



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESILIENCE OF CSOS INCLUDING TRADE UNIONS WITHIN A CON-
TEXT OF SHRINKING CIVIC SPACES | MID-TERM EVALUATION OF
THE JOINT WSM/CM-MC, ACV-CSCI, BIS-MSI PROGRAMME 2022-2026
ON DECENT WORK & THE RIGHT TO SOCIAL PROTECTION

Introduction: Objective, Subject & Scope

This mid-term evaluation assesses the impact of shrinking civic space on the Joint WSM/CM-MC, ACV-CSCi, BIS-MSI programme (2022-2026) concerning decent work and the right to social protection. The study prioritizes learning and joint decision-making among stakeholders rather than merely evaluating programme results. It examines the validity of the first assumption in the Theory of Change (ToC) under changing socio-political contexts. The assumptions in the ToC, and which were subject of the mid-term evaluation were defined as follows:

- Assumption 1: WSM-Continental levels & ACV-CSCi: Civil society plays a key role for inclusive and sustainable governance through institutionalised dialogue (for civil society as a broad, including trade unions) and social dialogue (for trade unions only) with relevant political and economic actors.
- Hypothesis 1 BIS-MSI: Trade unions play a key role in inclusive and sustainable governance through social dialogue.
- Assumption 1 - WSM – Belgian level: Social movements are agents of social change. By internationalising and interconnecting them, both within and between countries, we can strengthen them so that they work together to achieve decent work and the right to universal social protection for all.

The evaluation includes 11 countries: Belgium, Peru, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Indonesia, Benin, Brazil, the Philippines, Niger, Burkina Faso, Burundi, and Haiti. It investigates whether shrinking civic space affects the programme's ability to achieve its objectives and provides recommendations to enhance future programme effectiveness in response to emerging challenges.

For this mid-term evaluation, the partners in the eleven countries of WSM, ACV-CSCi, and BIS-MSI were primarily consulted through interviews and focus group discussions besides extensive desk research based on longitudinal data of indices and literature.

Evaluation Questions

The evaluation addresses eleven key questions. It examines to what extent and how shrinking civic space affects social and institutionalized dialogue and their contribution to achieving decent work and social protection (EQ1), and explores the strategies trade unions and social movements—including mutual health organizations—have used to respond to this shrinking space, identifying what worked in which contexts and what support is needed (EQ2). It also looks at how the Theory of Change (ToC) pathways at governance and thematic internationalization levels can be improved based on midterm findings (EQ3). Further questions explore how the internationalization and interconnection of social movements contribute to respect for rights in supply chains (EQ4), and what factors and strategies can strengthen inclusive governance and counter shrinking space in Belgium and other continents (EQ5). The evaluation also investigates how Belgian and continental social movements can collaborate to reduce the negative impacts of shrinking space (EQ6), and how social movements in Belgium can be strengthened to achieve social change, including how strategies of internationalization and interconnectedness can be fine-tuned (EQ7). It assesses the different manifestations of shrinking space across global contexts and their impact on inclusive governance and citizen rights (EQ8). Finally, it explores to what extent anchoring intervention strategies in international policies shields union partners from shrinking space (EQ9), whether these strategies allow for improvement in working conditions (EQ10), and how shrinking space makes certain strategies harder to implement, prompting adaptations by union partners to pursue programme objectives (EQ11).

Theoretical Framework

The concept of civic space is explored through two levels: Level 1 includes fundamental freedoms such as the right to associate, assemble peacefully, and express opinions freely, while Level 2 covers policy inclusiveness in decision-making processes and social dialogue mechanism. Civic space is analysed using the ANIME model and tripolar governance framework, emphasizing institutionalized dialogue. While participating into the institutionalised

dialogue like other types of CSO's, trade unions also play a distinct role, given their formalized participation in social dialogue under International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions. This framework is crucial for understanding how the restrictive environment affects advocacy, governance participation, social dialogue and democratic engagement.

Methodology

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach that combined extensive desk research with in-country and online data collection, structured around a triangulation framework to ensure analytical depth and reliability. The desk research comprised a thorough literature review of documents provided by WSM, ACV-CSCi, and BIS-MSI, supplemented with relevant academic and research publications on the shrinking civic space and its implications for civil society organisations (CSOs), including trade unions. This material was coded and analysed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software aligned with the evaluation matrix. In addition, the evaluation incorporated data from three international indices—V-Dem, ITUC Global Rights Index, and CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor—offering longitudinal, global insights into democratic trends, civic freedoms, and workers' rights. These indices enabled an objective and evidence-based assessment of the status of civic space in the eleven focus countries and were triangulated with qualitative findings from 131 interviews and group discussions. Data collection was conducted through a combination of local and online interviews, with local consultants engaged in seven countries to ensure contextual sensitivity, while all other interviews were held remotely. The interviews were conducted between May 2024 and January 2025. Interviews followed a predefined guide based on evaluation questions and were analysed using the same coding process as the document review. Triangulation was implemented across data types and researchers, with each country analysis led jointly by a local and an international consultant, whose independent interpretations were synthesized to ensure balanced and context-aware reporting.

The evaluation acknowledged limitations, including self-censorship by respondents, selection bias due to reliance on partner-nominated interviewees, and logistical constraints affecting data collection in some countries. Nevertheless, the integration of multiple data sources and analytical perspectives provided a comprehensive and credible assessment of how the shrinking civic space is impacting the ability of CSOs and trade unions to promote decent work and social protection.

Findings on Shrinking Civic Spaces: Indices

The analysis of all three international indices—V-Dem, CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor, and the ITUC Global Rights Index—reveals a consistent and concerning pattern of shrinking civic space across the eleven countries under review, marked by the erosion of democratic freedoms, increasing restrictions on civil society organisations (CSOs), including trade unions, and widespread violations of workers' rights. V-Dem data, analysed across high-, mid-, and lower-level indicators, highlights a long-term trend of democratic backsliding and weakening civic space, particularly in countries with fragile or recently established democratic systems. In more consolidated democracies, the data reflects a noticeable decline linked to rising political polarization. Mid- and lower-level V-Dem indicators expose specific and sharp declines in key areas such as rule of law, freedom of expression, civil society participation, and access to independent information while also demonstrating a persistent lack of institutionalized consultation with CSOs. The CIVICUS Monitor corroborates these findings, classifying the majority of countries as either “Obstructed” or “Repressed,” and pointing to escalating repression, intimidation, and violence against civil society actors. Similarly, the ITUC Global Rights Index underscores systemic and severe violations of labour rights, including legal barriers to unionisation and social dialogue. The convergence of these indices illustrates that restrictions on civic and labour rights are part of broader authoritarian trajectories, often exacerbated by economic and political instability, legal and administrative constraints, and targeted repression of activists.

Findings based on Partners and Stakeholders

Stakeholders report that shrinking civic space has led to an undermining of influence of CSOs including trade unions in policymaking. Many organizations struggle to engage with governments, facing bureaucratic hurdles, funding limitations, and outright repression and violence. In several countries, governments justify these restrictions under security pretexts, effectively curtailing social dialogue and institutionalized engagement.

Trade unions in many countries report facing systemic anti-union policies, with legal obstacles preventing them from mobilizing workers effectively. Employer retaliation, legal harassment, and even physical threats against union leaders and activists have become increasingly prevalent. In some contexts, government-controlled institutions undermine independent trade union activities by establishing rival unions that are more aligned with state interests.

CSOs also face a wide array of constraints, including exclusion from consultation processes, restrictions on foreign funding, and administrative barriers that prevent them from operating freely. In many cases, repression extends beyond legal mechanisms to include public stigmatization, surveillance, and police intimidation, particularly in authoritarian-leaning regimes.

Furthermore, shrinking civic space has led in some cases to self-censorship, as organizations fear government retaliation. Many CSOs including trade unions report hesitancy in speaking out against government policies due to threats of deregistration, harassment, and violence.

Strategies & Responses of CSOs including trade unions

CSOs including trade unions have responded to shrinking civic space with a mix of defensive and adaptive strategies. One prominent approach has been strengthening internal governance and capacity-building efforts, as seen in almost all countries studied. This includes training for union leaders and activists in negotiation, advocacy, and legal literacy to navigate increasingly complex regulatory environments.

Forming alliances at national and international levels has been another critical response. By leveraging international labour and human rights frameworks, these organizations have been able to challenge repressive policies and gain solidarity from the global labor movement. Decentralized approaches, in complementarity to the work done on national level, have also gained traction.

Digital advocacy and alternative media channels have emerged as vital tools in the face of shrinking civic space. Many organizations have moved their advocacy efforts online, utilizing social media, encrypted communication platforms, and independent digital news outlets to circumvent state-controlled narratives.

Legal advocacy remains a key strategy for some unions and other CSOs. This legal approach has proven effective in maintaining pressure on governments to uphold their commitments to labor and human rights standards.

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. Many organizations operate under severe repression, requiring continuous adaptation to new forms of government control. Sustained support, both financial and institutional, from the international community is critical to ensuring that these organizations can continue their work in increasingly hostile environments. And as demonstrated (see below), they continue to make a difference and achieve impact on improved labor and social rights, even within this challenging context. Sustained external support for those countries, such as the programs led by WSM/CM-MC, ACV-CSCi & BIS-MSI, is critical to ensuring the protection of rights, social dialogue and other forms of institutionalized dialogue in increasingly restrictive environments. So, continuing to work with partners in these countries will be pivotal to counterbalance the restrictive context.

Despite shrinking civic space, CSO including trade union still achieve important outcomes

Despite a challenging global context, the program successfully contributed to improving workers' rights and social protection across multiple countries. Civil society organizations (CSOs), including trade unions, acknowledged the

constraints but also recognized the resilience and adaptability of partner organizations in navigating shrinking civic space.

Key achievements include:

- Benin (WSM): Strengthened civil society alliances, discreet advocacy strategies, and legal education enabled unions to influence policies despite restrictions.
- Brazil (ACV-CSCi): The 2023 Equal Pay Act, driven by sustained trade union advocacy, mandates wage transparency and corrective measures to address gender pay gaps.
- Burkina Faso (BIS-MSI): A 46.58% increase in the minimum wage, improved sectoral wage scales, and enhanced social security coverage for informal workers.
- Burundi (BIS-MSI): Successful negotiations led to employment contracts for all workers and a commitment to a universal health insurance scheme within three years.
- Indonesia (WSM): civil society networks played a key role in labor rights advocacy, including pushing for domestic workers' legal protection and integrating social protection policies.
- Philippines (ACV-CSCi): Ratification of ILO Convention C190 against workplace violence, marking the Philippines as the first Asian country to do so, enabling stronger gender-based violence protections.
- DR Congo (WSM): partners and civil society networks successfully advocated for elderly protection laws, reducing administrative costs for social security and mobilizing religious and civil society groups to influence policy.
- DR Congo (ACV-CSCi): In July 2022, a major breakthrough was achieved in the DRC when a Presidential Decree granted public servants—including police, military, magistrates, and teachers—access to retirement benefits through the CNSAP. As a result, 65,000 public agents have since retired with access to pensions, ending the previous system where many were forced to work past 65 without benefits.

Recommendations.

Recommendation 1: CSOs including trade unions, which contribute to democratic governance, are the only organizations that still offer a counterweight to authoritarian tendencies and shrinking civic spaces. As this report has shown, they have developed strategies to still achieve their objectives. It is therefore important to continue international support through partnerships/programs with CSOs including trade unions

Recommendation 2: One of the strategies of CSOs including trade unions was to continue to strengthen their internal capacities, governance and organizational strength. It is therefore important to continue (and even enlarge) programmes that support capacity and organisational strengthening.

Recommendation 3: Continue to strengthen strategic (international) coalitions and (international) partnerships

- Continue to support the partnership with key partners in the partner countries to strengthen legitimacy, negotiation power and increase international visibility. International partnerships can protect the CSO's including the TU's and their leaders and activists of being isolated or left behind when repressed/attacked by governments and employers.
- Continue and strengthen the cooperation with ITUC, incl. TUDCN and ITUC's regional organizations.
- Importance to use ILO's juridical instruments to continue putting pressure on governments to respect labor rights (ILO's Conventions, ILC's Committee on the Application of Standards, etc.)
- Continue to support and strengthen the INSPiR networks

Recommendation 4: The shrinking civic space (level 1) could be included as important risk for the implementation of the programme. Risk and Risk management (strategies), for each of the partner countries and partners should be a key point of attention in the full programme cycle.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen decentralized and local approaches to promote social and institutionalized dialogue and continue to work on national levels (two-level approach)

- Promote local-level engagement of organizations to foster social / institutionalized dialogue where local governments are more open to discussion.
- Support the capacity building of local leaders through the decentralization of training, empowering them to engage with local communities, companies or governmental bodies.
- Develop context-specific advocacy strategies, by promoting direct engagement with local employers for sector-specific agreements.

Recommendation 6: Enhance research production for evidence-based advocacy

- Encourage collaboration with universities and research institutions from global South and global North to generate gender sensitive evidence and data for social dialogue, and other forms of institutionalized dialogue and policy influence.
- Encourage and support the production and dissemination of technical studies that are innovative and unprecedented to support negotiation (social dialogue) and advocacy efforts.
- Support the collection of data to build surveys and questionnaires, especially in countries where access to data is difficult or data is unreliable.

Recommendation 7: Boost digital and media strategies for advocacy

- Review the strategy of digital platforms (e.g. google workspace, Microsoft environment) in each country participating in the programme/intervention, to tailor it to country's contexts, aiming to increase public awareness and support for CSOs including trade unions. Consider per partner, per country whether it is necessary to secure data and communications so that they are protected from government surveillance and surveillance from private actors (e.g. proton.me and Threema)
- Support partners to develop social & solidarity economy media initiatives and media partnerships to counter misinformation and fake news, combating this practice and helping to increase the transparency of institutions.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen the role of CSOs including trade unions in policy implementation and monitoring

- Support the use of data-driven methodologies for conducting social audits and tracking governance commitments.
- Support the development of policy-tracking dashboards to ensure government accountability on policy implementation and monitoring.
- Continue to support CSOs including trade unions in monitoring and evaluating the implementation of labor rights frameworks, with focus on vulnerable groups (women and youth for example).

Recommendation 9: Continue and deepen the HRDD/CSDDD approach in Belgium and the continents and reflect on using it as a model for internationalization supporting the role of CSO's and TU's

- Continue to lobby for accurate implementation HRDD/CSDDD at Belgian and European level.
- Develop capacities on HRDD (Human Rights Due Diligence) /CSDDD (Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive) at the Belgian level and all stakeholders (CSOs including TU) at continental level.
- Encourage linkage, (international) networking among stakeholders in the global value chains.

Conclusions.

The evaluation reports shows that persistent restrictions on freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression have serious impact on the operational activities of CSOs including trade unions. These restrictions take various forms, including administrative barriers, legal obstacles, and harassment of trade union and civil society actors. While such impediments constrain social dialogue and institutionalized dialogue, they also prompt organizations to develop adaptive strategies. Many partners use community-level negotiations, digital platforms to continue their training efforts, and alliances with international federations/networks in order to address national-level intransigence. Nonetheless, shrinking civic space remains a profound challenge that require specific reflections and strategies for achieving imperils the shared objective of rights-based and inclusive governance (see assumptions).

In reviewing the array of strategies and challenges observed across partner countries, it becomes evident that the hypothesis¹ of the Theory of Change, which emphasis the important role of civil society including trade unions, is still valid and is even becoming more and more relevant. CSOs including trade unions have found strategies to cope with context and still achieve some of their objectives, as illustrated by the success stories. Moreover, CSOs including trade unions are increasingly gaining importance as counterpowers to governments and corporations. Shrinking civic space and the threat it poses at the collective level to CSOs including trade unions and CSO and trade union leaders would be best mapped by country and partners with associated mitigation strategies (*see recommendation 4*).

The shrinking civic space in all the countries studied (including fragile states) and the importance of CSOs including trade unions to advocate for social and labor rights within this shrinking civic space let the evaluators conclude that continued support from the Decent Work program to these partner countries and partners is necessary. Leaving the partners behind would cause a tremendous backlash in organizational capacity and subsequently in social and labor rights. (*see recommendation 1*)

A related impetus strategy lies in reinforcing more localized frameworks (besides the national frameworks) that often endure in times of national polarization, an insight mirrored in *recommendation 5*, which highlights the value of decentralized approaches. Incorporating evidence-based advocacy into this work, as promoted in *recommendation 6*, can help organizations generate robust data that contributes to a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of issues related to workers' rights and social protection. International and national cooperation (including networks such as e.g. ITUC and INSP!R, and other alliances) should be continued in order to stimulate, mutual learning, national and global mobilization and protection a priority described in *recommendation 3*, so that organizations with limited access to institutional resources find the support they need to confront or circumvent government obstacles.

One of the most important strategies reported by CSOs including trade unions was to continue to strengthen their internal capacities, governance and organizational strength. Capacity-building was seen as essential to educate members and leaders within the context of a shrinking civic space to continue advocating for improved social and labor rights. Since supporting capacity building is one of the major strengths of BIS-MSI, WSM and ACV-CSCi, the evaluators recommend that this support be continued and even expanded if possible (*see recommendation 2*).

Sustaining these initiatives requires, among others, innovative thinking about digital media and modern forms of communication. By strengthening outreach strategies, civil society and unions can connect with members, coordinate actions, and engage broader audiences in contexts where direct contact is restricted. This component aligns with *recommendation 7*, which calls for more robust digital and media strategies that can stand firm even when governments or corporations impose technological constraints, block resources, or conduct surveillance.

Within country contexts substantial gains are still possible. CSOs including trade unions can place greater emphasis on implementation and monitoring. These monitor functions should be data driven. Reinforcing their centrality

¹ WSM -continent & ACV-CSCi: "Civil society plays a key role for inclusive and sustainable governance through institutionalised dialogue (for civil society) and social dialogue (for trade unions) with relevant political and economic actors". BIS-MSI: "Trade unions play a key role in inclusive and sustainable governance through social dialogue". WSM – Belgian level: "Social movements are agents of social change. By internationalising and interconnecting them, both within and between countries, we can strengthen them so that they work together to achieve decent work and the right to universal social protection for all".

corresponds to *recommendation 8*, highlighting that policy outcomes depend on rigorous follow-up measures that guarantee genuine adherence to agreements.

An equally critical dimension in efforts to mitigate shrinking civic space involves the ongoing development of human rights due diligence (HRDD) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). Many stakeholders recognize that global supply chains often exert an outsized influence on both economic structures and labor policies in a given country. *Recommendation 9* supports this strategic focus by indicating that international frameworks, when effectively enforced and monitored, can protect the work of the CSO's and TU's and their leaders and local labor activists advocates. These instruments make it harder for governments or employers to neglect or target domestic organizations, as they raise legal and ethical standards for private actors and government agencies alike. They also elevate international scrutiny, pressing global corporations to ensure compliance with decent work practices across their subsidiaries and suppliers.

Finally, another important finding of this evaluation is that CSOs including trade unions continued to achieve important results for more and better labour and social rights, among other things, thanks to their adapted strategies and with the support of WSM, BIS-MSI and ACV-CSCi.