

CONNECT, DEFEND, ACT!

COLOMBIA BASELINE STUDY 2024



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Baseline Study Connect, Defend, Act! (CDA) Country Colombia

Brief Project Overview

All around the world, those in power, not only in autocratic governments but in established democracies as well, are increasingly imposing restrictions on civil society to freely express themselves, to protest against systemic injustices and to organize themselves to defend fundamental human rights. Digital tools and platforms carry the potential to create safe and brave spaces for trust-based collaboration and increased access to information, but they remain shaped by unequal access, as well as undermined by increasingly sophisticated digital surveillance and attacks by state and non-state actors.

With Support from NORAD, Hivos is implementing a project called [“Connect, Defend, Act!”](#).

To respond to the issue of shrinking civic space and amplify civil society-led action, the “Connect, Defend, Act!” (CDA) project will support Civil Society Actors in Colombia, Indonesia, Malawi and the occupied Palestinian territory in their efforts to defend and expand civic space through three strategic objectives:

- 1) By promoting coalition building among diverse Civil Society Actors, including Human Rights Defenders, Rights holder-led civil society organizations and independent media actors, grounded in civil society-led evidence gathering and knowledge production, and facilitated by context-specific Communities of Action.
- 2) By contributing to safe and inclusive digital civic spaces for sustained collaboration and action among Civil Society Actors through localized holistic digital security capacity strengthening, knowledge production and active referral to digital protection providers.
- 3) By increasing Civil Society Actors’ flexibility to rapidly respond to changes in civic space through organizational capacity strengthening and the provision of strategic funding for sustainable action.

The project aims to strategically support relevant actors within civil society whose work actively contributes to civic space from the perspective of different sectors and interests, while particularly including groups who are marginalized within civil society, such as women, youth, LGBTIQ+ persons, Indigenous People and others.

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Specific problems per country

In all four countries, civic space is under considerable pressure according to the CIVICUS Monitor but not fully closed. This means that there are opportunities for Civil Society Actors to positively influence the openness of civic space by preventing further backsliding as well as harnessing windows of opportunities through joint action.

In Colombia, civic space for human rights defenders (HRDs), journalists, young artists and creatives, as well as other civil society actors, is under considerable pressure. Assessed as “repressed” by the CIVICUS Monitor, Colombia is among the most restricted countries in South America. Civic space in Colombia remains heavily influenced by five decades of guerilla warfare, which formally came to an end in 2016 that unfortunately did not end the armed conflict. While mass violence and crime initially declined in the wake of the successful peace process, new and existing armed groups and organized crime groups soon ramped up their activities again, leading to an overall decline in security and civic space, particularly in rural areas, that soon spread to the cities. Fuelled by rising levels of violence, rampant corruption, and a badly conducted tax reform. The civil society includes young people, artists and creatives who actively participate in and support peace initiatives despite serious funding limitations that force them to focus on surviving rather than creating, and the violence they face on a daily basis, especially when it comes to women, LGBTIQ+, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian creators.



To address the state-of-the-art baseline study of the project in Colombia, various research procedures and tools were used to facilitate the collection, analysis, codification, and systematization of relevant information, such as:

a) Data Collection and Analysis Matrices:

- *Written sources:* A total of 103 secondary sources, such as reports from organizations, academic studies, human rights reports, and public policies related to the digital civic space, were collected and organized in a systematization matrix.
- *Identification of key actors:* Fifty-nine most representative actors (**collectives/groups, networks, coalitions, organizations, and movements**) were identified in a matrix, where several variables (**region, department, areas of work, specific groups, digital media, and contact channels**) were analyzed, specifying their strengths, needs, obstacles, and capacity gaps.
- *Maps:* Maps from secondary sources were gathered and contrasted to visualize the location, dynamics, and territorial context of the ethnic groups under study.

b) Surveys

Primary source collection instrument: Sixty surveys were conducted with leaders and active members of collectives/groups, networks, and social movements, most of whom belong to organizations with more than 50 people for a wider scope.

On-site dialogues: were done with Afro, Indigenous, and LGBTIQ+ populations for deepening social research, in which a horizontal and participatory approach was adopted.

c) Data Systematization: Atlas TI Software

Organization and grouping of variables: The Atlas TI software was used to systematize and code the qualitative information obtained through the analysis matrices and surveys.

d) Data Analysis

Operationalization of Variables: The key variables of the study, analyzed from the context of the armed conflict in Colombia, focused on digital civic rights, digital security, and identification of networks and coalitions, being operationalized.



Analysis of Primary and Secondary Data by Categories

- **Categorization:** The data was organized into relevant categories, both those yielded by primary and secondary sources.
- **Triangulation of information:** A data triangulation process was carried out, comparing the different sources of information (surveys, documents, and on-site dialogues) to validate the findings and ensure the consistency of the results.
- **Comparative Analysis:** was used to identify key differences between ethnic groups in Colombia, based on their geographical location, access to digital resources, and the realities of the legal, social, and political context.

The situation of armed conflict in Colombia exacerbates inequalities in access and exercise of digital civic rights, in ethnic communities, LGBTIQ+, youth, and women, in regions affected by conflict, lack of digital infrastructure, insecurity and surveillance limit access to the internet, and communication tools, restricts communities' ability to express their opinions, defend their rights and participate actively in civic space.

The intersection of conflict and digital exclusion perpetuates the marginalization of these sectors, highlighting the urgency of policies to promote connectivity but also protect the safe exercise of digital civic rights in contexts of violence and high vulnerability as is the case of Colombia.

Although digital inclusion government policies and training programs have been implemented, structural barriers remain affecting connectivity, cultural autonomy, and civic participation of the Indigenous and NARP (Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizales, and Palenqueros) population.



Baseline recommendations

Strategic recommendations by population

NARP (Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizales, and Palenqueros) population

- It is essential to develop digital skills training programs for the NARP population, with a focus on using technologies that allow them to generate their content and manage their narratives in digital platforms, through ethno-education, to promote digital skills from knowledge in their territory, including tools for the creation of visual content that reflects their culture and identity, and ensure their digital civic rights in the country. Indigenous people.

Indigenous people

- Support the development of communication platforms that respond to linguistic and cultural particularities of indigenous communities, facilitating their autonomy and capacity for expression in the digital civic space. This includes the creation of training programs in audiovisual production and digital media management, promoting communities to disseminate their knowledge and demands from their worldviews. Additionally, it is crucial to implement programs that support digital sovereignty, allowing these communities to manage their data, protect their intellectual property, and maintain digital self-determination.



Hivos
people unlimited



- It is essential to territorialize studies and processes of social intervention, prioritizing regions where connectivity is extremely limited. The implementation of adapted technological infrastructure, such as satellite internet networks and community WiFi zones, will help to reduce the digital gap in remote areas. In addition, developing digital literacy programs tailored to the socio-cultural contexts of these communities, with a focus on digital rights, privacy, and security, will facilitate the safe and effective use of technologies, promoting active and sustainable digital inclusion.

- Develop Digital Literacy and Psychosocial Support Programs: Specific digital literacy programs for the LGBTIQ+ community need to be implemented, including training in digital security and online harassment management. These programs should consider psychosocial aspects and offer support to address the risks of discrimination in the digital environment, empowering the community in its safe and effective use of technology.



02 Government Intervention:

- Strengthen Digital Inclusion Policies with a Diversity Perspective: The Colombian state should improve the implementation of digital inclusion policies focusing on sexual and gender diversity. This involves creating safe spaces and platforms that allow LGBTIQ+ people to participate without fear of retaliation or discrimination and ensuring that digital infrastructure reaches rural and marginalized areas



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