex and difficult to reduce violence. In 2023 alone, there were 79 documented murders of land and environmental defenders, which is the highest in the world followed by Brazil with 25.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/mercado-laboral/empleo-y-desempleo>

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=CO>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.igac.gov.co/sites/default/files/2024-04/FDPRC\\_Territorios\\_Dig.pdf](https://www.igac.gov.co/sites/default/files/2024-04/FDPRC_Territorios_Dig.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/pobreza-y-condiciones-de-vida/pobreza-monetaria>

<sup>6</sup> <https://cedetrabajo.org/pobreza-y-desigualdad-y-la-politica-social-de-petro/>

The climate crisis in Colombia is not a priority according to many interviewees. The policy for energy transition is seen as a copy of the European degrowth discourse, without taking into account that Colombia is not a net pollutant. The most serious environmental problem is the deforestation related to livestock farming, agro-industrial monocultures and illicit crops, mainly coca. The proposed changes to the energy matrix therefore do not correspond to the real needs of society, but rather to a way of promoting green projects and raising funds in line with climate change as a fashionable topic in cooperation.

### CSOs' needs

CSOs in Colombia face a complex and multidimensional set of challenges. A primary concern is access to stable and diversified funding. Many organizations rely heavily on short-term, project-based funding, often from international donors. For the smaller grassroots initiatives (often rural) this means also depending on the intermediation of middle range or national NGOs). This creates instability and hinders long-term planning. This dependence on external funding can also lead to a situation where organizations prioritize securing funds over their core mission. Access to public funds is also often difficult due to unattainable requirements, bureaucratic processes, lack of transparency, and competition with larger entities<sup>7</sup>. As one representative of a grassroots organization stated, "navigating the government's procurement system is like a maze. We simply don't have the resources or expertise to compete with big consulting firms" (CSO).

CSOs also identify a critical need for capacity building in various areas. These include financial management, project management (including proposal writing, budget planning, as well as project implementation and M&E), strategic communication, internal conflict resolution, and overall organizational development<sup>8</sup>.

Inequalities are also reflected in the distribution of resources and support among the diversity of CSOs, the most notable variation in needs is between grassroots CSOs and larger NGOs, in particular those of peasants without land in the rural areas and community urban organizations are the ones who need more support for developing. Nevertheless, in all regions the problems faced by CSOs are similar.

Another recurring theme is the need for recognition and legitimization of local and ancestral knowledge, particularly among Indigenous and Afro-descendant organizations. As one representative of an Indigenous organization explained, the traditional knowledge is essential for

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<sup>7</sup> These are often firms specialized in bidding with the State, without specific missions or social theories, other than professional expertise and the capital that ensures winning the bids.

<sup>8</sup> This is the acquisition of soft skills for fundraising, such as networking, political incidence, communications managements. The lack of professional personal, especially in rural areas hinders their negotiation opportunities as well with intermediary NGOs. The lack of knowledge in using computers and illiteracy itself are strong obstacles for many organized communities and leaders. Further, the apathy of younger people in supporting elders in CSOs is weakening processes and neglecting the generational transition. In this sense ethnic organizations such as indigenous and NARP are stronger, as they have been able to build a legacy and own cultural education and opportunities to engage future generations in the "struggle". Particularly in the department of Cauca and in the area of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The NASA and the Tairona are one of the stronger communities and more visible in political terms, they organization is big and holds legitimacy in their territories towards citizens and the State. NARP (Black) communities hold legitimacy in territories, but hold complex conflicts for the access to land, on top of structural racism, which Indigenous had more or less granted since 1991 constitution. Peasant organizations have achieved a milestone with the recognition of their cultural identity and the possibility to build collective property territories.

sustainable development in territories, but is often dismissed by external actors who prioritize Western scientific approaches. One interviewee described a tendency to believe that what comes from outside is better than what is local. This relates to funding, due to the conditionality on agendas, activities and management of international funds. This also expressed the need for safeguarding policies in line with decolonizing power relations in cooperation and solidarity in general. Also, it comes as part of the trust building process, in which those who can access funds and donors should acknowledge the fact that people are doing what they know is best for them and their communities.

Finally, competition for resources among CSOs, often exacerbated by funding scarcity, creates tensions and can hinder collaboration. As one interviewee noted, "We're all competing for the same limited pool of funds, which makes it difficult to collaborate and share resources" (CSO). Another challenge faced by CSOs, particularly grassroots organizations, is demonstrating their impact. This highlights the need for capacity building in M&E.

Interviewees expressed the importance of sharing experiences of the same challenges. For these exchanges to be more effective, improving M&E is necessary within smaller CSO by systematizing experiences, creating databases, and including the use of digital tools to showcase the work accumulated over decades.

### Current state of CSOs development

CSOs in Colombia employ diverse strategies to foster their growth and impact. A prevalent approach is project-based funding, which, while providing necessary resources, can also introduce administrative complexities and potentially divert organizations from their core missions. As one interviewee described this as, "challenge that organizations constantly face", stating "it is increasingly difficult to find funding sources that allow organizations to work freely, [...] and that do not involve them in conflicts of interest..." (CSO).

Some CSOs prioritize building financial sustainability through diversifying their income streams and exploring alternative funding models. This often involves developing social enterprises, providing fee-for-service programs, or establishing endowments. The 2021 national strike motivated citizens and philanthropists locally to fund and support social movement activities, leading to the emergence of communitarian philanthropy through territorial foundations<sup>9</sup>. While these foundations can play a valuable role, concerns have been raised about the potential for depoliticization of CSOs actions. Instead, some foundations may prioritize more localized, service-oriented activities. The other side is that CSOs local action is funded by local economic interest groups which also capitalize this into electoral processes.

Networking and building alliances are a crucial development strategy for CSOs. They can share resources, knowledge, and experiences, and strengthen their advocacy capacity. The mobilization for the 2016 peace agreement showcased the convergence of diverse segments of the social movement. This demonstrated a heightened level of articulation within the social movement, and became even more evident in the 2020 protests sparked by mobility restrictions and food insecurity during the pandemic, and which foreshadowed the national strikes of 2019 and 2021. While these

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.territoriacolombia.org/nosotros>

mobilizations took place both in the streets and through legal channels with legal assistance and strategic litigation, technology, particularly social networks, played a crucial role in amplifying their reach and impact, and voicing human rights violations out in the international arenas, gaining attention from international organs such as the UN Secretary General, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and the European Parliament, as well as the neighbouring states. Many CSOs have turned to the use of social networks and digital tools in general to achieve visibility and to gain support for political incidence.

Building trust and strong relationships with grassroots organizations and communities is a crucial aspect of CSOs' development, particularly for larger NGOs and international organizations seeking to operate effectively at the local level. This requires a long-term commitment to building genuine partnerships, respecting local knowledge and self-determination, and avoiding top-down approaches that can undermine local ownership and agency. As one representative from a grassroots organization emphasized, it is important that external actors don't work with pre-conceived notions about what local communities need. They need to listen and understand the context. Concerns have been raised about instances where smaller CSOs are instrumentalized by larger organizations primarily to access funding. This highlights the importance of capacity building within smaller CSOs to ensure their genuine involvement and benefit from collaborations.

The influence of external trends and donor priorities on the support landscape can also affect CSOs' development. Funding priorities can shift rapidly in response to global events or emerging development agendas, potentially leaving CSOs working on less "fashionable" or less prioritized issues without adequate support. This trend-driven approach can incentivize organizations to adapt their missions to align with current donor interests, potentially diverting them from their core objectives.

This is the case of the border-project from Civil Rights Defenders (CDR), a Swedish NGO which is turning their work in Colombia as a hub of cooperation among CSOs of the region (further information of this example can be found on annex 1 about the case study). Finally, universities can play a key role in supporting CSOs development through training, research, and technical assistance. As one academic pointed out, "Universities can provide valuable expertise and support to CSOs, helping them to strengthen their organizational capacities and improve their impact" (academic).

### Access to support

Several key external trends and factors significantly influence CSOs in Colombia and their ability to access support for organizational development. One challenge is the unequal distribution of resources and support, with smaller and less established CSOs, particularly those located in rural and isolated areas, facing considerable barriers. This disparity is often attributed to limited access to information about funding opportunities, complex application processes requiring specialized technical skills, and a lack of established networks and connections to relevant actors within the support ecosystem. As an independent consultant points out, these requirements can be particularly burdensome: "Sometimes you see cooperation calls, but they are very complex to apply to..." (Independent Consultant).

The emphasis on funding when asking for support emerges as the available support to which more organizations can access comes as research and analysis, accompaniment (mostly for security and political incidence)<sup>10</sup>. However, training and technical assistance is not relevant when there are no resources to materialize action. Capacity building, even in terms of having a physical space and equipment, comes from funding; as well as the urgent need for livelihoods and productive projects. Thus, the fluctuating trends and priorities create instability and uncertainty for CSOs. As one interviewee explained: It's difficult to plan long-term when the funding landscape is so unpredictable (CSO). The competitive nature of the funding landscape, where CSOs compete with each other and with larger international organizations for limited resources, creates additional challenges, for example UNDP is competing locally with NGO for public resources. This competition can strain relationships and discourage collaboration.

Concerns have also been raised about potential conflicts of interest and undue influence from certain donors, particularly foundations linked to extractive industries or other sectors with potentially negative impacts. As one interviewee stated, "We don't want to compromise our integrity or be seen as promoting the interests of companies that are harming the environment" (Re-grantor). The recent news on the suspension of USAID<sup>11</sup> support that have lasted for years is a reminder of the need to look for more reliable donors, emphasizing the importance of fostering national philanthropy and CSOs which can grow autonomously.

Organizational development opportunities are scarce for the smaller CSOs and in particular those based in remote areas; repetitive workshops addressing the same topics are frequently offered. The most relevant support for grassroots organizations is technical assistance and trainings for agriculture. The reliance on informal communication channels, such as WhatsApp groups, for disseminating information can further exacerbate this unequal access, excluding organizations with limited access to technology. There is an emphasis of some CSOs, in particular the more professionalized ones, to grow and to be part of a "market". It is important to make a distinction between financial growth and development.

### 3. The ecosystem of support

#### Existing support, accessibility and effectiveness

The way in which Colombia CSOs organize tends to be in regional clusters and networks, which at the same time articulate with national and international organizations, either trying to have legal and political impact and for funding. One example is CIMA, which brings together different rurally rooted processes under the umbrella of the campesino identity based on agricultural vocation in the south-west region; or the case of the Juntanza Anticolonial Muyquytá based in Bogotá, which attempts to support grassroots processes in different parts of the country focused on indigenous

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<sup>10</sup> From the interviewed consultants and organizations 45% (18) offer research and analysis, from those 4 of them, 20%, also support CSOs for political incidence, other 20% with technical assistance. The rest offer support in terms of general accompaniment, visibility, legal and logistical assistance and few of them for capacity building.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/31/which-countries-will-trumps-foreign-aid-suspension-hurt-most>

based organizations and with a nuance of entrepreneurship. However, most of these initiatives work on a voluntary basis<sup>12</sup>.

There are mixed perceptions on how to define whether or not there is in Colombia a coherent ecosystem of support for CSOs. There is a strong complex structure of self-organization of civil society<sup>13</sup>, which is astonishing in such an unequal society and in the context of civil war. Mario Roset from Civic House argues that Colombia has a great potential for developing further its civil society if it is possible to foster local private resources.

The support landscape for CSOs in Colombia is diverse, encompassing a range of actors and types of support. These include financial assistance, technical assistance, legal assistance, psychosocial accompaniment, networking opportunities, advocacy support, and access to information, research and analysis for political incidence. Providers of support include international and national NGOs, cooperation agencies (bilateral and multilateral), government agencies, corporate foundations, independent consultants, and other more spontaneous forms of organizing solidarity.

While the current government's efforts to involve CSOs in policy development are generally viewed positively, the overall support landscape is often described as dispersed and fragmented, lacking clear strategic direction or effective coordination mechanisms. Colombia has kept a relatively open system of opportunities of organization and participation in comparison to the regional context. This lack of coordination can lead to duplication of efforts, inefficient use of resources, and a lack of focus on achieving demonstrable impact. The situation of local consultants, who play a crucial role in providing technical assistance and organizational development support to CSOs, is also a concern. Many local consultants face precarious working conditions, limited access to professional development opportunities, and insufficient recognition.

However, the supply of support does not always effectively meet the diverse needs of CSOs. Several key gaps and **challenges** persist:

- **Accessibility:** Unequal access to information and resources remains a significant challenge, particularly for smaller, rural CSOs. Complex application processes, language barriers, and limited technological access can exclude many organizations.

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<sup>12</sup> Other organizations like Civil Rights Defenders, Christian Aid and the Coordinación Colombia-Europa-Estados Unidos, organize in such manner that help ensemble grassroots organizations with bigger national NGO and enable international incidence processed.

<sup>13</sup> The long internal armed conflict in Colombia, and the precarious institutional structure explained by a differentiated presence of the state (in which the State has formed and expanded around economic enclaves), has left most of the country in hands of armed groups disputing the control of territories. This phenomenon has also allowed people in the midst of a civil war to choose neutrality and self-organization of lives, economy and politics with a strong tradition of nonviolent action. Workers unions are the biggest actors of CSOs ecosystem, together with peasants and student movements. Also, the ancestral indigenous resistance movement has closely accompanied CSOs development, especially as a moral compass and as a rector for nonviolent action. However, it has been peacebuilding and the tireless effort of women organizations (most of them victims of the war), which has agglutinated a very strong social movement in Colombia.

See:

- Garcia Duran S.J., M. (2003). *Movimiento por la paz en Colombia. 1978-2003*. (CINEP). CINEP. [https://issuu.com/cinepppp/docs/completo\\_movimiento\\_por\\_la\\_paz\\_colombia](https://issuu.com/cinepppp/docs/completo_movimiento_por_la_paz_colombia)
- González, Fernán E. 2003. "¿Colapso Parcial O Presencia Diferenciada Del Estado En Colombia?: Una Mirada Desde La Historia". *Colombia Internacional*, no. 58 (December): 124-58. <https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiant58.2003.05>.
- Prieto Sanabria, Juan Diego; Leiteritz, Ralf; Nasi, Carlo and Rettberg Beil, Beatriz Angelika, (2018). *¿Diferentes recursos, conflictos distintos?: La economía política regional del conflicto armado y la criminalidad en Colombia*. Universidad de Los Andes. Access: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7440/2018.05>

- **Quality:** The quality of support varies, with most programs not tailored to the specific needs of CSOs or delivered by individuals lacking the necessary expertise or cultural sensitivity.
- **Coordination:** Lack of coordination among support providers and the ecosystem in general leads to duplication of efforts and inefficiencies. Some trainings and workshops can be repetitive and become irrelevant.
- **Sustainability:** Short-term, project-based support programs often fail to address long-term development needs, creating a cycle of dependency.
- **Relevance:** Some support programs may not be relevant to the specific context and challenges faced by CSOs in different regions, necessitating a more localized and contextualized approach.
- **Recognition of Local Knowledge:** The lack of acknowledgment, respect and integration of local knowledge and practices in support programs remains a significant gap. As one interviewee emphasized, funding is important, but CSOs also need technical assistance, training, and institutional strengthening to truly develop their capacity.

### The market and development of local consultancy support

The market for local consultancy support for individuals and CSOs in Colombia presents a complex landscape. The market is often fragmented and operates under precarious conditions, especially for local consultants working directly with grassroots organizations. Most of the market supply is provided by local consultants. Most of the support for capacity building is largely provided by volunteer professionals from the social sciences. However, when it comes to technical assistance for productive projects, there are greater resources, especially in relation to agriculture. An emerging segment in the market is support in digitalisation. Organisations such as Las Andariegas on a small scale, CRD and Civic House are promoters of this type of support. Several key **features** define this market:

- **Precarity and informality:** Many local consultants, particularly those deeply embedded in territorial work and direct engagement with marginalized communities, face precarious working conditions. As one consultant working in a rural area explained, "We often work on a voluntary basis or for very low fees, simply because the organizations we work with don't have the resources to pay us what we're worth" (CSO).
- **Geographic concentration:** Consultancy services tend to be concentrated in urban centres, especially Bogotá D.C., creating barriers to access for CSOs operating in rural and remote areas, as NGOs personnel, especially international, are not willing to travel to remote and risky areas. The presence of international citizens in some high-risk areas is very helpful to dissuade violence from armed actors, notably northern/white citizens.
- **Unequal competition:** Local consultants face unequal competition from international NGOs and consulting firms and individuals, which often benefit from greater name recognition, more substantial resources, and established networks.
- **Undervalued local expertise (classism and racism):** Local knowledge and experience are often undervalued compared to academic credentials or international experience. This can

discourage local non-professional consultants, with vast experience in the issues of their territorialities<sup>14</sup>, and limit their access to professional development.

- **Lack of spaces for networking and collaboration:** Local consultants often lack dedicated spaces for networking, sharing experiences, and building a collective voice. Many of these consultants are activist and active part in different CSOs as voluntaries subject to political violence, and as project-dependent workers.

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist for local consultants to enhance their skills, build connections with other professionals, and establish a collective voice. An example of this is Opportunities for consultant development:

- Networking and collective action: Building strong professional networks with other consultants, CSOs, and support organizations can facilitate collaboration, knowledge sharing, and professional growth. These networks (academia, social movement and the market), can also serve as platforms for promoting best practices, improving for consultants' rights, and fostering a sense of professional community.
- Professionalization, specialization and *dialogo de saberes*: efforts to formalize the consultancy market, through the development of professional standards, certification programs, and consultant registries, can enhance the quality of services provided and build greater trust between consultants and CSOs. Developing specialized expertise in specific areas can increase a consultant's marketability, opening up new professional opportunities and strengthening CSOs indirectly.

Organizational development and strengthening initiatives for CSOs are resourced by a variety of actors. Resourcing of organizational development and strengthening:

- International donors and cooperation agencies: These actors provide a substantial portion of the funding for CSO development programs, often through grants, technical assistance projects, and capacity-building initiatives.
- Government agencies: Certain government agencies offer funding and technical support to CSOs, although access to these resources can be complex and subject to political considerations.
- Foundations, corporations and the private sector: Businesses' foundations and corporations also contribute to CSOs development, often focusing on specific thematic areas aligned with their corporate social responsibility objectives. Initiatives as The voluntary principles<sup>15</sup> can foster coherence between the private sector contribution to CSOs and the conflict resolution. Multinational as well as big national industrial conglomerates have foundations to work with communities (organized or not) where they have socio-environmental impact. Not to disregard, the territorial foundations<sup>16</sup>, which are very recently promoting national philanthropy.

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<sup>14</sup> Territoriality is a concept that brings together culture and territory, addressing the inherent cohesion of social and ecological dimensions.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.voluntaryprinciples.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.territoriacolombia.org/nosotros>

- **National CSOs themselves:** Some larger and more established national CSOs, not, therefore, INGOs with country offices, provide support to smaller organizations through mentoring programs, training workshops, and resource sharing initiatives. For example, CAJAR's with their school of environmental justice and defense of the territory<sup>17</sup>, but their capacity is very limited.
- **Local consultants:** Local consultants play a vital role in delivering organizational development services directly to CSOs, although their work is often characterized by precarious funding and limited resources.

## 4. Conclusion

Several critical areas of the ecosystem of support for CSOs in Colombia require attention, with recommended actions for each:

- The persistent **challenge of securing stable and diversified funding streams** for CSOs.
  - Establishing **centralized information platforms** and streamlining application processes for funding opportunities, making significantly easier access for all CSOs, particularly those operating in remote areas with limited resources. This would enhance transparency and efficiency in resource allocation.
- **The capacity gaps** within CSOs, particularly in areas such as financial management, project management, and strategic communication.
  - **Implementing long-term integral-interdisciplinary capacity-building programs**, tailored to the specific needs of different types of CSOs, would improve organizational effectiveness and sustainability. These programs should emphasize practical skills development and knowledge transfer, with a focus on impactful measurable outcomes, M&E based on Theories of Change, which can be used as a tool for systematization of experiences, and to truly enhance the achieving of social transformations aimed by CSOs.
- **A lack of coordination and collaboration** and solidarity among ecosystem actors which causes duplication of efforts and inefficient use of resources.
  - **Developing clear coordination mechanisms** and establishing regular communication channels among ecosystem actors would foster greater collaboration and avoid duplication of efforts. This could involve creating inter-institutional working groups or establishing a coordinating body with clear mandates and responsibilities. Innovation in digital communication and needs for technological tools are difficult to massify, as electricity and internet connection.
- The need to recognize and **integrate local embodied knowledge and expertise** into support programs.
  - **Embedding this into all stages of program design, implementation, and evaluation** is crucial for ensuring their relevance and effectiveness. This requires establishing mechanisms for meaningful community participation and valuing diverse forms of knowledge, like safeguarding policies.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.colectivodeabogados.org/convocatoria-escuela-de-justicia-ambiental-y-defensa-del-territorio/>

## Annexe 1: case study: civil rights defenders – CRD

The case of Civil Rights Defenders (CRD) in Colombia exemplifies how an international organization can significantly contribute to strengthening grassroots civil society and contribute to their capacity building, organizational and network development. CRD's work in Colombia is its focus on defending the rights of communities affected by armed conflict. CRD has documented numerous cases of human rights violations in these regions and has supported victims in their search for justice. Furthermore, CRD has worked closely with indigenous and peasant organizations to defend their territories and promote sustainable development models. CRD has positioned itself as a key player in some Latin American countries support ecosystems. In Colombia's sees a hub from where human rights defenders CSOs can benefit from support and strengthening opportunities from the exchange with similar organizations. CRD is able to work with all size and type of CSOs working in the defense of civil rights.

CRD is based in Sweden and has a small office in Bogotá. Its strategy focuses on supporting local civil society organizations while advocating for change at national and international levels. In Colombia, CRD has paid attention to communities and individuals affected by their leadership in struggles for diverse social inequalities focused in complex conflict affected areas. The fact that they focus on defenders is an advantage in terms of the variety of issues that intersect when working with their partners, environmental, education and LGTBIQA+ rights advocate work together in an ensemble proposed by CRD.

One of CRD's strengths lies in its ability to build strong and lasting networks among local CSOs, which can survive outside the intermediation of CRD. By working closely with these actors, CRD has managed to strengthen their capacities, expand their reach, and increase their impact. This network-based approach has enabled CRD to address the complexity of the work of human rights defenders, by effectively and sustainably supporting their livelihoods.

One potential area for development lies in the increased utilization of local consulting firms for research, legal and psychosocial assistance, and communication support. While CRD effectively leverages grassroot CSOs, further integrating local consulting services could enhance the efficiency and sustainability of their work.

In addition to providing financial support, CRD offers its partners a wide range of services, including technical assistance, training, legal support, and communication support. By doing so, CRD not only strengthens the capacities of local organizations but also contributes to building a stronger and more cohesive social movement.

CRD's presence in Colombia has been particularly relevant in the context of the armed conflict and humanitarian crisis on the border with Venezuela. CRD has provided support to local organizations working with communities affected by violence and forced displacement, and has advocated for a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflict.

CRD's extensive network and experience in human rights defense in Colombia make them a valuable potential partner for deeper engagement in Phase 2. Potential areas of collaboration include joint projects on human rights monitoring, capacity building for local consultants on human rights research methodologies, and knowledge facilitating spaces for sharing on best practices in human rights advocacy and capacity building.

The case of CRD is relevant because it illustrates several key points about strengthening civil society in Colombia:

- The importance of networks: Networks of civil society organizations are fundamental for generating long-term social change.
- The need for adaptative and long-term approach: Strengthening civil society requires a long-term commitment and constant adaptation to the changing needs of the context.
- The relevance of human rights defense: Human rights defense is the fundamental guarantee for CSOs possibility for building more just and equitable societies.
- The importance of international cooperation: International cooperation can play a fundamental positive role in strengthening civil society in countries like Colombia, when is tailored to local needs by sensitive accompaniment and exchanges.

By analysing the case of CRD, several opportunities can be identified to strengthen the support ecosystem for civil society in Colombia:

- Strengthening the capacities of grassroots organizations: It is necessary to invest in training in areas such as project management, communication, and advocacy, but with a close pedagogic accompaniment to CSOs.
- Promoting collaboration and solidarity among national and international actors, and with grassroots organizations: It is essential to foster collaboration between grassroots, national, and international organizations to maximize the impact of developed initiatives, by facilitating and accompanying exchanges and collaboration processed.
- Diversifying funding sources: Civil society organizations should seek diversified funding sources to reduce their dependence on international cooperation.
- Addressing the root causes of conflict: It is necessary to address both the root causes of conflict, at the same time that livelihoods and productive activities are supported too, providing real opportunities for participation.

Examples of collaboration and capacity building:

- CRD has demonstrated a strong ability to coordinate actions at both the national and local levels, as evidenced by its joint work with grassroots organizations Fundación Dignidad Trans <sup>18</sup> in Arauca and GAAT<sup>19</sup> (Trans People Action and Support Group Foundation) .

- Through its annual global exchange meeting, CRD facilitates connections between key actors for exchanging experiences, and the dissemination of best practices.
- CRD has strengthened the digital security of grassroots organizations such as the Trans Arauca Foundation and FOIDH by providing specialized training. Also, contributes to improve physical security, by giving grants for securing offices and leaders' houses; in addition to the Emergency Fund with which assist individual human rights defenders in need for relocation.

In conclusion, the case of Civil Rights Defenders in Colombia demonstrates the potential of international cooperation to strengthen civil society and promote sustainable development, supporting livelihoods. By learning from CRD's experiences, we can identify best practices and design more effective strategies to support civil society organizations in Colombia and other countries in the region.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/FundacionDignidadTrans/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://lafundaciongaat.wordpress.com/fundaciongaat/>

## Annexe 2: additional key contacts

**Civic House** has a developed infrastructure to work towards crowdfunding campaigns for small organisations. **Juntanza Anticolonial Muquytá**, a network of consultants in contact with other networks, government, INGOs, accompany grassroots organisations and communities in different regions of the country with capacity building on a voluntary basis. Juntanza, provide coaching in proposal writing, reporting and accountability, transferring knowledge for OD and capacity building. They also focus on ensuring cultural nuance, accessibility, and the active inclusion of local actors.

**CRD, CAJAR, Corambiente** and **Las Andariegas**, can support the design and accompaniment of OD processes with sensitivity to the intersected needs of CSOs and their members. This conflict sensitive approach, with a focus on leadership development, needs due to the intersecting issues faced by CSOs amid complex contexts, such as internal armed conflict, gender-based violence, racism, and general structural poverty and inequality.

Context and cultural awareness, dialogo de saberes, and safeguarding policies help to make initiatives sustainable and locally designed and owned. To address the need for local knowledge and authority, respect and legitimacy is key in assuring local ownership and contextual sensitivity, to increase autonomy and sustainability. Investing in network building to support grassroots organisations is highly beneficial to address the contexts and to support the core values and purposes of grassroots processes. **DANTA, SETAA, Anfibias** and **Granja Pura Vida** build and support such approaches and processes, promoting networking and dialogo de saberes, while delivering technical assistance. Resuena, supports networking processes and fosters respectful and fruitful dialogue among actors, moderating events and facilitating nonviolent communication training.