STOKING THE COMMON FIRE

CROSSROADS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM IN CENTRAL AMERICA (2025–2028)

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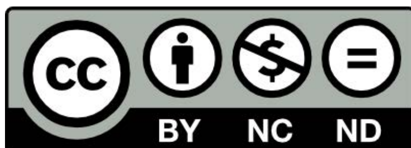

About Casa Centroamérica

Casa Centroamérica is an initiative founded by Central American exiles in Mexico with the purpose of articulating, strengthening, and making visible the Central American diaspora as a collective actor with cultural, social, and political agency. Since its creation, the organization has sought to build a space for gathering, reflection, and action that connects experiences of exile with broader processes of human rights defense and promotion, knowledge production, and memory preservation. In a regional context marked by shrinking civic space, persecution of social actors, and the weakening of democratic institutions, Casa Centroamérica emerges as a platform that enables the preservation of connections, the protection of displaced political and cultural trajectories, and the continuity of struggles for justice and democracy across the region.

Building on this foundation, the organization promotes the development of diasporic and regional infrastructure—understood not only as a physical space, but as a network of relationships, resources, knowledge, and initiatives that strengthen the Central American ecosystem of organizations, media, artists, academics, and communities in motion. Through an ecosystemic approach, Casa Centroamérica fosters collaboration among actors within and beyond the region, supports solidarity networks, creates cultural and critical thinking spaces, and contributes to building the conditions necessary to sustain collective capacities over time. This approach recognizes that democratic resilience and the defense of rights in the region increasingly depend on the interdependence between territories, diasporas, and transnational actors.

Credits

General coordination of the report
Casa Centroamérica

Project Director
Gabriel Wer

Researchers
Briseida Milián Lemus
José Luis Sanz

Quantitative researcher
Aldo Magoga

Project assistance
Andrea Soto

Editing and proofreading (Spanish)
Gabriela Selser/ SELSER Editoras

Translation
Casa Centroamérica

Editorial design
Adrián Nandayapa

Cover illustration
Jesús Martínez

Institutional support
Casa Centroamérica Team

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Executive Summary

This study analyzes the sustainability of the ecosystem of civil society organizations and independent media in Central America (2025–2028), in a context marked by the progressive closure of civic space, the consolidation of authoritarian practices, and the sustained contraction of funding. Using a comparative approach, it identifies structural vulnerabilities and explores emerging strategies of adaptation and innovation driven by the actors themselves. The research combines in-depth interviews, a survey of 58 organizations based on the RIOCA Index (developed for this study), and the construction of national scenarios as tools for strategic analysis.

The central finding is clear: the ecosystem is facing a structural, not a cyclical, crisis. Democratic backsliding and declining resources converge with persistent internal dynamics—such as fragmentation, mistrust, and organizational weakening—that limit its capacity to respond. This is compounded by a limited awareness that funding scarcity is a long-term condition, leaving part of the ecosystem operating in a "waiting mode," increasing the risk of closures, loss of critical capacities, and growing precarity.

The comparative analysis reveals differentiated trajectories: Nicaragua presents the most restrictive environment; El Salvador reflects exhaustion and self-censorship; Honduras shows high levels of fragmentation; and Guatemala, while relatively more stable, faces imminent risks. These findings confirm that Central America cannot be approached as a homogeneous block: differentiated country-level strategies are required, articulated within a regional perspective.

Innovation exists, but it is fragmented, precarious, and largely reactive. Without seed capital or sustained support, it rarely translates into structural transformation. Yet, there is still room for action. A critical window of 18 to 24 months remains to reconfigure strategies, strengthen capacities, and improve coordination among actors.

Central America has become one of the fastest-moving contexts of democratic deterioration in the hemisphere. Withdrawing or reducing support at this moment would not only be a mistake—it would accelerate the degradation of the ecosystem and leave key actors unprotected.

The central challenge is how to stoke the common fire: how to sustain collective action as the environment closes and resources diminish.

Introduction

Civil society and independent media in Central America are facing a critical moment, marked by the progressive closure of civic space, the weakening of democratic guarantees, and the criminalization of social actors. In El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, governments and other state actors have, over the past decade, promoted repressive laws and stigmatizing campaigns; initiated judicial persecution that restricts freedom of association and expression; undermined key democratic checks and balances[1]; and forced hundreds of human rights defenders—including journalists—into exile[2].

State hostility is compounded by the devastating impact of a dramatic decline in international cooperation funding, particularly following the abrupt reduction in U.S. foreign aid implemented by the administration of Donald Trump. Between January and March 2025 alone, approximately 83% of programs funded by the United States Agency for International Development were canceled, representing an estimated $54 billion cut[3].

In Central America, more than 80% of USAID programs were affected, with approximately 92 initiatives reduced or suspended[4] across Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Most of these programs were aimed at strengthening human rights, governance, transparency, and violence prevention[5].

The regional impact has been severe. In Honduras, early reports indicate that around 70% of civil society organizations have reduced staff; 50% reported a "serious impact" on their budgets, and 25% described the impact as "very serious."[6]. n El Salvador, the closure of USAID has meant a loss of $258 million for civil society for the 2024–2025 period. The human rights organization Cristosal, which lost more than half of its funding within just a few weeks[7], was forced months later to leave the country following the arbitrary detention of the head of its Anti-Corruption and Justice Unit, Ruth López, and the approval of a Foreign Agents Law condemned by numerous international human rights organizations[8]. In Guatemala, organizations such as Udefegua face growing difficulties in sustaining their protection programs, particularly after the cancellation of funding dedicated to the security and protection of human rights defenders[9].

> **In El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, governments and other state actors have, over the past decade, promoted repressive laws and stigmatizing campaigns**

Historically, since the struggles for democracy in the 1970s and 1980s, civil society in the region has emerged as a force for oversight, human rights advocacy, and the reconstruction of social fabric. Popular organizations, labor unions, NGOs, and peasant movements played a key role in peace processes, constitutional reforms, and social mobilization, building undeniable legitimacy in the face of authoritarianism and structural violence[10]. Today, a dual crisis—shrinking civic space and financial weakening—threatens the sustainability of the Central American ecosystem.

In this context, the study is guided by the following question: **What strategies would enable civil society organizations and independent media in Central America to sustain and strengthen their collective work in order to fulfill their missions, in an increasingly adverse political and financial environment?**

Faced with the collapse of traditional funding, many organizations are exploring alternatives: diversifying revenue sources through local donation campaigns, rethinking alliances, strengthening South–South cooperation, and restructuring operations to reduce costs. At the same time, international philanthropic actors are adjusting their approaches to mitigate the immediate impact on civil society organizations and independent media, and have begun promoting new funding streams for decentralized networks and emerging collectives[11].

However, responses should not focus solely on a deep analysis of impacts and potential financial solutions, but also on key

[1] CIVICUS Monitor. "People Power Under Attack 2024". Available in: https://monitor.civicus.org/data/

[2] D. Rea. y P. Mónaco Felipe, "Exilio se escribe en presente". *Gatopardo*. 24 de marzo de 2025. Available in: https://www.gatopardo.com/articulos/exilio-se-escribe-en-presente

[3] C. Lu, "USAID Purge Ends With 83 Percent of Programs Canceled". *Foreign Policy*. March 10, 2025. Available in: https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/03/10/trump-rubio-usaid-cuts-foreign-aid/

[4] T. Welsh, "Trump's Funding Cuts Hurt 80 % of USAID Central America Programs". *Devex*. March 14, 2025. Available in: www.devex.com/news/trump-funding-cuts-hurt-80-of-usaid-central-america-programs-report-101936

[5] Peter J. Meyer, "U.S. Foreign Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean: FY2025 Appropriations". Congressional Research Service. January 14, 2025. Available in: https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48266

[6] N. Rauda Zablah, "From El Salvador to Honduras, why authoritarians gain from USAID cuts". *Christian Science Monitor.* May 23, 2025. Available in: /www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2025/0523/el-salvador-bukele-us-aid-foreign-agents-registry

[7] T. Armus, "Its U.S. funding cut, rights group flees Bukele's El Salvador". *The Washington Post.* July 17, 2025. Available in: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/07/17/cristosal-el-salvador-bukele-usaid-trump/

dimensions such as social legitimacy, organizational innovation, and regional coordination capacity. This study seeks to consolidate a diagnosis of the impact that the described crisis has had on the ecosystem of civil society and independent journalism in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, as well as to develop a forward-looking analysis that enables civil society organizations, donors, and cooperation institutions to design strategies aimed at protecting the existence, influence, and development of this ecosystem.

1.1 Current situation

Central America is experiencing its most severe human rights crisis and civic space closure since the end of the region's civil wars. In Nicaragua and El Salvador, mass detentions[12] and torture in detention centers have been documented[13], while authoritarian governments have imposed legal frameworks designed to restrict international cooperation and criminalize civic action[14]. In Guatemala and Honduras, though with distinct dynamics, similar patterns persist: the instrumentalization of institutions[15], harassment, and structural violence, particularly against anti-corruption actors and organizations defending Indigenous and environmental rights.

Despite their differences, judicial systems across all four countries operate selectively to persecute human rights defenders and critical journalists, while impunity reaches alarming levels. This combination of judicial and extrajudicial repression places civil society and independent media under extreme pressure; forced exile and varying degrees of self-censorship have become regional patterns.

The reduction of international cooperation in recent years—particularly following the return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in early 2025—has further consolidated a context of hostility and extreme vulnerability for most social actors, with country-specific expressions across the region.

Nicaragua

Since the outbreak of social protests in April 2018—followed by a violent state crackdown—Nicaragua has experienced the most severe process of civic and democratic space

The reduction of international cooperation in recent years—particularly following the return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in early 2025—has further consolidated a context of hostility and extreme vulnerability for most social actors

xclosure in Central America16. The ongoing persecution carried out by the government of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo against any form of dissent, social organization, or political opposition includes the systematic use of violence, the criminalization of protest, and the consolidation of a restrictive legal framework condemned by international bodies.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights documented more than 350 people killed between April and September 2018 alone, while an independent United Nations commission has reported that the Ortega-Murillo regime has systematically committed crimes against humanity up to the present[17].

This repressive context has been institutionalized through the adoption of laws such as the Foreign Agents Regulation Law (2020), the Special Cybercrime Law (2020), and penal and constitutional reforms that expanded executive control, completing a legal framework used to imprison social leaders, political figures, and journalists; restrict international funding to civil society organizations and independent media; and dismantle the country's associative fabric[18].

Between 2018 and 2025, the Nicaraguan state has revoked the legal status of more than 5,600 organizations[19], including human rights NGOs, feminist associations, religious groups, universities, professional associations, and community-based entities. More than 80% of the organizations that were legally registered

[8] Amnistía Internacional. *El Salvador: La nueva Ley de Agentes Extranjeros amenaza los derechos y libertades de las organizaciones de la sociedad civil y los medios de comunicación.* 13 de junio de 2025. Available in: https://www.amnesty.org/fr/documents/amr29/9498/2025/es/

[9] Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2025: Guatemala.* Available in www.hrw.org.

[10] E. A. Brett, "Voluntary Agencies as Development Organizations: Theorizing the Problem of Efficiency and Accountability". Development and Change. April 1993. Available in: https:onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-7660.1993.tb00486.x.

[11] Ford Foundation. *Building Resilience in Civil Society: Programmatic Adjustments 2023–2025.* February 3, 2025. Available in: www.forus-international.org/en/news/navigating-crisis-building-resilient-communication-strategies-for-civil-society

[12] https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/2023/cierre_espacio_civico_nicaragua_spa.pdf

[13] https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/11/12/us/el-salvador-torture-of-venezuelan-deportees

[14] https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/foreign-influence-report_Jan_2025_update.pdf

[15] https://www.wola.org/es/2025/12/cidh-confirma-riesgos-a-la-democracia-y-crisis-en-el-sistema-de- justicia-de-guatemala/

[16] https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/Nicaragua2018-es.pdf

[17] https://www.ohchr.org/es/press-releases/2024/02/nicaraguas-grim-reality-investigation-un-experts- reveals-crimes-against

[18] https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/nicaragua

[19] https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/MESENI/Boletines/boletin-meseni-2025_04.html

in Nicaragua prior to 2018 have been shut down or forced into exile[20].

Human rights defenders face surveillance, threats, arbitrary detention, unfounded legal proceedings, and, in many cases, banishment. Since 2023, the government has stripped at least 452 individuals of their Nicaraguan nationality on spurious grounds, in violation of international law[21].

Since 2018, at least 60 media outlets have been shut down, confiscated, or forced to cease operations through license cancellations, equipment seizures, and the criminal prosecution of their leadership. One direct consequence has been the mass exile of journalists. By the end of 2024, approximately 280 individuals linked to media organizations—including 180 journalists—had been forced to leave the country. Despite this, multiple Nicaraguan media outlets continue to operate from exile[22] and maintain information flows into Nicaragua. However, these initiatives face conditions of high financial precarity, fragmented audiences, and risks associated with transnational repression.

The reduction in international cooperation over the past year—including the suspension of USAID programs and the broader decline in Official Development Assistance (ODA)—has significantly worsened the situation of Nicaraguan civil society organizations and independent media, further limiting their operational capacity[23]. Many organizations have been forced to downsize staff, shut down projects, and now face the risk of disappearance.

El Salvador

Since Nayib Bukele came to power in 2019—and more sharply following the establishment of the state of exception, which has remained in effect continuously since March 2022—El Salvador has experienced a rapid institutional deterioration. This process has been characterized by the concentration of power in the Executive branch, the erosion of democratic checks and balances, and the loss of due process guarantees[24]. The unconstitutional re-election of the president in 2024[25] further consolidated a governance model based on intimidation, social control, and restrictions on civic participation and freedom of expression[26].

Civil society organizations and journalists face systematic stigmatization campaigns from the Executive, as well as surveillance, espionage (the right to privacy of communications has remained suspended since 2022)[27], selective audits, and threats of administrative or criminal proceedings. Since September 2021, public protests have been subject to restrictions and, in some cases, police repression[28]. Harassment is directed particularly at community leaders and social movements, although the climate of self-censorship also extends to cultural spaces such as theater and music, within a broader context of aesthetic homogenization shaped by a government-controlled narrative of development and the future.

Particularly since the detention and imprisonment of human rights defender Ruth López in April 2025, and constitutional lawyer Enrique Anaya a few days later, human rights defenders have been operating in a high-risk environment. Under the state of exception, thousands of arbitrary detentions have been reported, along with hundreds of testimonies of physical abuse and torture in detention centers[29]. In addition, defenders who accompany victims of state abuses face criminalization and threats. Some organizations have chosen to reduce their visibility or relocate their operations outside the country[30].

Independent journalism has been one of the most affected sectors. Media outlets such as El Faro, Gato Encerrado, and Revista Factum have documented digital surveillance, smear campaigns, and judicial harassment. In 2023, El Faro moved its administrative operations outside El Salvador for security reasons and in 2025 its entire newsroom went into exile[31], shortly after the complete relocation of Cristosal[32]. In 2025 alone, around 40 Salvadoran journalists left the country due to fear of criminal or administrative retaliation[33].

The legal framework is increasingly being used to further restrict the work of civil society. The Foreign Agents Law—discussed since 2021 and fast-tracked in May 2025—has been used to limit access to international funding[34] and impose arbitrary controls on independent organizations. This context has led to greater dependence on external funding managed from exile, deepening the precarity of the civic ecosystem.

[20] https://www.divergentes.com/el-cementerio-de-oeneges-de-daniel-ortega/

[21] https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/cidh%3A-nicaragua-ha-privado-de-su-nacionalidad-a-452-nicarag%C3%BCenses-y-negado-entrada-a-290/89163812

[22] https://confidencial.digital/confidencialtv/el-periodismo-independiente-se-reinventa-ante-la-persecu cion-del-regimen-orteguista/

[23] https://confidencial.digital/english/usaid-suspension-hits-nicaraguan-civil-society-in-exile/

[24] https://dplf.org/indebido-proceso-analisis-de-las-reformas-que-acompanan-el-regimen-de-excepcion -en-el-salvador/

[25] https://elfaro.net/es/202402/el_salvador/27245/bukele-se-reelige-inconstitucionalmente-con-el-82-de-los-votos-mientras-la-oposicion-pide-repetir-elecciones-legislativas

[26] https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador

[27] www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/01/el-salvador-pegasus-spyware-surveillance-journalists/

[28] https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2025/05/el-salvador-gobierno-profundiza-patron-autoritario- frente-al-descontento-social/

[29] www.fespad.org.sv/3-anos-del-regimen-de-excepcion-tortura-sistematica-en-carceles-el-salvador/

[30] https://apnews.com/article/el-salvador-heinrich-boll-guatemala-ley-asociaciones-daedbc5c091012274c5e80c34e5d93

Honduras

In terms of civic space, Honduras is classified as "repressed" according to monitoring by CIVICUS[35] and as "partly free" by Freedom House[36]. The country continues to carry a historical context of high structural violence and institutional weakness that severely affects civil society. Despite some discursive improvements since 2022, risks persist for human rights defenders, social leaders, and journalists—particularly those working on land rights, environmental issues, Indigenous rights, corruption, or organized crime[37]. Over the past 15 years, more than 120 environmental activists have been killed, making Honduras the most dangerous country in the world for land defenders[38]. According to estimates by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, impunity in these cases remains above 90%[39].

Independent journalism also operates in a high-risk environment marked by threats, attacks, and killings. Honduras consistently ranks among the most dangerous countries for journalists in Latin America, especially outside major urban centers[40]. This has led to a sustained, though less documented, exile of journalists compared to Nicaragua or El Salvador. At least 20 journalists left the country between 2019 and 2024 for security reasons[41].

The sustainability of civil society organizations and media has been weakened by the reduction and fragmentation of international cooperation, which has increasingly shifted toward humanitarian priorities and poverty alleviation[42] rather than institutional strengthening and independent journalism. Between 2022 and 2024, United States Agency for International Development had invested more than $129 million in 57 projects focused on democracy, human rights, and governance in Honduras. The closure of the agency has created a financial gap for numerous organizations—such as the Consejo Nacional Anticorrupción, which received more than 50% of its funding from USAID—affecting their operations and long-term sustainability[43]. As previously seen in El Salvador, official narratives portraying international cooperation as part of a hidden agenda have also been used to criminalize recipient organizations[44], adding institutional pressure and fiscal uncertainty to independent civic work.

The context of high conflict, institutional distrust, and allegations of irregularities during the November 2025 presidential election has further deepened the country's democratic instability. The electoral crisis triggered an increase in threats, surveillance, and stigmatizing rhetoric against critical civic actors.[45].

Guatemala

The deterioration of civic space in Guatemala is marked by the capture of anti-corruption institutions by corrupt actors and the systematic use of the justice system to persecute justice operators, journalists, and human rights defenders. The closure of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala in September 2019 marked a turning point, weakening accountability mechanisms and enabling the expansion of illicit political–economic networks[46].

The instrumentalization of the Public Prosecutor's Office and criminal courts to selectively initiate spurious legal proceedings against lawyers, prosecutors, judges, social movement leaders, and journalists has been accompanied by ongoing stigmatization campaigns, surveillance, and threats. While there has not been a cancellation of legal statuses as in Nicaragua, judicial and administrative harassment has led to increased self-censorship and organizational weakening[47], particularly in rural areas.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Guatemala records one of the highest levels of attacks against human rights defenders in Central America, including killings and both internal and transnational forced displacement[48]. Since 2021, dozens of defenders and justice operators have been forced into exile.

Independent media and journalists have also been targeted. The most emblematic case is that of José Rubén Zamora, former director of elPeriódico, who has been imprisoned and subjected to flawed judicial processes since 2022. Reporters Without Borders[49] and the Committee to

[31] https://beta.elfaro.net/titulares/el-exilio-nos-alcanza

[32] https://cristosal.org/ES/cristosal-suspende-operaciones-en-el-salvador-ante-escalada-represiva/

[33] https://elpais.com/america/2025-10-01/la-principal-asociacion-de-periodistas-el-salvador-exilio.html

[34] www.wola.org/analysis/curtailing-civic-space-tightening-restrictions-on-civil-society-in-the-americas/

[35] https://monitor.civicus.org/country/honduras/

[36] https://freedomhouse.org/country/honduras/freedom-world/2025

[37] https://www.omct.org/es/recursos/declaraciones/honduras-riesgo-para-las-personas-defensoras

[38] https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/honduras-deadliest-country-world-environmental-activism/

[39] https://www.hrw.org/es/world-report/2022/country-chapters/honduras.

[40] https://conadeh.hn/?p=3605

[41] contracorriente.red/2023/05/05/libertad-de-prensa-agoniza-en-una-centroamerica-autoritaria

[42] elpais.com/planeta-futuro/2025-12-09/la-cooperacion-para-el-desarrollo-ante-un-incierto-futuro.html

[43] https://eusee.hivos.org/assets/2025/08/Honduras_Baseline-Snapshot-Honduras-final-MF-1.pdf

[44] https://www.elpais.hn/congreso-de-honduras-investigara-uso-de-fondos-de-usaid/

[45] https://rsf.org/en/honduras-rsf-and-seven-partner-organisations-condemn-environment-surveillance-intimidation-and?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Protect Journalists have warned about rising self-censorship and the weakening of investigative journalism in Guatemala. Between 2019 and 2024, at least 40 Guatemalan journalists left the country for security reasons, primarily relocating to Mexico, the United States, and Costa Rica[50].

Although the election of Bernardo Arévalo in 2023 raised hopes for an end to criminalization, two and a half years later his administration has not succeeded in dismantling ongoing patterns of judicial persecution and coercion against civil society and independent journalism. The appointment, in the first half of 2026, of a new Supreme Electoral Tribunal, a new Constitutional Court, and new leadership of the Public Prosecutor's Office will shape the country's political trajectory and define the conditions under which civil society will operate in the coming years.

In this broader context, there is growing consensus on the need for a deep strategic reassessment within civil society across the region. Since 1997, the USAID Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index has measured the strength and overall viability of civil society sectors in more than 70 countries[51]. In parallel, organizations such as WINGS[52] have produced analyses of social movement ecosystems for donor audiences. Its 2025 report, Partnering for People Power: The Philanthropy Support Ecosystem for Social Movements in Africa and Latin America, recommends leveraging existing infrastructures, supporting the organic creation of new funding mechanisms, moving away from traditional funding models, and promoting a culture of giving.

Both donor-oriented analyses and tools designed for civil society emphasize the importance of coordinated action among organizations in response to current challenges. For example, the Human Rights Funders Network[53] proposes, through its Better Preparedness Initiative, a practical guide for foundations to act, coordinate, and transfer resources to civil society under threat. It also encourages organizations to articulate themselves through "consultative," "collective," and "permanent" modes of collaboration as strategies for resilience in the face of crisis.

1.2 Research objectives

General objective

To analyze the current situation, future scenarios, and existing and prospective strategies of the ecosystem of civil society organizations and independent media in Central America, with the aim of developing a roadmap for donors that guides philanthropic investments and support structures that are sustainable, flexible, and inclusive, in line with an adverse political and financial context.

Specific objectives

To assess the current situation of civil society organizations and independent media in Central America and their networks, identifying strengths, vulnerabilities, trends, and key drivers of change within the political, legal, economic, and social environment.

1. To explore possible scenarios within the evolving funding landscape, evaluating their implications, advantages, and disadvantages for civil society organizations and independent media.

2. To identify existing and prospective strategies that can inform a donor-oriented roadmap aimed at strengthening the sustainability of the civil society and independent media ecosystem in Central America, prioritizing opportunities for collaborative, coordinated, and regionally focused action.

3. To provide recommendations to donors and allies on philanthropic investment strategies with a sustainability lens, as well as on flexible, inclusive support structures adapted to sectoral and regional needs.

[46] https://www.cicig.org/cicig/informes_cicig/informe-de-labores/informe-final-de-labores/#informe

[47] https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/guatemala

[48] https://www.ohchr.org/es/documents/country-reports/ahrc5822-situation-human-rights-guatemala- report-united-nations-high

[49] https://rsf.org/es/pais/guatemala

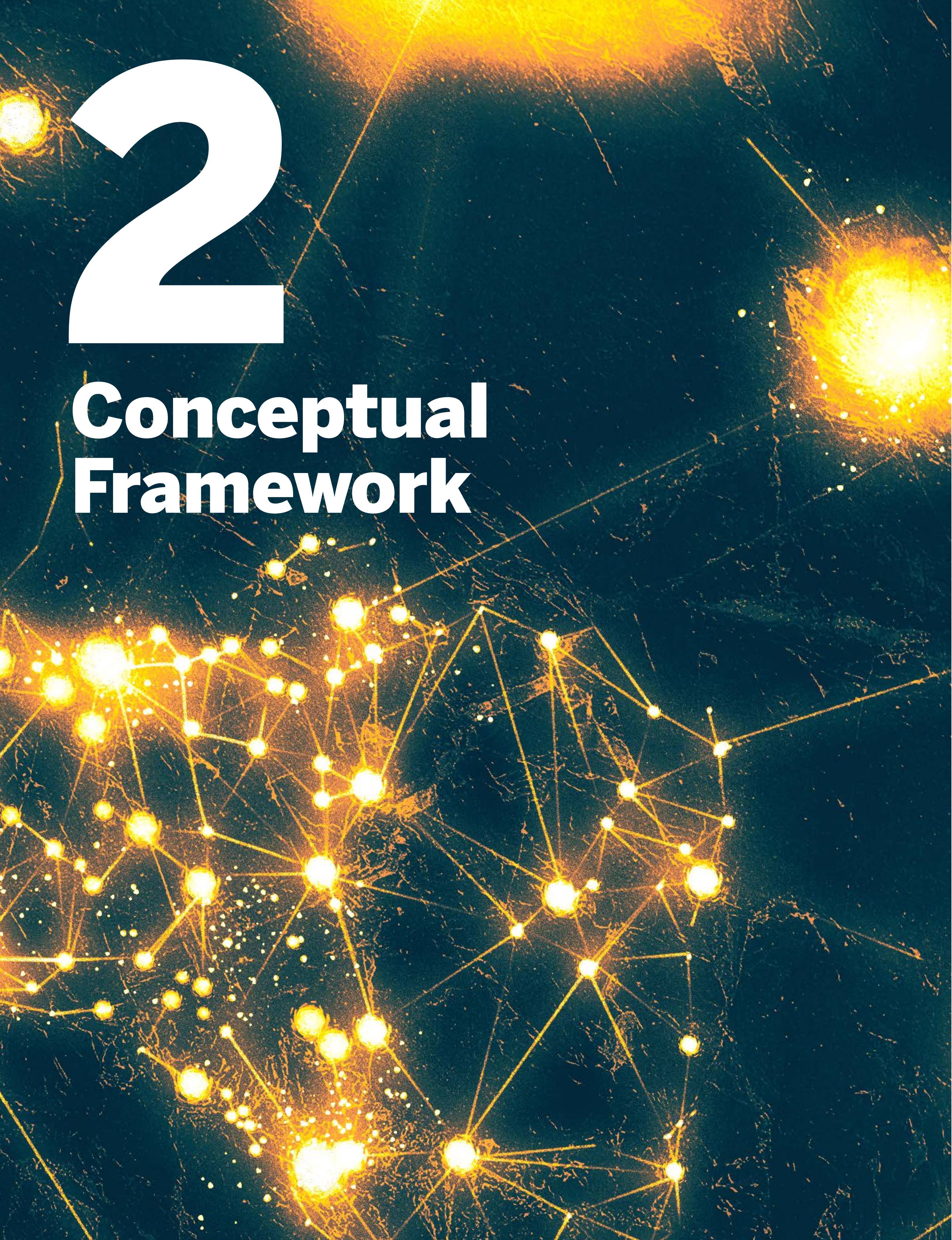
[50] https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/guatemalan-journalists-in-exile-recount-challenges-and-expectations-for-future-of-journalism-in-their-country/

[51] https://www.icnl.org/post/tools/civil-society-organization-sustainability-index

[52] https://wings.issuelab.org/resource/partnering-for-people-power-the-philanthropy-support-ecosystem- for-social-movements-in-africa-and-latin-america.html

[53] https://www.hrfn.org/better-preparedness/

2 Conceptual Framework



The object of study of this research is the sustainability of the ecosystem composed of civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent media in Central America for the period 2025–2028. We define civil society organizations and independent media as formally constituted entities based on free association—including media outlets not aligned with state, partisan, or corporate interests—that pursue democratizing objectives, the defense of human rights, and the strengthening of civic space and the right to information. For the purposes of this study, the analysis is limited to CSOs and independent media that operate in one or more Central American countries.

Although most are legally established as non-profit organizations, their funding models have diversified in recent years; therefore, variation in income sources is not considered an exclusion criterion for inclusion in this study.

Initially, these CSOs and independent media were categorized according to the **country in which they seek to exert influence.** This decision is based on the understanding that, despite transnational similarities in thematic areas, organizational objectives and the determining conditions for their operation are primarily shaped at the national level. Furthermore, coordination and collaboration are generally more feasible—both logistically and politically—among actors within the same country. Accordingly, five initial groupings were established: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and regional actors.

In a second step, organizations were categorized according to **the nature of their work.** This sub-classification seeks to ensure representativeness across sectors within the ecosystem. To this end, organizations were identified based on the type of impact or influence they aim to achieve: territorial organizations, institutional public policy organizations, social transformation organizations, and independent media.

The category of territorial organizations includes, for example, those working on environmental causes within specific geographic areas, as well as Indigenous territorial resistance movements and similar initiatives that are not centered on institutional structures or do not primarily seek national-level policy influence.

Institutional public policy organizations are

We define civil society organizations and independent media as formally constituted entities based on free association—including media outlets not aligned with state, partisan, or corporate interests—that pursue democratizing objectives, the defense of human rights, and the strengthening of civic space and the right to information

those focused on influencing public policy development, legislation, and judicial decisions that contribute to independent justice systems, human rights, and democratic governance.

The category of social transformation organizations includes those that aim to promote broader cultural and social change toward greater inclusion and equity, such as organizations focused on gender, LGBTI rights, or civic participation, among others.

Finally, the category of independent media includes organizations whose primary mode of influence is through journalism and investigative reporting. Due to their inherently cross-cutting nature, these actors may intersect with or contribute to any of the three aforementioned categories.

Regarding organizational sustainability, this study conceptualizes sustainability as the "overall strength and viability of CSO sectors,"[54] which, according to the United Nations, entails "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[55] In other words, it refers to the pursuit of balance **between needs and resources to ensure their long-term availability.** Likewise, social innovation is understood as the process of developing and implementing effective solutions to often systemic problems in support

[54] https://www.icnl.org/post/tools/civil-society-organization-sustainability-index

[55] https://www.un.org/es/impacto-acad%C3%A9mico/sostenibilidad

[56] https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/experience/about/centers-institutes/csi/defining-social-innovation

of social progress[56]. According to ECLAC (CEPAL), it refers to "new forms of management, administration, and implementation; new instruments or tools; and new combinations of factors aimed at improving social conditions and overall quality of life for the population of the region." In essence, it is the search for new solutions to systemic problems.

To analyze the sustainability of CSOs and independent media, the Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index—developed since 1997—measures seven dimensions[57]: legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service provision, sectoral infrastructure, and public image. While all these dimensions are relevant to the objectives of this study, particular emphasis is placed on the legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, and political advocacy as core axes for the construction of scenarios and strategies. These variables are complemented by two additional dimensions: the feasibility of sustaining alliances, and the effects of regionalization and diasporas. The inclusion of alliances is informed by recent recommendations for donors and CSOs[58], while the relevance of regionalization and emerging political diasporas arises from observation of the current context[59].

Accordingly, the first variable focuses not strictly on legal frameworks, but more broadly on the **operating environment**, encompassing the political, legal, economic, and social conditions in which CSOs and independent media function. Within this dimension, the study seeks to identify advantages and constraints affecting their ability to achieve objectives, considering factors such as electoral cycles, legal frameworks, authoritarian geopolitical trends, criminalization strategies, and reductions in international cooperation.

The second variable is **organizational capacity**. This dimension examines the internal capacities of CSOs to achieve their goals, including organizational longevity, size, generational and institutional fatigue, as well as experience and preparedness to adapt and respond to crisis situations.

The third variable is **financial viability.** This dimension explores sources of funding, their diversity, management tools, and institutional and financial projections (such as the number of active projects, staffing levels, and budget

CSOs are experiencing a form of 'forced decentralization' driven by authoritarian measures and shifting social and economic conditions. This dynamic, while constraining, also opens new contexts that may enable innovative responses and adaptive strategies

cuts), as well as the strategies organizations may adopt in a context where donors and available resources are increasingly limited.

The fourth variable is **political advocacy.** This dimension focuses on the ability of CSOs to achieve their social objectives, including how they assess their capacity to influence public opinion and public policy, their evaluation of the impact of their work to date, and their strategic orientation moving forward.

The variable concerning the feasibility of sustaining alliances explores the extent to which organizations recognize the necessity of the broader CSO ecosystem, their familiarity with it, and their ability to orient strategies toward its strengthening. It also examines their understanding of cross-sector collaboration, the increasingly blurred boundaries between domestic and international issues, as well as their capacity to contribute to the ecosystem and their awareness of interdependence among actors.

Finally, the variable on **the effects of regionalization and political diasporas**—resulting from forced displacement—emerges from observing current realities and identifying opportunities for innovation. Specifically, CSOs are experiencing a form of "forced decentralization" driven by authoritarian measures and shifting social and economic conditions. This dynamic, while constraining, also opens new contexts that may enable innovative responses and adaptive strategies.

[57] https://www.ngoconnect.net/civil-society-organization-sustainability-index-methodology-0

[58] See 1.1 Current situation.

[59] See 1. Introduction.

3 Methodology

3.1 General Methodological Approach

The research adopts a mixed-methods, comparative, and regional approach to analyze the sustainability of the ecosystem of CSOs and independent media in Central America, within a context of shrinking civic space, authoritarianism, and transnational reconfiguration. It combines qualitative and quantitative tools to capture both the trajectories, perceptions, and strategies of key actors, as well as structural patterns related to organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, and alliances. The analysis is organized by country (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala), allowing for the identification of national specificities alongside shared regional dynamics.

The study integrates in-depth interviews, the application of the RIOCA Index, actor mapping, and the construction of non-predictive scenarios, conceived as tools to explore possible futures and strategic options. The approach is situated and context-sensitive, incorporating the impact of exile, repression, and regionalization, as well as a human rights, intersectional, and security framework to ensure the ethical and protected use of information.

3.2 Techniques and Instruments

Actor mapping

An initial mapping of 135 actors (CSOs, media outlets, and experts) was conducted to reconstruct the regional ecosystem under conditions of political and financial constraint. Actors were characterized based on variables such as type, sector, scope, country of operation, and country of residence, enabling the study to capture their diversity, fragmentation, interdependence, and the growing role of exile and diaspora. Rather than a mere inventory, the mapping functioned as an analytical tool that informed the selection of interviews, surveys, and focus groups.

Qualitative Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was applied based on the actor mapping, prioritizing key actors by country, organizational type, and scope of influence. A total of 61 actors were selected, and 41 semi-structured interviews were conducted. This approach enabled the reconstruction of organizational trajectories, decision-making processes, and strategic adaptations, capturing in-depth the diversity of responses to the closure of civic space.

STAKEHOLDER PRIORITIZATION

Country of work	High	Medium	Low.	N/A	Subtotal
Central America	5	1		3	**9**
Expert	1			1	**2**
CSO	4	1		2	**7**
El Salvador	16	10		11	**37**
Shut down	2				**2**
Expert	1	1			**2**
CSO	13	9	11		**33**
El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras	1				**1**
CSO	1				**1**
Guatemala	12	3		25	**40**
Expert		1		2	**3**
CSO	12	2		23	**37**
Honduras	12	1		1	**14**
CSO	12	1	1		**14**
Nicaragua	15	6	7		**28**
Shut down		1			**1**
CSO	15	5	7		**27**
Nicaragua and Central America		1			**1**
CSO		1	1		**2**
N/A			1	4	**5**
Expert				4	**4**
Total	**61**	**22**	**20**	**32**	**135**

TABLE 1. Qualitative sampling breakdown for prioritizing in-depth interviews.

Interviews

Interviews are a qualitative method for collecting oral and personalized information on events, experiences, and perspectives. For this study, structured interviews were ruled out, as the primary objective was not to compare responses across actors, but rather to explore the processes of interest in depth. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used, allowing for the collection of richer and more nuanced information, as well as the flexibility to address unforeseen topics[60]. A guiding questionnaire or interview guide was developed to cover all identified conceptual variables.

An approximate range of eight to twelve interviews per country was considered sufficient to capture a diversity of profiles and achieve an adequate level of analytical depth, with the final number adjusted based on the availability and relevance of identified actors. Based on this approach, the interviews conducted were as follows:

[60] Pilar Folgueiras Bertomeu, «La entrevista». Universitat de Barcelona.

COUNTRIES AND TYPES OF CSOS AND MEDIA INTERVIEWED

		Institutional public policy organizations	Territorial Organizations	Social transformation organizations	Independent Media
Total	**41**	**12**	**9**	**11**	**9**
Nicaragua*	**11**	3	3	3	2
El Salvador	**9**	2	2	3	2
Honduras	**8**	2	1	2	3
Guatemala	**11**	3	3	3	2
Central America	**2**	2	–	–	–

*One of the interviewees was a CSO that had ceased operations. Its responses were not used in the narrative findings and were only considered to provide additional contextual understanding of the situation.

TABLE 2. Breakdown of interviewed CSOs and media outlets by country and type.

RIOCA Index Survey

The **Institutional Resilience Index of Civil Society Organizations in Central America (RIOCA)** is an analytical tool designed to measure, compare, and monitor the level of vulnerability of civil society organizations and independent media across Central America. It measures and compares dimensions such as the operating environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, and alliances. The index also enabled direct triangulation between qualitative and quantitative data. The index provides a comprehensive assessment of institutional resilience in contexts of high political and financial pressure, identifying strengths, vulnerabilities, and critical areas. In total, the survey was completed by 58 organizations, distributed by country and type of organization as detailed in the following table:

Country	Subtotal	Institutional public policy organizations	Independent Media	Territorial Organizations	Social transformation organizations
Subtotal	**58**	**15**	**16**	**13**	**14**
Central America	**3**	2	1	–	–
El Salvador	**18**	5	6	3	4
Guatemala	**16**	4	4	4	4
Honduras	**8**	2	2	1	3
Nicaragua	**13**	3	2	5	3

TABLE 3. Breakdown of surveyed CSOs and media outlets by country and type.

Scenarios and Focus Groups

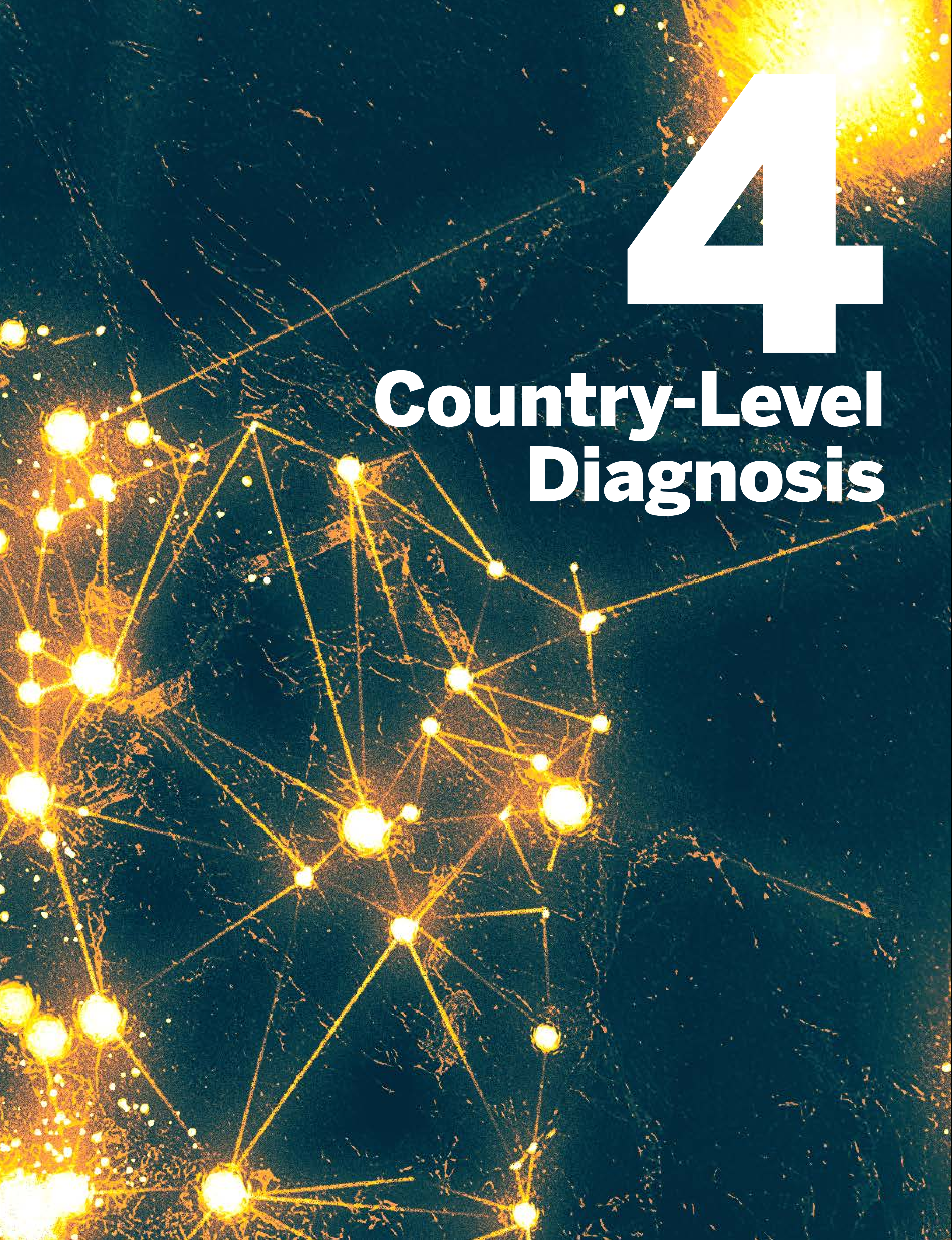
Country-specific scenarios were developed based on "critical uncertainties," not as predictions but as tools to analyze possible futures. These were explored through country-level focus groups, where participants discussed implications, adaptation strategies, and organizational capacities. This exercise enabled the translation of the diagnostic findings into collective strategic reflection, grounded in the lived experience of participating actors.

3.3 Scope and Limitations

The methodology employed in this study provides a regional and comparative diagnosis with a high level of analytical depth regarding the sustainability and resilience of civil society organizations and independent media in Central America. The combination of interviews, the RIOCA Index survey, actor mapping, scenario construction, and focus groups enables robust triangulation of information, integrating qualitative and quantitative perspectives as well as context-specific strategic insights by country. This approach makes it possible to identify structural patterns, relevant national differences, and emerging strategies, offering valuable inputs for organizational decision-making, strategic planning, and dialogue with key stakeholders, including donors and regional partners.

However, the study also presents limitations inherent to its design. First, the sampling strategy is purposive and analytical; therefore, the findings are not intended to be statistically representative of the full universe of CSOs and media in the region. Second, much of the information collected is based on perceptions and self-assessments by participating organizations, which may introduce biases associated with high-pressure contexts, risk, or self-censorship. Additionally, security conditions and the closure of civic space in some countries limited access to certain actors and restricted the ability to explore particularly sensitive topics in greater depth.

Finally, the construction of scenarios and the use of focus groups should be understood as analytical and strategic tools, rather than predictive exercises. The scenarios reflect situated perspectives on the near future within a highly volatile context, and their relevance is subject to rapid changes in the political, social, and economic environments of the region. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a consistent and flexible framework for understanding complex dynamics, identifying margins for action, and guiding strategies for sustainability and resilience in contexts of crisis and transition.



4 Country-Level Diagnosis

NICARAGUA

This chapter presents the country-level diagnosis, based on the integration of qualitative findings from interviews and quantitative results from the survey, including the RIOCA Index. For each national context, the analysis develops the main perceptions of interviewees regarding the sustainability, resilience, and adaptive capacity of their own organizations and media outlets, understood as situated readings of the political, social, and organizational moment they are experiencing. In this sense, the chapter constitutes an analytical systematization of informed perceptions, complemented and contrasted with index results, rather than an external evaluation of organizational performance.

Countries are presented in an order that moves from those exhibiting the most adverse conditions for the sustainability of the CSO and media ecosystem to those with relatively greater margins for action and adaptation. For each country, the analysis examines prevailing trends as well as relevant differences across the following variables: political and social environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, political and social advocacy, sustainability of alliances, and the effects of regionalization and diasporas. This approach makes it possible to identify both structural constraints and differentiated capacities depending on the national context.

The diagnosis for each country concludes with the presentation of constructed scenarios, developed from these perceptions and the critical factors identified. These scenarios are not intended as predictions, but as analytical tools that help structure uncertainty, explore possible future trajectories, and serve as catalysts for identifying organizational and collective strategies, which are further developed in subsequent chapters of the report.

4.1 Nicaragua

In-depth interviews were conducted with the leadership of organizations and media outlets primarily focused on Nicaragua.

Political and Social Environment

None of the organizations interviewed currently maintains any form of relationship with the government of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, and all describe the environment as one of extreme hostility and systematic persecution. All have received threats or been subjected to direct attacks and are currently operating in exile. The main drivers of persecution include attempts by the regime to neutralize their role in social mobilization since the 2018 uprising, dismantle potential actors with electoral projection, and silence the dissemination of critical information and investigative work. Several interviewees were visibly affected by the recent killing of a Nicaraguan exile in Costa Rica[61], which reinforced the perception of an expanding pattern of transnational repression, even against Nicaraguans residing abroad.

Regarding perceived opportunities or risks associated with the electoral process scheduled for 2027, none of the interviewees identified any real possibility of change through this mechanism. Some suggested that potential shifts in the regime would more likely stem from internal conflicts within the ruling party or factors related to the health of Ortega and Murillo, rather than formal electoral processes. In this context, only four respondents considered that their organizations might play a role in the upcoming process, primarily focused on work with the general population: promoting critical thinking, sustaining networks, documenting and denouncing electoral irregularities and human rights

violations. As for the political opposition, only one interviewee considered it relevant to maintain any form of engagement from civil society organizations; the rest did not identify a clear organizational role in relation to the electoral process.

Most respondents agreed that the primary factor shaping their work in the immediate future is financial, followed—according to more than half—by the anticipated deepening of authoritarianism. Only one person identified the need for strategic reinvention of their organization as a central concern, and a small number pointed to public disillusionment and frustration as a growing challenge. Even so, despite the lack of objective mechanisms to measure it precisely, almost all interviewees believe that the general population—or at least significant sectors of it—support the work carried out by their organizations or similar initiatives. This perception constitutes an important source of legitimacy and continuity in an extremely adverse context.

Organizational Capacity

A significant proportion of the organizations interviewed operate with medium-sized teams and levels of activity that allow them to sustain their work in the short to medium term. Within this context, there is a relatively high perception of organizational continuity over the next three years, suggesting notable levels of institutional resilience, even under adverse conditions. Likewise, many organizations have begun—formally or in early stages—to consider leadership transition processes, although these efforts are taking place under significant structural constraints.

At the same time, the emotional impact of the political context, repression, and exile emerges as a cross-cutting factor that significantly affects teams, influencing both their well-being and their operational sustainability. Among the main strengths identified are commitment, internal cohesion, accumulated experience, and the legitimacy of both the organizations and their leadership. In contrast, persistent structural weaknesses include financial limitations, security risks, and work overload. Generational renewal faces additional barriers linked to risk, resource scarcity, and conditions of exile, highlighting the challenges of sustaining and renewing organizational capacities within a context of prolonged authoritarianism.

Financial Viability

Overall, only a small number of the organizations interviewed rely on a single funding source. Most operate with a portfolio of three to five funders. However, even with this relative diversity, there is a high level of dependence on philanthropy and international cooperation. Within these sources, very few organizations report having their own income streams or autonomous revenue-generation mechanisms; when such mechanisms do exist, they represent only a marginal share of overall budgets.

The research identified a significant contraction in external funding over the past three years. In six of the ten in-depth interviews, respondents pointed to the withdrawal or reduction of USAID funding as a result of decisions made by the administration of Donald Trump. In other cases, reductions or closures linked to additional U.S.-based institutions were mentioned. Cuts associated with the European Union and other international organizations were also reported.

In response to this context, most of the organizations and media outlets interviewed and surveyed report having reflected on the need to diversify their funding sources, although very few have been able to implement or sustain these strategies over time. Beyond seeking new donors through project-based funding, the strategies mentioned include: the creation of service units to generate revenue; crowdfunding schemes (including efforts targeting audiences in the United States and the Nicaraguan diaspora); "multi-actor anchor" financing models for co-funding with beneficiaries or partners; exploration of relationships with private companies and corporate social responsibility programs; engagement with Costa Rican civil society to access public tenders; provision of technical consultancy services (e.g., project management); merchandise sales; audiovisual production for the private sector; collaboration with Indigenous networks in the Global North with access to

61 The assassination of Roberto Samcam, a Nicaraguan former military officer and critic of the regime of Daniel Ortega, carried out on June 19, 2025 in San José, exposed the persistence of transnational risks faced by exiled individuals and political dissidents. It also highlighted the extension of intimidation and violence beyond national borders, including in countries considered places of refuge.

alternative donors; thematic expansion (e.g., from Indigenous and Afro-descendant rights to environmental rights); membership fees or audience donations without restricting access to content; and digital monetization mechanisms (such as YouTube channels and websites).

The areas most affected by funding cuts include research, communications, project operations, mobility and travel, office maintenance, hiring of technical staff, and reductions in fees. In some cases, this has resulted in staff reductions; in others, it has led to a cumulative deterioration of working conditions and increased pressure on small teams to sustain basic operations. Beyond operational impacts, the reduction in funding is also associated with significant emotional effects: a sense of vulnerability, increased organizational stress, and difficulties in medium-term planning. Additionally, respondents report a weakening of connections with local communities, reduced public visibility for some organizations, and greater barriers to integrating new profiles. Taken together, these findings underscore that financial sustainability has become a critical cross-cutting factor, with direct effects on the capacity for action, care, and long-term continuity of the CSO and independent media ecosystem in contexts of shrinking civic space.

Political and Social Advocacy

Nearly all of the organizations and media outlets interviewed and surveyed agreed that advancing their social and political objectives increases the risks they face. As a result, most have reduced the public exposure of their leadership in response to these threats.

POLITICAL OBJECTIVES AND MEASUREMENT OF ADVOCACY BY CSOS AND MEDIA IN NICARAGUA

Political Objective	How It Is Measured
Strengthening democracy	Monitoring and evaluation units; examples include focus groups with beneficiaries and structured internal team feedback processes
Making human rights violations visible and supporting victims of repression	Responses and levels of trust from victims and their families
Making human rights violations visible and reducing cultural gaps between the Caribbean and the rest of Nicaragua	Media monitoring and the uptake of narratives by broader audiences
Contributing to social justice	Project-level indicators within strategic plans; for example, the percentage of migrants achieving economic sustainability after participating in training programs
Preserving Nicaragua’s natural resources	Media monitoring to assess presence in public opinion; positioning within local communities; responses from government and international mechanisms
Promoting social change through communication, narratives, and social movements	Government responses to advocacy campaigns conducted in alliance with other organizations
Advancing full citizenship for women	Participation and presence in social and political coalitions
Building feminist memory from exile and developing new migrant narratives	Social media indicators, audience surveys, focus groups, and participation in workshops and events
Journalism that contributes to strengthening the rule of law	Social media metrics; recognition as a source in national and international media; government responses
Overcoming censorship	Positioning as a reference media outlet

TABLE 4. Examples of political and social advocacy objectives of CSOs and media outlets, as well as how they measure and evaluate their impact.

This evidence suggests that, even in highly restrictive contexts, organizations continue to develop mechanisms to assess their advocacy efforts. However, these mechanisms are often closely tied to qualitative indicators—such as trust, narrative positioning, and audience engagement—rather than traditional policy outcomes, reflecting both the constraints and adaptive strategies of advocacy under authoritarian conditions.

Sustainability of Alliances

The organizations interviewed recognize a significant level of interdependence within the ecosystem: the strengthening or weakening of some actors directly affects the capacities of the whole. However, this logic does not fully extend to the realm of security, which continues to be perceived primarily as an internal responsibility rather than a collective one.

Alliances are built mainly on strategic alignment, trust, and shared principles, as well as on their contribution to collective strength and public legitimacy. In terms of needs, financial support emerges as the most urgent priority, alongside demands for technical assistance in areas such as institutional protocols, communication, and advocacy. There is openness to deeper forms of collaboration—including, in some cases, organizational integration—provided that these contribute to long-term sustainability.

As a strategic opportunity, respondents highlight the need to strengthen international coordination in response to the regionalization of authoritarianism. Additional priorities include expanding spaces for coordination, reducing competition, diversifying access to resources, and strengthening communication and collective action.

Effects of Regionalization and Diasporas

Exile has become a widespread condition within the ecosystem and a critical factor for organizational sustainability. It has affected operational continuity, team stability, and planning capacity, forcing organizations to reorganize functions, redistribute responsibilities, and adapt their strategies. In response, many have expanded their scope toward a regional scale, supporting displaced populations and reconfiguring networks in an increasingly transnational context.

While some countries are perceived as relatively more viable environments for operational reorganization, they entail higher costs and new institutional barriers, placing additional strain on financial sustainability. At the same time, the regionalization of authoritarianism and forced displacement have consolidated a scenario in which operating requires mobility, dispersion, and increased precariousness. Nevertheless, new opportunities are also emerging: the strengthening of transnational networks, access to new sources of support, and enhanced capacity for advocacy from the diaspora, as well as expanded regional connections and flows of information, denunciation, and solidarity.

> **Exile has become a widespread condition within the ecosystem and a critical factor for organizational sustainability. It has affected operational continuity, team stability, and planning capacity, forcing organizations to reorganize functions, redistribute responsibilities, and adapt their strategies”**

EL SALVADOR

4.2 El Salvador

Interviews were conducted with leaders of organizations and independent media, including actors both inside the country and in exile, complemented by the application of the RIOCA Index survey to a broader group of organizations.

Political and Social Environment

All interviewed organizations agreed that El Salvador has undergone a drastic transformation in its political context in recent years, marked by an escalation of repression against human rights defenders and journalists since May 2025, including the approval of the Foreign Agents Law. None of the organizations receives government funding or implements projects in partnership with executive branch institutions.

All respondents report extreme or near-extreme hostility from the current government, with a high legal risk to organizational existence due to the absence of procedural guarantees. All have received threats, although none is currently facing formal judicial proceedings. One community-based organization reported awareness of arbitrary investigations targeting its leaders and their families, while three others experience legal uncertainty due to the executive's refusal to respond to requests for tax exemption under the Foreign Agents Law. This is perceived as a coercive use of discretion—determining who is classified as a foreign agent, who is subject to registration and inspections, and whose access to international funding is restricted.

Interviewees consistently indicated that the upcoming election—scheduled for March 2027—offers no credible opposition or clear rules of the game, and that the current regime is likely to consolidate power through what they describe as a de facto referendum on the president's mandate. This is expected to unfold in a context of heightened repression, with fears that intimidation may escalate into physical violence. It is considered unlikely that civil society—having already participated in an unsuccessful attempt to promote a unified opposition candidacy in 2024—will engage in a similar effort again.

Respondents also assert that the president's highly personalistic political style has weakened territorial leadership, reducing electoral counterweights and contributing to the advancement of election timelines. More broadly, there is a widespread expectation that repression will intensify as the social and economic impacts of government policies increasingly affect broader segments of the population.

In this context, most organizations believe that government propaganda has succeeded in severing the relationship between the general population and independent organizations and media, positioning them instead as adversaries in the public narrative.

Organizational Capacity

Organizations in El Salvador show consolidated trajectories and medium-sized teams, with governance models that combine leadership continuity and rotation. In general, they have basic institutional management mechanisms—such as security protocols, internal policies, and accountability practices—that allow them to sustain operations in adverse contexts. Nearly all report having security protocols, some form of gender policy, and accountability systems, which in a few cases include assembly-based processes.

Among their main strengths, organizations highlight their ability to adapt in crisis contexts and the strong commitment of their teams. All emphasize their high level of credibility, in some cases built over decades of visible work and sustained leadership in social and human rights struggles. This legitimacy has been essential in resisting smear campaigns. One organization underscored as a strength the fact that it has operated with a geographically "multi-sited team" since its inception, which has facilitated adaptation to the current context of exile.

At the same time, recurring weaknesses are identified, even among organizations with strong public presence and international reach. Chief among these is the challenge of communication in the current national context. There is also a shared recognition of the need to strengthen long-term strategic thinking and move beyond reactive approaches—what one interviewee described as being "efficient firefighters." Two organizations pointed to their boards of directors as unexpectedly vulnerable spaces, given the impact of government intimidation on their members. Several organizations engage in self-critique and call for deeper internal reflection to adapt to the new context. One highlighted the lack of territorial engagement as a weakness in the current political moment, while another identified as a short-term priority the need to rethink internal processes—"to move beyond NGO culture"—and shift toward dynamics where the organization as a whole focuses on measuring social impact rather than process outputs shaped by crisis conditions.

Several interviewees also pointed to the challenge of ensuring that generational differences do not become a source of organizational fragility. They stressed the need to transmit accumulated knowledge and historical experience to younger team members, amid the perception that uncertainty and fear may affect those with less political experience more intensely. In this regard, they warn of the risk that the current context could deepen these gaps, both within organizations and across society more broadly.

Among their main strengths, organizations highlight their ability to adapt in crisis contexts and the strong commitment of their teams. All emphasize their high level of credibility, in some cases built over decades of visible work and sustained leadership in social and human rights struggles

Financial Viability

Organizations in El Salvador operate under diverse conditions, with heterogeneous funding models. While some depend almost exclusively on external resources, others have developed their own sustainability mechanisms, such as membership contributions, community-based support networks, individual donations, or self-generated activities. Although still limited in scale, these experiences reflect efforts to build greater financial autonomy in an increasingly restrictive environment.

Overall, there remains a high concentration of income among a small number of donors, which increases vulnerability to shifts in international cooperation. Recent funding cuts have had uneven effects: in some cases, they have led to significant reductions in staff and operations, while organizations with more diversified funding streams or a stronger social support base have been able to maintain relatively greater stability.

In response, several organizations have reconfigured their priorities, reducing or closing certain lines of work and focusing resources on areas considered strategic—such as protection, monitoring, or accompaniment in higher-risk contexts. For media outlets, this has also meant adjusting production dynamics and relationships with audiences in line with their current capacities.

At the same time, there is a growing exploration of diversification strategies, including services, products, self-generated economic initiatives, and new forms of engagement with audiences and communities. However, these

alternatives coexist with high levels of uncertainty regarding the sustainability of current models, and with a growing perception—among some actors—that traditional grant-based funding schemes are reaching structural limits.

Political and Social Advocacy

Most of the organizations interviewed and surveyed in El Salvador agree that pursuing their social and political objectives increases their exposure to risk. A majority acknowledged resorting to self-censorship in their advocacy and communication work as a form of protection—sometimes at the request or under pressure from family members. In fact, several organizations declined to participate in this study due to fear of reprisals—even after being assured anonymity—or because they had adopted, since early 2025, internal policies of complete silence.

At the same time, as has been observed since 2018 among Nicaraguan organizations and media, those operating in exile are highly aware of the differentiated advocacy role they can play. From safer environments, they complement the more constrained and risky work of those still operating within El Salvador. As one interviewee who left the country in 2025 explained: "Our public denunciation challenges silence and self-censorship; we open the door for others to speak."

POLITICAL OBJECTIVES AND MEASUREMENT OF ADVOCACY BY CSOS AND MEDIA IN EL SALVADOR

Political Objective	How It Is Measured
Sustain democratic forces and create conditions for a future return to democracy	Development of new, more useful monitoring and evaluation systems
Consolidate a regional narrative: democracy in Central America is captured by criminal networks (with varying forms)	Reach and dissemination of publications and reports
Act as an effective barrier to attacks on freedom of expression and protect journalists; raise public awareness about the importance of defending journalism	Annual evaluations; indicators include organizational survival and number of at-risk cases supported
Influence debate on electoral campaign financing; serve as a key source of information for media, civil society, and international actors; generate data to pressure authorities into moderating actions	Media mentions; citation of reports in journalistic investigations and political or institutional debates
Work with local governments to build infrastructure responding to women's needs; train justice sector actors and police on gender issues	Program implementation and number of participants in activities
Influence public health policy	Inability to measure or achieve results due to the government's decision to cut off all dialogue
Defend the rights of rural workers and environmental defenders in their territories	Growth in membership and participation; dissemination of messaging in media
Defend victims of violence and abuse of power; promote the rule of law	Project-based indicators; recognized need to strengthen qualitative evaluation within annual operational plans

TABLE 5. Examples of political and social advocacy objectives of CSOs and media outlets, as well as how they measure and evaluate their impact.

This evidence reflects a constrained but persistent field of advocacy, where organizations continue to operate under high risk while adapting their strategies. Measurement of impact increasingly relies on indirect indicators—such as narrative positioning, visibility, and survival—rather than direct policy outcomes, highlighting both the limits and the adaptive capacity of advocacy under conditions of authoritarian consolidation.

Sustainability of Alliances

Organizations in El Salvador generally express a positive disposition toward collaboration and maintain multiple partnerships. However, this openness coexists with a more ambivalent assessment of the strategic role of alliances, which are not always perceived as decisive for achieving organizational objectives. In practice, this reflects an ecosystem where collaboration is frequent, but not necessarily structuring.

At the same time, a logic of operational autonomy prevails: most organizations do not perceive themselves as dependent on others, nor do they consider their security to be directly linked to the behavior of the broader ecosystem. In some cases, this translates into decisions to prioritize direct work with communities or specific populations over broader coordination processes.

Despite this, there is openness to deeper forms of collaboration—including sustained alliances or more integrated arrangements—although these possibilities face obstacles related to organizational differences, approaches, and priorities. In this context, there is also a growing recognition of the need to rethink how collaboration is structured, moving toward more flexible agreements oriented around long-term strategic objectives.

In terms of needs, several organizations emphasize that international political support is as important as—or even more important than—financial support, particularly in a high-pressure environment. At the same time, they acknowledge that material sustainability remains a critical factor: without resources, collaboration is difficult to sustain. In this regard, opportunities are identified in strengthening networks in exile contexts and exploring models that promote greater financial autonomy and collective action capacities.

Several organizations emphasize that international political support is as important as—or even more important than—financial support, particularly in a high-pressure environment. At the same time, they acknowledge that material sustainability remains a critical factor: without resources, collaboration is difficult to sustain

Effects of Regionalization and Diasporas

Most of the organizations surveyed in El Salvador report having members of their teams in exile. Within this sample alone, a total of 30 individuals are currently displaced. Fewer than half of these organizations are able to allocate resources to cover the basic needs of those in exile, and most indicate that they cannot guarantee such financial support for more than six months.

Two of the surveyed organizations were created directly in response to exile or to the escalation of government repression in recent years, reflecting the emergence of new organizational forms shaped by forced displacement.

Most organizations state that exile has not fundamentally altered their core priorities or thematic areas of work. However, three report having redefined their geographic focus—either by concentrating more deeply on the country where most of their staff has relocated, or by expanding their scope to a broader Latin American scale.

Notably, none of the surveyed organizations identified the large historical Salvadoran diaspora in the United States or other countries as a strategic area of engagement, support, expansion, or political action. This suggests an underexplored dimension of potential relevance for sustainability, legitimacy, and transnational advocacy.

HONDURAS

4.3 Honduras

In Honduras, in-depth interviews were conducted with leaders of organizations and independent media, covering a range of profiles—including institutional advocacy, territorial work, community-based initiatives, and journalism—allowing for a diverse reading of the national ecosystem.

Compared to other cases, participation was more limited in both the qualitative and quantitative phases. This results in a more constrained empirical base which, while sufficient to identify relevant trends, suggests that findings should be interpreted with caution. This lower response rate may also reflect the context in which organizations operate, characterized by restrictions, distrust, and operational limitations that affect their willingness or ability to engage in this type of exercise.

Political and Social Environment

The electoral tensions of 2025 confirmed the diagnosis shared by interviewed organizations, although several noted that extreme polarization, the arbitrary use of institutions to harass critical voices, and the persistent shadow of violence linked to organized crime have been defining features of Honduras for at least two decades.

At the time of the interviews, most organizations agreed on a pessimistic outlook regardless of the electoral outcome. The three main political parties competing for power are widely perceived as sharing a legacy of corruption, ties to drug trafficking, and tolerance of impunity. As such, the—contested—victory of the National Party did not represent a source of hope for civil society.

By contrast, environmental and LGBTI rights organizations reported having achieved some progress under

the government of Libre and expressed concern that the return of the party associated with Juan Orlando Hernández—recently pardoned in the United States after a conviction related to drug trafficking and money laundering—could result in setbacks.

Organizations report having faced various forms of harassment and pressure in recent years, within a context of legal uncertainty and low institutional predictability. While the level of risk does not reach that of other countries in the region, the prevailing perception is clear: the environment could deteriorate rapidly. No one feels completely safe. Some organizations have chosen to reduce their visibility or adjust their operational strategies. The space for action exists, but it is fragile.

Pressures are multiple and persistent: indirect restrictions, threats, digital vulnerabilities, and the latent risk that legal tools may be used to constrain civic work. The concern is not only about current conditions, but about what may come next. Several voices warn of a potential shift from stigmatization to the systematic use of the justice system as a mechanism of control. Honduras appears, in the words of one interviewee, to be in a "waiting moment"—an unstable equilibrium.

Pressures are multiple and persistent: indirect restrictions, threats, digital vulnerabilities, and the latent risk that legal tools may be used to constrain civic work. The concern is not only about current conditions, but about what may come next

This is compounded by a perception of growing structural fragility and the erosion of external protective references. International support, which for years functioned as a buffer, no longer provides the same guarantees. The message is clear: the rules of the game have changed. Organizations are aware of this—and understand that they will need to reinvent themselves.

At the same time, there are emerging signals that open small cracks in this restrictive context: increased civic interest, more active audiences, and a growing appreciation for independent journalism in moments of crisis. This support is not yet consolidated—it is quiet, uneven, sometimes invisible. But it exists. And it may become a critical point of leverage.

Organizational Capacity

Organizations in Honduras show consolidated trajectories and relatively large teams, supported by formal planning structures and functioning internal protocols. There is a widespread perception of short-term continuity, even under adverse conditions. However, this apparent stability coexists with a transversal challenge: high staff turnover. Sustainability is not immediately in question, but it remains under constant pressure.

Among the main strengths identified are organizational resilience, transparency, and, in many cases, sustained connections with communities. The commitment of teams—particularly at leadership levels—also stands out as a critical asset. Yet this strength has limits: persistent gaps remain in leadership development and in the capacity to sustain organizational structures over time. The institutional "muscle" exists, but it is not always renewed.

Weaknesses are clear and recurrent. Communication emerges as a critical issue in an environment shaped by disinformation and intense contestation over public opinion. Some organizations acknowledge difficulties in connecting with broader audiences, and even a perceived erosion of legitimacy. This is compounded by widespread technological fragility, which constrains both operational capacity and security in contexts where risks are increasingly digitalized.

In some cases, recent experiences have forced organizations to anticipate extreme scenarios—such as digital attacks, financial blockages, or operational disruptions. This has prompted preventive and adaptive measures, including strengthening digital security and exploring alternative mechanisms for financial safeguarding. The signal is clear: organizational management is no longer merely technical. It is, increasingly, a matter of survival.

Financial Viability

Organizations in Honduras display, in comparative terms, a relatively stronger financial base. Most report having reserves that would allow them to sustain operations in the short term, providing some room for maneuver in the face

of uncertainty. However, this stability is uneven and coexists with cases of high fragility. Sustainability exists—but it is neither homogeneous nor guaranteed.

Unlike other contexts, there is more visible progress in diversification strategies: multiple funding sources, lower dependence on a single donor, and, in several cases, the generation of own-source income. These practices have strengthened the financial resilience of some organizations and reduced external dependency. Even so, a significant portion of the ecosystem remains anchored in international philanthropy as its primary support.

The impact of funding cuts has been uneven. Some organizations have managed to sustain—or even expand—their operations, while others have had to reduce staff, close lines of work, or scale back their territorial presence. In several cases, cuts have affected core functions and strategic programs, revealing that even relatively solid structures can quickly come under strain. The capacity to adapt exists, but it comes at a cost.

Despite these efforts, a structural limitation persists: the absence of consolidated alternative strategies beyond the search for new donors. Emerging initiatives—services, products, training programs, advertising, even a print magazine—have yet to offset the weight of traditional cooperation funding. In this context, the message is clear: without sustained financial backing, the ability to take risks is drastically reduced. And without risk-taking capacity, advocacy weakens.

Political and Social Advocacy

Most organizations interviewed in Honduras indicate that advancing their advocacy objectives increases their exposure to attacks. About half report having reduced their public visibility or engaging in self-censorship to avoid reprisals. One environmental organization stated that it suspended all activities during the electoral year for security reasons.

POLITICAL OBJECTIVES AND MEASUREMENT OF ADVOCACY BY CSOS AND MEDIA IN HONDURAS

Political Objective	How It Is Measured
Provide timely information to university youth, organized communities, CSOs, and international actors with influence in the country	Impact monitoring systems based not only on reach metrics but also on presence in public debate; evaluation of training activities
Achieve influence among rural populations, marginalized urban sectors, and critical/analytical audiences	Accompaniment by expert advisors and specialists
Promote the rule of law, justice, and governance	Project evaluations
Provide independent and high-quality information	Weekly reach metrics; monthly impact reports
Promote environmental rights, citizen participation, and environmental justice	Evaluation of project implementation across member organizations within networks
Promote youth empowerment, including violence prevention and engagement with families and community leadership	Annual institutional reporting, linking activities to objectives with disaggregated data
Defend the rights of women and LGBTIQ populations; challenge the influence of religious actors in public policy	Indicator systems based on strategic plans

TABLE 6. Examples of political and social advocacy objectives of CSOs and media outlets, as well as how they measure and evaluate their impact.

These findings reflect a context in which advocacy remains active but increasingly constrained. Measurement practices combine quantitative tools (reach, outputs, reporting) with more process-oriented or relational indicators (presence in public debate, expert validation), revealing both an effort to sustain strategic clarity and the limitations imposed by a high-risk environment.

Sustainability of Alliances

Organizations in Honduras show a strong sense of belonging to the broader ecosystem and a high willingness to collaborate. They maintain multiple active partnerships and recognize themselves as part of a shared community. However, this sense of belonging does not always translate into a perception of interdependence: many do not see their work or security as directly dependent on other actors. Coordination exists—but it is not consistently understood as a condition for survival.

Even so, alliances play a critical role in practice. They are used to amplify advocacy, share capacities, and respond to risks. More integrated forms of collaboration are also present, ranging from joint projects to direct solidarity mechanisms in response to threats. There is openness to advancing toward deeper arrangements—including, in some cases, mergers—though this is conditioned by strategic alignment and concerns about losing autonomy. Collaboration is pursued, but not at any cost.

In terms of needs, there is no single dominant priority, but a clear pattern emerges: organizations call for flexible funding, political backing, and capacity strengthening. Financial resources are necessary, but not sufficient. Political support directly affects security, while technical support strengthens the ability to adapt. The challenge is not only to survive, but to elevate the level of response in an increasingly demanding environment.

Finally, a strategic concern emerges: the absence of shared leadership or common spokespersons capable of articulating the ecosystem around key democratic agendas. This weakens collective advocacy capacity. At the same time, there is growing recognition of the need to strengthen regional coordination, grounded in an increasingly evident premise: the problems are no longer solely national—and the responses cannot be either.

Effects of Regionalization and Diasporas

Among the organizations interviewed in Honduras, only one reported having had to send six members of its staff or beneficiaries into exile or temporary relocation in recent years. Another organization, while not yet resorting to exile, currently has eight individuals under the protection of the National Protection System for Human Rights Defenders, which is nonetheless perceived as a highly fragile mechanism.

Other organizations have begun to anticipate potential escalation scenarios. Some report having contingency plans in place to relocate operations outside Honduras if necessary, including pre-established protocols for such transitions. Additionally, several organizations indicate that they have considered initiating engagement with the Honduran diaspora or expanding their work at a regional level.

These findings suggest that, while exile is not yet as widespread as in other countries in the region, it is increasingly present as a latent risk and a factor shaping organizational planning. At the same time, the possibility of regionalization and diaspora engagement is emerging not only as a response to threat, but also as a potential strategic avenue for sustainability and continuity.

A strategic concern emerges: the absence of shared leadership or common spokespersons capable of articulating the ecosystem around key democratic agendas. This weakens collective advocacy capacity. At the same time, there is growing recognition of the need to strengthen regional coordination

GUATEMALA

4.4 Guatemala

In Guatemala, in-depth interviews were conducted with leaders of organizations and independent media, covering a range of profiles (territorial work, community-based work, institutional advocacy, and media), enabling a broad reading of the national ecosystem.

This qualitative base was complemented by additional responses to the RIOCA Index survey, primarily from advocacy organizations and media outlets, strengthening comparative analysis and the identification of patterns across key dimensions.

Overall, the evidence provides a consistent picture of the Guatemalan ecosystem, combining diversity of actors with sufficient analytical depth to identify trends, tensions, and opportunities in the current context.

Political and Social Environment

It is important to note that, across the other countries analyzed, Guatemala was repeatedly identified as a key regional reference in the current context—both due to the political significance of the 2023–2024 cycle and its potential demonstration effect for Central America. Within the Guatemalan interviews, most participants emphasized that the political context cannot be assessed homogeneously within a three- to five-year methodological horizon, given the rupture represented by the beginning of the government of Bernardo Arévalo.

Accordingly, the analysis distinguishes between medium- and long-term perspectives, and those focused specifically on the remaining period of the current administration, which ends in January 2028.

Several leaders—particularly in the media sector—highlighted that during the government of Alejandro Giammattei, journalism and investigative work were subject to explicit blockages, institutional hostility, and systematic restrictions, increasing the vulnerability of media outlets and journalists. By contrast, some interviewees perceive that in the current moment, traditional actors who previously controlled state spaces are more fragmented and weakened. However, structural constraints on governance persist, particularly due to the overrepresentation and influence of traditional private sector actors in public decision-making.

Approximately half of the interviewees agree that the current administration represents a significant improvement compared to previous governments, noting greater possibilities for engagement with state institutions. That said, this relationship is neither uniform nor guaranteed across all sectors. Some organizations report very positive relationships with the government, while acknowledging ongoing barriers to access or coordination with certain institutions. Others emphasize that, particularly in territorial contexts, threats, attacks, and risks persist, and that the government has not succeeded in ensuring effective protection against local power structures, other institutions, and organized crime. At the same time, some interviewees warn of a growing risk of public disillusionment, linked to unmet expectations and the government's limited capacity to deliver tangible transformations.

Nearly all respondents agree that the upcoming electoral cycle and the potential change of government pose an imminent risk of regression, including the possibility of a return to a more adverse political environment for democratic agendas. In this context, roughly half anticipate active engagement in electoral observation and social oversight—both in the second-tier elections of 2026 and the subsequent general elections—while the other half expect to continue working on political participation, democratic strengthening, and human rights through community and territorial approaches.

Across the board, the vast majority identify financing as the main factor that will affect their work over the next three years. Around one-third highlight the potential reclosure of civic space—accompanied by hostility, persecution, or criminalization—as a central threat, particularly under a possible regressive electoral outcome. Finally, more than half perceive support from key social sectors (including peasant and Indigenous movements, rural youth, urban communities, and digital audiences), while a minority reports limited support, attributed to low public awareness of civil society and media work or to the influence of conservative religious and far-right sectors.

Organizational Capacity

The ecosystem in Guatemala is defined by its diversity: small, agile organizations coexist with more consolidated structures that have significant institutional capacity. There is a prevailing perception of relative short-term stability, with important levels of confidence in organizational continuity. However, this stability is fragile—it exists, but under pressure.

Internally, organizations tend to have cohesive teams with low turnover, which strengthens continuity and the accumulation of institutional knowledge. At the same time, leadership succession is widely recognized as a challenge and, in several cases, is already being addressed. The emotional impact of the political context is significant, though less acute than in other countries in the region. The pressure is not extreme, but it is constant.

Key strengths include administrative solidity, professionalization, and management capacity, positioning several organizations with a relatively high level of institutional maturity. These are complemented by committed teams, strong connections with audiences and communities, and the ability to articulate with diverse actors. There is structure, there is experience, there is legitimacy.

However, a structural vulnerability persists: dependence on international funding. This is not a new weakness, but it is becoming increasingly critical. In addition, organizations face a range of challenges—communication, strategic direction, and organizational adaptation—that do not follow a single pattern. The ecosystem is heterogeneous. And so are its risks.

Financial Viability

The ecosystem in Guatemala shows progress in income diversification, with multiple funding sources and, in several cases, the generation of own-source revenue. However, this diversification remains partial: sustainability still depends largely on international cooperation. There are more options, but the center of gravity has not shifted.

In recent years, several organizations have faced the reduction or withdrawal of external funding, confirming an increasingly volatile environment. These changes have placed pressure on budgets and forced internal adjustments. The signal is clear: resources are more uncertain, more competitive, and less stable.

In response, many organizations have activated diversification strategies, including services, products, partnerships with the private sector, individual donations, and new income-generation platforms. Innovation exists and is advancing—but it has not yet offset the structural dependence on external funding.

Despite these efforts, cuts have been unavoidable. They have affected teams, technical capacities, and, notably, strategic areas such as research. The risk is not only financial—it is a loss of capacity. Sustaining operations remains possible; sustaining impact is becoming increasingly difficult.

Political and Social Advocacy

Most organizations interviewed and surveyed in Guatemala believe that advancing their social and political objectives increases the risks they face. Nearly one-third acknowledged that, as a form of protection, they have resorted to self-censorship in their advocacy and communication work.

POLITICAL OBJECTIVES AND MEASUREMENT OF ADVOCACY BY CSOS AND MEDIA IN GUATEMALA

Political Objective	How It Is Measured
Improve quality of life through evidence-based public policies	Monitoring and evaluation systems
Transform the country's economic governance	Outcomes of working groups and positioning in public opinion
Promote human rights in national languages	Indicators (advocacy, participation, training)
Strengthen territorial democratic and human rights processes, as well as the audiovisual sector in Central America	Indicators of relationships with territorial communities
Contribute to coordinated action among Maya actors in the regions where they operate	Existence of a shared agenda and collective mobilization
Strengthen neighborhood and political organization in Guatemala City	Theory of change indicators
Promote social justice, gender equality, and youth empowerment	Project-based indicators (behavioral change, labor insertion, testimonies)
Ensure dignified living conditions for LGBTQ+ populations	Surveys and project indicators
Promote community and feminist journalism	Interaction with physical and digital communities
Stimulate public debate and independent journalism	Audience response and agenda-setting impact
Influence protection mechanisms for human rights defenders	Engagement with current government institutions

TABLE 7. Examples of political and social advocacy objectives of CSOs and media outlets, as well as how they measure and evaluate their impact.

These findings suggest that advocacy in Guatemala remains active and multifaceted, combining institutional engagement, territorial work, and narrative influence. Measurement approaches reflect a mix of formal systems (monitoring frameworks, indicators) and more relational or outcome-oriented metrics (public positioning, community engagement, agenda-setting), highlighting both the diversity of strategies and the need to better capture real impact in a fluid and uncertain political context.

Sustainability of Alliances

Most interviewees in Guatemala—a pattern also confirmed in the survey—agree that their organizational results depend, to a medium or high degree, on what other actors in the ecosystem do. This perception extends to the dimension of security: a significant proportion considers that their own protection and ability to mitigate risks is linked, at least in part, to the broader organizational environment and to the actions of other CSOs and media outlets. Nearly all respondents report feeling part of a community of organizations, and more than half identify the primary driver of alliances as alignment around a shared political and social project—expressed through common objectives, lines of work, principles, and values.

In terms of priority needs, most interviewees highlight external financial support as the most urgent, reaffirming the structural weight of this variable as a key determinant of sustainability. Eight respondents also

emphasized the importance of technical support, particularly in areas such as developing new funding models, strengthening research capacities and methodologies, communication strategies, leadership development, and internal processes—including human resources, security, anti-racist approaches, strategic and foresight analysis, team strengthening, organizational diagnostics, creativity and innovation, and academic support. Only three identified political support as a primary need, suggesting that, despite the highly politicized context, the most immediate gaps lie in institutional capacity and material sustainability.

Within this context, most organizations expressed willingness to explore deeper forms of integration—including institutional mergers—if necessary to achieve their objectives or ensure survival.

Regarding opportunities to strengthen the ecosystem, interviewees identified as a priority the development of common strategies in response to the national electoral context, and their articulation with regional dynamics. Around one-third highlighted the need to improve interorganizational communication and promote more systematic and sustained spaces for convergence. Some also underscored the strategic value of strengthening alliances to distribute territorial and thematic efforts, ensure coordinated coverage of critical areas of the country, and reduce competitive dynamics—particularly over funding—by promoting agreements that make collective work more efficient and sustainable

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Effects of Regionalization and Political Diasporas

None of the civil society organizations or media outlets interviewed with a primary focus on Guatemala were created directly as a response to exile or forced displacement. However, nearly half of the interviewees reported that key staff members have gone into exile over the past three to five years. This indicates that, while Guatemala does not constitute an "exile-based ecosystem" comparable to Nicaragua or other contexts, it has experienced sustained dynamics of forced displacement and relocation of critical profiles.

The organizational impact of these exiles has been heterogeneous. For some institutions, the effects have been limited; for others, they have represented a critical disruption, affecting internal capacities, leadership continuity, institutional management, and overall sustainability. Nonetheless, unlike in other countries, almost no organization reported having significantly altered its institutional mission or geographic focus as a result of exile. This suggests a relatively greater degree of territorial stability—or, in some cases, the persistence of minimum conditions that still allow operations within the country.

> **Key strengths include administrative solidity, professionalization, and management capacity, positioning several organizations with a relatively high level of institutional maturity**

Even so, from a forward-looking perspective, approximately half of the interviewees indicated that they have considered modifying the legal registration of their organization as a preventive or risk-mitigation measure. Countries identified as potentially safer for such strategies include Costa Rica, Mexico, United States, and Canada. At least three organizations reported already having an alternative legal registration in one of these countries, conceived as an institutional "Plan B." This reflects a growing adoption of legal protection and operational continuity strategies in uncertain scenarios, even in a context where the current political window is perceived as relatively more open than in other parts of the region.

Finally, some interviewees identified opportunities linked to recent regionalization processes and political diasporas, particularly in terms of increased international visibility, greater external media attention, and opportunities for exchange with comparative experiences from other countries. They also pointed to the potential for building new forms of transnational solidarity and, to a lesser extent, accessing emerging financial opportunities through international networks, academic partnerships, and other global support spaces.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, while diasporas have not redefined the territorial focus of the Guatemalan ecosystem, they are influencing institutional planning and contributing to the emergence of strategies centered on protection and transnational articulation.

5

Strategies and Innovative Approaches

Following the diagnostic phase, this chapter takes a critical step forward: moving from analysis to action. It systematizes the strategies that organizations themselves identify—and in some cases are already implementing—to confront democratic backsliding, the closure of civic space, and increasing institutional vulnerability across Central America. These are not prescriptive formulas. They are situated responses, grounded in lived experience.

The strategies are organized at two complementary levels. On one hand, the chapter gathers proposals emerging from country-specific scenario exercises: what is already being done, and what remains possible but has yet to be implemented. On the other, it systematizes ongoing practices with potential for replication, organized around key variables: organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, alliances, and transnational dynamics. The approach is deliberate: to connect the local with the transferable.

5.1 Strategies in Response to Country Scenarios

Spaces for collective strategic reflection were developed to address a central question: how to act under conditions of uncertainty? Based on three-year scenario matrices, organizations identified strategies aimed at two fronts: resisting in adverse contexts and expanding room for maneuver in more favorable ones. The goal was not consensus, but clarity.

The proposals were organized into actions already underway and strategies yet to be implemented, revealing both existing capacities and critical gaps. This exercise made it possible to map not only what is being done, but also what is missing.

From this process, a set of robust strategies emerges—those that remain effective even as conditions shift. They do not depend on ideal scenarios. They do not wait for favorable circumstances. They are the strategies that allow organizations to sustain their work, adapt, and continue acting.

Because in this context, resistance alone is not enough. The challenge is knowing how to sustain it.

Nicaragua

The focus group discussion in Nicaragua was marked by a tone of deep concern and collective introspection, shaped by the urgency of understanding and naming a political context that remains highly repressive and restrictive—both the country and across exile dynamics. Participants clearly expressed that their reading of the immediate future is conditioned by the persistence of political violence, the closure of civic space, and the absence of minimum conditions for the exercise of rights. This significantly limits organizational room for maneuver and deepens accumulated exhaustion.

> **Key strengths include administrative solidity, professionalization, and management capacity**

Throughout the exchange, a recurring difficulty emerged in maintaining the discussion strictly within the proposed scenarios. Interventions repeatedly returned to the traumatic experiences of 2018 and its aftermath, as well as to the current labor, emotional, and material precarity faced by individuals both in Costa Rica and within Nicaragua. This dynamic revealed an ecosystem profoundly affected by fatigue, uncertainty, and distrust, but also underscored the ongoing need to process experiences that continue to shape perceptions of both the present and the future.

The overall tone was further marked by a sense of abandonment and disconnection from international cooperation and philanthropy, perceived as insufficiently attuned to the complexity of the Nicaraguan context, the realities of operating in exile, and the political dilemmas facing the ecosystem. This was expressed through moments of frustration and contained anger, particularly when discussing the lack of coherent strategies for Nicaragua, the rigidity of funding mechanisms, the prioritization of indicators disconnected from lived realities, and the reduction in available resources.

Despite this, moments of strategic clarity did emerge. Participants identified key strengths, including accumulated experience in adverse conditions and a strong adaptive capacity. At the same time, they raised concerns about sectoral atomization, fragmentation risks, and the urgent need to rebuild spaces for coordination and shared security.

Ultimately, although marked by evident vulnerability, the focus group conveyed a clear will toward collective reconstruction. Several interventions emphasized the importance of intensifying dialogue, fostering in-person encounters, and rebuilding trust within the ecosystem of CSOs and independent media—particularly in a transnational context of escalating repression.

Strategies Already Underway

Organizations working on Nicaragua—particularly from exile contexts—are already implementing a set of adaptive strategies aimed at sustaining operations, legitimacy, and connection with the territory:

- Building alliances beyond Nicaragua that are already taking shape at regional and international levels.
- Maintaining a substantive connection with Nicaragua beyond donor-driven projects or externally imposed mechanisms.
- Sustaining social movements that still retain some capacity for action the country.
- Diversifying strategies and actively seeking new sources of sustainability.
- Continuously strengthening comprehensive security, including mental, physical, and digital dimensions.
- Developing approaches to expand organizational agency and presence outside Nicaragua, particularly in exile contexts such as Costa Rica and beyond.

Potential and Emerging Strategies

Beyond current practices, participants identified a set of strategic directions that could strengthen resilience, coordination, and long-term impact:

- Promoting international accountability and justice mechanisms.
- Articulating social movement forces to build a collective political subject capable of acting as opposition and sustaining strategic narratives.
- Identifying shared "red lines" to prevent fragmentation and enable coordination in potential negotiation scenarios.
- Developing collaborative proposals that complement different areas of work and organizational strengths.
- Strengthening regional alliances to respond to the transnational nature of repression.
- Critically revising intervention models to ensure real impact, aligning indicators with current social and political dynamics.
- Guaranteeing minimum conditions for dignified work and life, particularly in exile contexts.
- Placing care at the center of organizational practice.
- Expanding spaces for dialogue to rebuild trust and mutual understanding within the ecosystem.
- Shifting from intervention-based approaches to accompaniment models, enabling communities to exercise their own political agency and representation.
- Promoting collective dialogues on legitimacy and narrative construction, including how to sustain hope under prolonged repression.
- Designing strategies better aligned with donor requirements around consortia and partnerships, without reproducing artificial alliances.
- Investing in in-person, human-centered, and restorative spaces for exchange among CSOs.
- Developing a specific support strategy for independent media, recognizing their distinct vulnerabilities and roles.
- Moving beyond reductionist approaches toward Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, adopting more complex, non-instrumental, and politically grounded perspectives.

Together, these strategies reflect a transition from fragmented survival responses toward a more deliberate search for collective agency, transnational coordination, and deeper political coherence—under conditions where both action and sustainability must be constantly renegotiated.

Conclusions on Strategies in Nicaragua

The strategies currently underway in Nicaragua are primarily concentrated on adaptation to the environment, prioritizing institutional survival, team protection, the maintenance of community ties, and operational continuity from exile. In contrast, more proactive or "offensive" strategies—such as the consolidation of an articulated political subject capable of opposition and narrative contestation—largely remain at the level of ideas or aspirations, lacking the necessary conditions for implementation.

That said, it is important to highlight that, compared to other countries analyzed, the Nicaraguan ecosystem demonstrates a more advanced trajectory in building spaces for articulation, both the country and across transnational exile contexts. This accumulated experience represents a critical asset in an otherwise highly constrained environment.

The focus group expressed a clear and explicit desire to move toward deeper forms of social and political articulation, strengthen legitimacy, and rethink the role of civil society across different possible scenarios: transition, continuity, or further entrenchment of the regime. Despite tensions, exhaustion, and material precarity, participants conveyed a form of strategic hope—grounded not in immediate change, but in the possibility that new models of cooperation and philanthropy, stronger regional alliances, and gradual forms of return from the diaspora could open pathways to sustain struggles, protect teams, and contribute to the long-term reconstruction of civic space.

Among the **robust strategies**—those with cross-cutting value across multiple scenarios—two stand out:

- Strategies that have proven effective at the international level, particularly in leveraging solidarity networks, international justice and accountability mechanisms, and maintaining grounded connections with local realities from abroad.
- Strategies focused on building shared ideas, proposals, and narratives among CSOs and independent media, as a basis for collective action and political coherence.

These lessons are especially valuable as transferable inputs for other countries in the region facing similar dynamics of repression, fragmentation, and forced displacement.

Finally, the focus group articulated direct requests and recommendations aimed at donors. These are collected and further developed in the final section of the report, as part of a broader effort to realign external support with the realities and strategic needs of the ecosystem.

El Salvador

The focus group discussion on El Salvador was limited to organizations still operating within the country, with the aim of capturing how government persecution and a climate of self-censorship shape their analysis, as well as exploring viable strategies of resistance that do not rely on exile. The conversation took place in San Salvador, although a public venue was intentionally avoided for security reasons and to foster trust.

The dialogue unfolded in a climate of exploration and mutual listening, marked by pessimism regarding the proposed scenarios and a shared perception that the country is effectively operating under a "soft authoritarian" regime, with a high likelihood of progressively increasing repression based on the trajectory of government actions over the past six years.

Participants devoted most of the discussion to strategies aimed at recovering impact, particularly through the reconquest of the narrative terrain. However, these reflections did not translate into a clear or structured roadmap. In contrast, despite being one of the areas of greatest vulnerability, financial sustainability received minimal attention. The organizations demonstrated limited creativity in this domain, largely reiterating the need to continue relying on donor or international cooperation funding.

Strategies Already Underway

Articulation and Alliances

- Creating spaces for discussion and coordination among civil society organizations to explore collective responses to the crisis.
- Building closer relationships with youth in territorial contexts.
- Establishing offline community spaces for conversation where political themes are not explicit, as a way to maintain engagement under restrictive conditions.
- Strengthening relationships with international actors (e.g., multilateral institutions, Organization of American States) that still have influence in the country.

Advocacy

- Lowering public visibility to protect territorial work.
- Leveraging growing public awareness of the current government's shortcomings, prioritizing issues where citizens feel unheard.
- Responding to the vacuum created by centralized power by reconnecting with community needs and exploring ways to operate within that gap.
- Collaborating with local governments (municipalities and districts) that lack technical and operational support, both to increase impact and to counter narratives of "non-constructive opposition."
- Actively participating in international networks to counter government-driven disinformation.
- Strengthening advocacy strategies aimed at increasing the political cost of repression and rights violations.

- Enhancing communication efforts toward U.S. policymakers, particularly to ensure access to reliable, evidence-based information.

Narrative Strategies

- Revising and adapting discourse and terminology to maintain influence without direct confrontation with official narratives (e.g., framing issues around "good governance" rather than "anti-corruption").
- Recognizing differentiated roles within civil society: not all actors need to prioritize narrative impact, allowing for a more distributed and complementary approach.

Overall, these strategies reflect a shift toward low-visibility, adaptive, and context-sensitive forms of action, where organizations seek to preserve operational space, rebuild social connection, and gradually regain narrative influence under conditions of heightened control and risk.

Potential Strategies

Financial Dimension

- Explore and secure new sources of funding, beyond traditional cooperation.
- Encourage organizations that have obtained exemptions under the Foreign Agents Law to channel resources toward more vulnerable organizations, redistributing capacity within the ecosystem.

Articulation and Alliances

- Improve mapping of pro-democracy and pro-rights actors to clearly identify who is *present and what they are doing*, enabling more strategic coordination.
- Build alliances based on complementarity rather than affinity, maximizing differentiated capacities.
- Develop partnerships with moderate private sector actors.
- Redefine the role and strategic purpose of organizations operating in exile.
- Strengthen articulation between actors in exile and those still operating within El Salvador, including stronger engagement with the diaspora—particularly in United States.

Advocacy

- Continue systematic documentation of abuses of power and human rights violations.
- Identify demobilized or disillusioned sectors of the population and develop strategies to reconnect and activate them.
- Prioritize actions that generate real political costs for the government, rather than those that produce visibility without impact.

Narrative Strategies

- Promote a narrative of hope capable of breaking cycles of fear and resignation.
- Develop new approaches to positioning narratives under conditions of repression.
- Advance a new "insurgent aesthetic"—through music, theater, poetry, and other cultural forms—that can express resistance, build emotional connection, and mobilize action.
- Construct a collective narrative framework with which citizens can identify, in the absence of clear leadership figures.
- Strengthen coordination among organizations to avoid fragmentation in narrative efforts.
- Explore alliances with content creators to expand reach and adapt to digital ecosystems.

Democratic Reconstruction

- Begin preparing for future windows of opportunity by designing strategies for democratic recovery, even if such scenarios currently appear distant.

Conclusions on Strategies in El Salvador

Organizations in El Salvador demonstrate a sophisticated and realistic reading of current and future scenarios, alongside a broad repertoire of potential strategies to confront the accelerated closure of civic space and the anticipated deepening of rights regression. The focus group operated from a shared premise: the country is effectively under a form of competitive authoritarianism, with a high likelihood of progressively intensifying repression.

However, a clear contrast emerged among different types of organizations—particularly in relation to their territorial anchoring. Urban, institutionally focused organizations tend to show greater disorientation and less strategic clarityunder current conditions. In contrast, organizations with sustained territorial engagement—working directly with youth, rural communities, victims, and hyperlocal collectives—demonstrate greater clarity and a relative degree of optimism. These actors not only possess a more grounded understanding of how authoritarian dynamics affect everyday life, but also draw inspiration from emerging forms of citizen organization and resistance.

Urban organizations are aware of this gap, and several of their proposals explicitly point toward rebuilding sustained territorial connections as a condition for recovering impact and legitimacy.

A shared strategic insight concerns the vacuum of local power generated by the centralization of authority and the weakening of municipalities. This creates potential openings to reconnect with immediate citizen needs, demonstrate the relevance of organized civil society, and strengthen existing community-based struggles. At the same time, unresolved dilemmas persist—particularly regarding the ethical implications and risks of engaging with local governments aligned with the ruling party.

In the narrative domain, where organizations recognize having lost ground, there is a strong emphasis on the need to construct a new collective narrative capable of countering fear and resignation. The idea of an "insurgent aesthetic" gained particular traction, highlighting the role of cultural expression (music, theater, visual arts) in rebuilding emotional connection, identity, and mobilization. This includes defending independent cultural spaces in a context where certain forms—such as elements of hip hop culture—have been co-opted or instrumentalized by the government. There is also openness to collaborating with content creators to modernize communication strategies and engage broader audiences.

Regarding alliances, a key priority is strengthening articulation between actors in exile and those still operating the country, recognizing their differentiated risks and complementary capacities. While some experiences already exist—particularly among independent media—there remains a notable absence of strong regional strategies or explicit engagement with broader regional dynamics, despite the growing political influence of El Salvador within Central America. Similarly, there is limited strategic engagement with the diaspora, despite its increasing economic, symbolic, and political relevance.

Across scenarios, the focus group identified a set of **robust strategies**—those that retain relevance regardless of how the context evolves:

1. Strengthening territorial engagement, especially with youth and hyperlocal collectives, as a foundation for legitimacy, impact, and contextual understanding.
2. Investing in adaptive narrative strategies, including hope-based framing and insurgent cultural expression, capable of influencing public discourse without constant direct confrontation.
3. Rigorous documentation of abuses and rights violations, as an indispensable input for effective advocacy.
4. Structured coordination between exile and in-country actors, enabling risk distribution, continuity of action, and more comprehensive democratic strategies.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while the Salvadoran ecosystem faces severe constraints, it retains significant analytical capacity and emerging strategic clarity. The central challenge lies not only in identifying viable responses, but in consolidating them into coherent, sustained, and collectively anchored strategies capable of operating under prolonged authoritarian conditions.

Honduras

The focus group in Honduras revealed one of the most fragile points of the ecosystem: low participation and difficulty sustaining collective spaces. This is not an isolated issue—it is a symptom. It reflects fragmentation, distrust, and real limits to articulation.

The exchange exposed deep tensions. Political differences, mutual suspicions, and underlying mistrust shaped the conversation. There were absences, self-censorship, and caution. Not everything was said. Not everything could be said. The space operated more under a logic of surveillance than openness, with direct consequences: it restricts deliberation and weakens collective construction.

The discussion advanced with difficulty. Silences, hesitation, and fatigue were evident. Translating diagnosis into strategy proved challenging. Frustration is palpable, as is accumulated exhaustion. The ecosystem is not only under external pressure—it is also navigating internal fractures.

And yet, no one is stepping away. Commitment persists. But with a clear warning: sustaining the work is still possible; imagining collective pathways forward is becoming increasingly difficult. Without trust, there is no strategy. Without strategy, resistance erodes.

Strategies Already Underway

- Maintaining existing lines of work—continuing to do what is already being done as a form of stability under uncertainty.
- Continuing efforts to foster a critical and informed citizenry.
- Giving greater protagonism to citizens and strengthening dialogue between communities and civil society, in order to reinforce legitimacy and representation.

These strategies reflect a defensive posture focused on continuity and minimal stability. They also underscore a central tension: while commitment to action remains, the absence of trust and shared strategic direction significantly limits the ecosystem's ability to move beyond fragmented efforts toward coordinated responses.

Potential Strategies

Articulation and Ecosystem Strengthening

- Strengthen coordination by organizing regular encounters between organizations, reducing distance and fostering trust.
- Develop joint response mechanisms to address attacks and shared challenges.
- Conduct periodic scenario analysis exercises to build shared strategic pathways that reduce distrust rather than deepen it.
- Raise and uphold higher standards of transparency within civil society, as a means to rebuild public trust and enable more effective dialogue.

Protection and Risk Response

- Prepare early warning and relocation mechanisms for human rights defenders in the event of escalating repression or civic space closure.
- Develop strategies—through training, accompaniment, and implementation—to counter self-censorship in both media and organizations.

Public Advocacy and Knowledge Production

- Increase resources allocated to public advocacy and evidence-based research that supports it.
- Identify and prevent the partisan instrumentalization of civil society organizations.

Media and Narrative Dispute

- Reaffirm journalistic commitment to truth and independence, reducing speculation and avoiding the dissemination of non-independent analysis.
- Avoid reinforcing the narrative of the "strongman" as a desirable political horizon, and contribute to amplifying pro-democratic narratives.
- Recognize that the private sector is not equivalent to civil society, and avoid conflating roles.
- Implement fact-checking mechanisms to scrutinize corporate media content and expose underlying political and economic interests.

Territory and Social Movements

- Scale up territorial resistance experiences—from Indigenous, rural, and social movements—to the national level, strengthening their presence and influence in urban centers.
- Deepen alliances between organized civil society and grassroots movements.

Democratic Culture and Civic Education

- Promote civic education programs in schools and broader initiatives on political culture, human rights, and environmental awareness.

Institutions and Justice

- Advocate for the Honduran justice system to pursue accountability for individuals extradited and tried abroad.
- Avoid blanket delegitimization of institutions; instead, promote a critical culture that identifies specific responsibilities, reduces speculation, and prevents further institutional erosion.

Political Hope

- Actively construct and promote scenarios and narratives of hope as a counterweight to fragmentation, fear, and paralysis.
- These strategies reflect an attempt to move from fragmentation toward reconstruction of minimum conditions for collective action. They recognize that, in the Honduran context, rebuilding trust—internally within civil society and externally with citizens—is not a secondary task, but the central condition for any viable strategy moving forward.

Honduras – Conclusions on Strategies

Civil society in Honduras emerges from this study as the most fragmented ecosystem in the region. While Honduran CSOs do not necessarily face the most severe financial contraction or the fastest authoritarian consolidation, the sector carries a political memory deeply shaped by the 2009 Honduran coup d'état and by two decades of systemic violence against activists, human rights defenders, and journalists. This recent history, combined with current tensions, permeates the organizational climate.

The discussion highlighted a strong emphasis on the need for self-criticism and the establishment of minimum standards of independence. It also revealed persistent concern about the presence of anti-rights agendas or partisan political linkages within civil society itself—an issue that is simultaneously instrumentalized by political actors to discredit independent organizations.

There is a shared awareness that the ecosystem is trapped in a vicious cycle of distrust, lack of rigor, speculation, and accumulated fatigue. At the same time, there is limited clarity on how to break that inertia. Many of the proposed strategies point less toward programmatic innovation and more toward the reconstruction of enabling conditions: trust, legitimacy, minimal coordination, and ethical rules of coexistence. In this sense, the strategic priority for the short and medium term in Honduras is not only to resist an adverse political environment, but to reconstitute the ecosystem itselfso that it can generate coherent and sustained responses under any scenario.

As in other countries, territorial struggles and community leaderships were repeatedly identified as concrete sources of legitimacy, strategic clarity, and meaning. Here, an important convergence with the case of El Salvador becomes evident: the urgency of constructing narratives and pathways of hope capable of breaking cycles of fear, apathy, and creative paralysis affecting both citizens and organizations.

The discussion also underscored the need to strengthen civic education and democratic culture as long-term pillars, alongside a more systematic and articulated engagement with social movements.

Finally, the focus group points to a specific opportunity: leveraging the current moment of political uncertainty and openness to self-reflection to foster permanent dialogue and cross-sector articulation among organizations with different areas of work but a shared commitment to democratic strengthening. This could help reduce internal fragmentation, improve collective responses to threats, rebuild social legitimacy, and enhance the sector's medium-term impact.

Beyond contextual analysis, the focus group identified a set of **robust strategies**—those that retain value across different possible scenarios:

1. Reconstruction of the ecosystem through stronger articulation, internal transparency, and minimum mechanisms of trust and coordination.
2. Sustained investment in civic education and democratic culture, particularly among youth, as a long-term structural strategy.
3. Strengthening ties with social movements and territorial leaderships as sources of legitimacy and strategic learning.
4. Recovery of rigor and ethical standards in communication, especially within media, including the adoption of fact-checking practices and active response to authoritarian narratives.
5. Development of early protection and response mechanisms for defenders and organizations, particularly in scenarios of increased persecution or civic space closure.

Taken together, these conclusions suggest that the Honduran case is less about the absence of strategies and more about the absence of enabling conditions to implement them collectively. Rebuilding those conditions—trust, coherence, and shared direction—emerges as the central strategic challenge for the ecosystem.

Guatemala

In comparison to other countries, the focus group in Guatemala demonstrated greater fluidity in sustaining a strategic discussion. The conversation progressed with clarity, focus, and a notable ability to translate scenarios into concrete proposals. This is significant: it suggests an ecosystem with relatively stronger conditions of sustainability. There is analytical capacity, contextual awareness, and strategic thinking.

However, this clarity does not automatically translate into action. While solid diagnoses and coherent proposals emerged, explicit commitments to take forward concrete steps were limited. Additionally, the fact that few participants knew each other beforehand reveals a broad ecosystem that remains weakly articulated. There are actors—but the connective tissue is still fragile.

During the exercise, participants acknowledged that several key actions "should already be underway" if there is to be meaningful influence over the coming years. Yet no single actor—or collective—appears to be leading them. There is strategic awareness, but also a dispersion of responsibility. Everyone sees the path, but no one is steering it.

This finding is particularly relevant. Guatemala is not just another case—it currently functions as a regional reference point. That raises the stakes: understanding the moment is not enough; it must be assumed and acted upon. Without collective leadership, the current window of opportunity risks closing.

Strategies Already Underway

- Initiatives driven by CSOs and non-organized citizens, though with limited influence on public policy.
- Independent information-gathering efforts.
- Advocacy strategies focused primarily at the international level, combined with protection actions.
- Delayed responses and limited mobilization capacity.
- A tendency to focus on positive scenarios, without sufficiently anticipating adverse outcomes.
- Dispersion across too many fronts.
- Weak articulation between urban CSOs and Indigenous peoples.
- Ongoing rethinking of strategies with a stronger emphasis on cultural dimensions.

Potential Strategies

- Strengthen articulation between CSOs and independent media.
- Promote a coordinated strategy from within government to engage with CSOs and media.
- Build a shared narrative capable of countering fear and activating collective action.
- Bridge positions in a context of persistent polarization.
- Address the growing tendency toward individualism within the ecosystem.
- Engage mid-level government actors as a space for operational advocacy.
- Develop legal, political, and organizational articulation for the 2026–2027 electoral cycle.
- Increase international visibility of issues that remain unresolved in Guatemala.
- Strengthen articulation across different levels of work between CSOs and Indigenous peoples.
- Activate public-space actions linked to the upcoming electoral cycle.
- Incorporate lessons from Nicaragua and El Salvador as part of preventive planning.
- Expand communication with the international community.
- Contribute to the construction of an alternative political project.
- Define operational strategies under scenarios of reduced or absent funding.
- Address leadership challenges: renewal, protection, and legitimacy of leaderships under pressure.

Conclusions on Strategies in Guatemala

While some relatively proactive strategies are already underway—such as public policy proposals and efforts at articulation—the overall picture is one of discoordination, fragmentation, and frustration. There is a shared understanding of what needs to be done, but most proposals face a practical bottleneck: lack of coordination, absence of collective leadership, and insufficient distribution of responsibilities.

This limitation becomes more critical when considering Guatemala's role as a regional reference. Its capacity for anticipation and coordination has both symbolic and strategic implications across Central America.

A central strategic priority identified by the group is the need to prepare for two key political processes: the 2026 second-level elections and the 2027 general elections. Addressing this cycle requires, urgently:

- stronger communication across the ecosystem,
- sustained articulation,
- and a clear distribution of roles, particularly in areas such as social oversight, institutional defense, protection of defenders, and narrative dispute in potentially regressive scenarios.

Another key insight is the importance of integrating regional learning into strategic planning—not merely as comparative analysis, but as forward-looking warnings. Experiences from countries like Nicaragua and El Salvador—particularly regarding abrupt civic space closure, repression, institutional capture, and exile—are seen as critical inputs for prevention.

Across scenarios, the focus group identified a set of **robust strategies**, primarily centered on anticipation and collective coordination:

1. Strengthening effective articulation between CSOs and media, with sustained communication mechanisms and clear role distribution.
2. Building a shared narrative capable of countering fear and sustaining a contested democratic identity.
3. Designing legal, organizational, and political preparedness for the 2026–2027 electoral cycle, including preventive protection and oversight actions.
4. Developing more strategic articulation across urban, territorial, and Indigenous actors.
5. Sustaining multi-level advocacy strategies—engaging mid-level officials, maintaining international advocacy, and activating public engagement—to expand room for action even under institutional deterioration.

Taken together, the Guatemalan case illustrates a paradox: high strategic clarity with limited collective execution capacity. The central challenge is not identifying what to do, but organizing the ecosystem to actually do it—before the political window narrows.

5.2 Innovative Approaches Globally

In a context marked by the progressive reduction of international cooperation, the shrinking of civic space, and increasingly restrictive political environments, civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent media have developed innovative sustainability strategies. These aim to reduce dependence on traditional funding, strengthen autonomy, and protect institutional viability.

This section outlines four relevant approaches from other regions, along with their risks and implications for adaptation in Central America.

Social Enterprises as a Sustainability Strategy

Social enterprises allow organizations to generate their own income through economic activities aligned with their mission. For example, BRAC has built a large ecosystem of social businesses that fund a significant portion of its operations. Similarly, Twaweza has monetized its technical expertise through applied research services and civic monitoring tools.

This model transforms organizational capacities into economic assets, contributing to financial stability and reduced donor dependency.

Key Risks and Challenges

- High administrative, financial, and governance demands
- Risk of mission drift toward more profitable but less mission-aligned activities
- Regulatory and fiscal risks tied to commercial activities
- Limited scale in small or constrained markets

Implications for Central America

- Selectively viable, especially for organizations with regional reach or strong technical capacities
- Diaspora-linked markets can be a key entry point
- Collective or consortium-based models can reduce risks and costs
- Requires careful assessment of political and fiscal exposure in authoritarian contexts

Crowdfunding and Diaspora-Based Support

Recurring micro-donations—especially from diaspora communities—have proven effective in sustaining independent media under political pressure. For instance, Hong Kong Free Press relies heavily on small individual donations, many from abroad.

This model combines financial sustainability with social legitimacy, anchoring support in engaged communities.

Key Risks and Challenges

- Donor fatigue and need for constant campaign renewal
- Dependence on political moments that mobilize transnational solidarity
- Digital security and data protection risks
- Potential stigmatization as foreign interference

Implications for Central America

- High potential due to the scale of the Central American diaspora
- Particularly relevant for media and human rights organizations
- Requires investment in transparency, digital security, and strategic communication
- Needs strong narratives linking diaspora communities to local impact

Legal Structures for Institutional Protection

Some organizations have developed legal mechanisms—such as trusts—to protect ownership, prevent political capture, and guarantee long-term independence. These structures act as shields against economic, corporate, or state pressure.

Key Risks and Challenges

- High legal and maintenance costs
- Weak or incompatible national legal frameworks
- Institutional rigidity if flexibility is not built into design
- Limited regional experience

Implications for Central America

- Highly strategic for independent media, memory archives, and high-risk organizations
- Often more viable when established in jurisdictions with stronger legal protections (sometimes outside the region)
- Signals long-term commitment to independence and sustainability for donors.

Community-Based Small Donor Models

Building a broad base of recurring small donors has enabled organizations to strengthen both financial autonomy and social legitimacy. Fondo Semillas combines micro-donations with endowment resources, while The Guardian sustains operations through voluntary reader contributions.

This approach distributes financial risk across many contributors.

Key Risks and Challenges

- Requires sustained investment in communication and community management
- Income volatility in the short term
- Administrative capacity needed to manage many small transactions
- Risk of donor base concentration

Implications for Central America

- One of the most replicable models in the region
- Particularly viable for organizations with strong legitimacy and clear impact narratives
- Success depends on building communities of trust and belonging, not just fundraising campaigns.

This comparative analysis shows that there is no single sustainability model. However, the most promising approaches for Central America are:

- Community-based funding models
- Diaspora-linked strategies
- Institutional protection mechanisms

These can be complemented—where capacity allows—by strategic social enterprise initiatives.

Ultimately, sustainability must be understood as a holistic process, integrating:

- financing
- governance
- social legitimacy
- and political protection

The challenge is not only to diversify income, but to reconfigure the relationship between organizations, their communities, and the broader political environment in which they operate.

5.3 Innovative Approaches in Central America

Innovative Approaches to Organizational Capacity

Organizational strength—understood as the quality of internal processes, clarity of roles, and the technical capacity of teams—is closely linked to institutional resilience and to organizations' ability to adapt in times of crisis.

Across the interviews, a range of innovative practices emerged, aimed at reducing vulnerabilities associated with leadership concentration, accumulated burnout, and the limited renewal of strategic personnel. Among these, two stand out: systematic leadership rotation or renewal protocols and structured programs for developing mid-level leadership, adopted by several of the organizations interviewed.

These initiatives are particularly relevant in a context where organizations often depend, over extended periods—sometimes decades—on their founding leadership. While this continuity can strengthen institutional identity, it also increases vulnerability to abrupt changes, persecution, or leadership fatigue.

Good Practice Model: Institutional Strengthening and Anticipatory Adjustment

An emerging pattern in the study shows that organizational sustainability does not depend solely on leadership, but on the strength of intermediate layers. Organizations that invest systematically in developing their teams—particularly mid-level management—achieve greater continuity, adaptability, and internal stability. The goal is not to replace established leadership, but to build a technical and organizational foundation capable of sustaining operations beyond individuals. In this sense, strengthening the organization's "core" becomes a key resilience strategy.

This approach becomes even more critical in scenarios of financial crisis. One effective practice identified is anticipation: adjusting organizational structures before the full impact is felt. When cuts are unavoidable, they can be implemented in a planned and phased manner, allowing not only for cost reduction but also for the reorganization of roles, the redefinition of priorities, and the strengthening of internal cohesion. It is not only about cutting back—it is about transforming.

The evidence suggests that organizations that act proactively are better able to absorb shocks and emerge stronger. Smaller teams, but with clearer roles, stronger cohesion, and greater strategic capacity. The difference lies not in avoiding crisis, but in how it is managed.

In summary, two key principles stand out as good practices: sustained investment in internal capacities and the anticipation of structural adjustments. In an uncertain environment, resilience is not spontaneous—it is built.

Innovative Approaches to Financial Viability

The interviews reveal that virtually all civil society organizations and independent media outlets have begun to explore or implement strategies to diversify their funding sources, with the explicit goal of reducing their dependence on international cooperation and philanthropy.

However, a critical finding emerges: despite the wide range of tactics and approaches identified, no organization has yet achieved consolidated financial sustainability through these alternatives. In most cases, these efforts remain incipient—pilots or strategies still in the design phase—whose value lies in expanding the repertoire of options, generating organizational learning, and testing potentially more autonomous models in a regional context of shrinking funding.

In this sense, innovative approaches to financial viability are perceived less as "immediate solutions" and more as a process of institutional transition: the development of new capacities (commercial, technological, marketing, and audience engagement), the creation of alternative legal and administrative instruments, and the adoption of a strategic mindset capable of sustaining socio-political work under volatile funding conditions.

The strategies identified by interviewees are organized below into analytical categories, as potential pathways for adaptation to this evolving landscape.

Strategies Focused on Diversifying Organizational Activities

Organizations report a growing trend toward developing service and product offerings linked to their technical capacities, aiming to convert organizational know-how into income-generating streams.

Examples include the creation of dedicated service units to raise funds—such as services offered to private companies in Costa Rica—engagement with civil society actors to participate in government procurement processes, the provision of technical consulting services (particularly in project management), audiovisual production for the private sector, and project administration for third parties.

In some cases, organizations also mentioned expanding existing initiatives—for instance, broadening Indigenous and Afro-descendant rights agendas toward environmental approaches—as a way to access emerging funding opportunities and partnerships.

Additionally, some organizations are exploring the development of social enterprises in areas such as coworking or digital marketing for small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as organizing festivals, forums, and in-person events that simultaneously serve political-cultural purposes and financial sustainability goals.

Strategies Focused on Community-Based Contributions

A second line of innovation centers on fundraising mechanisms based on communities, audiences, and diasporas. Notable examples include crowdfunding initiatives, including at least one case specifically targeting populations in the United States and the Nicaraguan diaspora.

Proposals also include the development of "multi-actor anchor" programs aimed at co-financing by multiple stakeholders and beneficiaries, alongside the implementation of membership or voluntary donation models that preserve universal access to content and services.

This category includes individual donations—such as targeted campaigns in the United States—membership schemes with more active roles in editorial and political sustainability, and subscription models. These strategies are considered particularly promising for independent media, although they require sustained technical capacities in database management, communication, storytelling, marketing, and operational continuity.

Strategies Focused on the Private Sector

Several organizations are exploring relationships with the private sector through corporate social responsibility schemes, partnerships with small businesses or international firms, and in-kind corporate donations.

They also mention services targeted at entrepreneurs, such as manuals and best practices, or business certifications linked to their institutional mission.

These strategies are highly dependent on national contexts—particularly levels of political openness or risk associated with engaging with critical civil society actors and media—as well as on organizational reputation and the ability to establish clear ethical and narrative frameworks to prevent co-optation.

Strategies Focused on Marketing and Monetization

This category includes strategies such as merchandise sales (clothing and other products), monetization of YouTube channels and websites, provision of hospitality-related services (accommodation, food, space rentals), virtual course academies aligned with organizational themes, cost recovery through previously developed products, and the sale of workshops and conferences.

In some cases, organizations also mentioned the development of film academies.

These strategies reflect a shift toward hybrid models in which cultural, communicational, or educational components also function as mechanisms for financial sustainability. However, their effectiveness depends on initial investment and commercial management capacities that many organizations are still in the process of developing.

Strategies Focused on Accessing Alternative Funding Ecosystems

Some interviewees reported strategies aimed at expanding access to specific international funding ecosystems, including engagement with Indigenous organizations in the Global North that operate with different funding streams from traditional donors.

They also mentioned the creation of foundations or nonprofit entities in the United States or European countries as a mechanism to diversify donor bases, mobilize resources through transnational solidarity networks, and reduce barriers to accessing certain funding sources.

This approach is clearly strategic, as it involves not only diversifying funding sources but also reshaping institutional architecture to sustain work under conditions of exile and/or transnational repression.

Strategies Focused on Financial Instruments

Finally, some organizations reported using fixed-term investments as a tool to generate interest income, signaling an emerging shift toward asset-based sustainability strategies. However, this approach remains limited by organizational budget size and access to seed capital.

Enabling Conditions for Financial Innovation

Beyond identifying specific tactics, the interviews reveal that financial innovation requires enabling conditions without which diversification strategies rarely consolidate or scale.

First, organizations need internal capacities that are often lacking within the ecosystem: robust administrative management, multi-year financial planning, cost monitoring and evaluation tools, as well as specific skills in fundraising, marketing, audience management, and donor retention. Many of the strategies described—such as services, academies, subscriptions, digital monetization, or social enterprises—require commercial, technological, and communication capacities that fall outside the traditional profiles of civil society organizations and independent media. This implies initial investment, internal reorganization, and often the incorporation or training of new technical profiles.

Second, sustainability based on financial innovation requires a minimally enabling institutional and political environment—or, in its absence, mitigation strategies. The implementation of self-generated income or private sector partnerships entails reputational and co-optation risks that must be addressed through clear ethical frameworks, strengthened internal governance, and explicit criteria for selecting partners.

Moreover, the transition toward hybrid models requires seed capital, risk tolerance, and time for maturation—conditions that are rarely compatible with annual, highly restricted, and results-oriented funding models. In this sense, financial innovation should not be understood merely as "diversification of funding sources," but as a gradual process of organizational transformation that requires deliberate investment, technical support, donor flexibility, and a realistic understanding of the time needed to consolidate new sustainability models.

Good Practice Model: Hybrid Architectures of Sustainability

An emerging pattern within the ecosystem is the development of hybrid funding architectures that combine local anchoring with international projection. Some organizations have established complementary structures abroad—particularly in countries with stronger philanthropic traditions—that function as resource mobilization platforms to sustain work in the region. These "mirror structures" enable access to donor networks that would otherwise be difficult to mobilize and help diversify income streams beyond traditional cooperation. The key is not merely to establish a parallel entity, but to build transnational trust.

Another important component is the professionalization of fundraising. The most robust experiences show that investing in donor management systems, database analysis, and retention strategies can transform both the scale and stability of individual contributions. It is not only about raising more funds—it is about doing so more effectively: through data, segmentation, and sustained engagement. Fundraising becomes a strategic capacity.

At the same time, a third pathway is beginning to consolidate: the development of social enterprise models. This involves allocating initial capital to income-generating initiatives—not necessarily directly aligned with the core mission—but capable of sustaining institutional operations. Services, consulting, or products can become stable revenue streams if designed with market logic and clear objectives. Sustainability thus moves beyond funding—it becomes a model.

Taken together, these practices point to a central lesson: dependence on a single funding source constitutes a structural risk. Diversification is not optional—it is a condition for survival. And in contexts of high uncertainty, financial innovation ceases to be an advantage. It becomes a necessity.

Innovative Approaches to Political and Social Advocacy

In a regional context marked by shrinking civic space, declining funding, and increasing contestation over public narratives, innovation in political and social advocacy goes beyond new communication tactics or alternative forms of institutional engagement. It also lies in organizations' ability to strategically reassess, translate, and expand their objectives—remaining consistent with their transformative mission while broadening their capacity to adapt.

This section presents findings that illustrate how some civil society organizations have adjusted their advocacy by redefining the thematic scope of their work, prioritizing territorial linkages, and strengthening community legitimacy, without abandoning their rights-based agendas.

A key pathway for adaptation among civil society organizations and independent media lies in how they define, expand, and operationalize their political and social objectives into viable work agendas. In this sense, innovation may involve adjustments in narrative frameworks, thematic priorities, and strategic alliances, enabling organizations to sustain their advocacy even under conditions of hostility or uncertainty.

Good Practice Model: Thematic Diversification to Sustain Advocacy

An emerging strategy within the ecosystem is thematic diversification as a mechanism for both political and organizational sustainability. Some organizations have strengthened their resilience by expanding their areas of work without losing coherence in their mission. This is not about dispersion—it is about translating a core agenda into multiple lines of action that allow advocacy to be sustained across changing contexts.

This approach is grounded in a clear reading of risk: when an organization concentrates on a single issue, its exposure increases. Diversification helps reduce vulnerability, adapt to different environments, and connect with agendas that may have greater openness or support. Migration, youth, education, or local development can serve as entry points to sustain broader goals of social justice and human rights.

At the same time, this strategy relies on strong internal capacities: multidisciplinary teams, community embeddedness, and the flexibility to operate across diverse contexts. The key is not simply to expand thematic areas, but to do so with political consistency and implementation capacity—diversifying without losing direction.

In restrictive environments, advocacy cannot be rigid. It must move, adapt, and find new channels. The objective remains constant—the pathways must evolve.

An emerging strategy within the ecosystem is thematic diversification as a mechanism for both political and organizational sustainability. Some organizations have strengthened their resilience by expanding their areas of work without losing coherence in their mission

Innovative Approaches to Sustaining Alliances

The importance of alliances in reducing the vulnerability of ivil society organizations and independent media in the region is currently under debate. For example, in the RIOCA Index, Nicaragua records the highest score in the "Alliances" variable (7.87), yet it also ranks lowest in the Fragility Index (5.14), suggesting that coordination alone is not sufficient as a protective factor in contexts of repression, precarity, and exile.

This ambivalence also emerged in the interviews, where some organizations questioned what they referred to as "alliancitis"—the proliferation of alliances without a clear strategic purpose, often driven more by external incentives than by the actual needs of the ecosystem. In regional gatherings of independent media, such as the one held in October 2025 in Guatemala City, journalists and media directors also expressed explicit resistance to alliances perceived as donor-driven or externally imposed.

Even so, focus groups revealed a shared understanding of the need for coordination and collective work—not only to avoid duplication among organizations with similar agendas, but also to generate synergies, share capacities, and strengthen the ecosystem through alliances among actors with complementary territorial reach, expertise, or strategies. In this regard, several relevant cases were identified that stand out for adopting non-traditional forms of collaboration, particularly those oriented toward material sustainability, organizational protection, and the expansion of collective advocacy.

Good Practice Model: Alliances for Sustenance and Protection

In contexts of high pressure and precarity, alliances cease to be optional and become a form of survival infrastructure. Some experiences highlight the potential of building arrangements that not only amplify advocacy, but also enable cost-sharing, risk reduction, and the maintenance of operations under adverse conditions, including scenarios of displacement or exile. It is not only about collaborating—it is about sustaining one another.

A key component is the creation of functional arrangements: sharing administrative structures, pursuing joint funding, or even providing legal support and fiscal sponsorship mechanisms to other actors within the ecosystem. These practices break with competitive logics and move toward shared responsibility. Former competitors can become strategic allies. Crisis forces a redefinition of the rules.

Broader coordination models are also emerging, where multiple organizations align efforts, distribute responsibilities, and prioritize collective interest over individual agendas. These spaces enable the sharing of learning, the optimization of resources, and the strengthening of advocacy capacity. Collaborative governance is not simple, but it opens up a critical possibility: moving from isolated efforts to coordinated action.

Finally, the most effective alliances are those that combine complementary capacities. Actors with territorial presence, local knowledge, or access to information can partner with others operating in safer environments or with greater international reach. This combination expands the scope for action and reduces structural constraints. However, there is a key condition: alliances must not dilute identity. Collaboration, yes—erasure, no.

Good Practice Model: Coordination as a Core Strategy of Action

An emerging approach redefines the role of alliances—not as a means, but as an end in itself. Some organizations have strengthened their sustainability by placing coordination at the center of their work, understanding that impact lies not only in what they do, but in what they enable others to do together. It is less about execution and more about catalysis.

This model shifts the focus from direct action to the construction of collective capacity. Effectiveness is measured in terms of the level of coordination achieved: when there is a shared agenda and joint mobilization, there is progress; when there is not, there is stagnation. Coordination ceases to be complementary and becomes the central indicator of impact.

Some organizations have strengthened their sustainability by placing coordination at the center of their work, understanding that impact lies not only in what they do, but in what they enable others to do together. It is less about execution and more about catalysis

This approach also expands legitimacy. By acting as facilitators of collective processes—particularly in territorial contexts—organizations strengthen their political and social anchoring and improve their positioning vis-à-vis different stakeholders, including funders. Coordination generates value—and that value sustains.

The lesson is clear: in fragmented contexts, individual action has limits. The ability to coordinate is, in itself, a form of power. And turning it into a strategy can make the difference between resisting in isolation and achieving collective impact.

Innovative Approaches to the Effects of Regionalization and Political Diasporas

In a context where exile, forced displacement, and transnational repression have become structural conditions of the Central American ecosystem of civil society organizations and independent media, regionalization goes beyond the mere geographic expansion of operations. For many organizations, it represents a profound shift: a redesign of their institutional architecture, modes of intervention, alliances, narratives, and even their political identity.

This section highlights innovative approaches along two complementary directions: outward-facing transnational strategies aimed at strengthening international advocacy and positioning within global agendas; and inward-facing adaptation strategies to sustain territorial anchoring, community legitimacy, and grounded analysis, even from exile.

Good Practice Model: Transnational Adaptation and International Projection

A key approach in contexts of shrinking civic space is the ability to shift action to the transnational arena without losing local anchoring. Some organizations have managed to sustain their advocacy from abroad through a combination of operational adaptation, social legitimacy, and strategic specialization. It is not only about resisting from outside—it is about reconfiguring how action is carried out.

A central element is the capacity to adapt methodologies in order to continue supporting affected populations remotely, while maintaining active links with local networks and reliable flows of information. This is complemented by the development of robust documentation and archiving systems, which not only preserve memory but also strengthen advocacy. Documentation is both protection and a form of influence.

Another key dimension is the translation of organizational work into international frameworks. Organizations that successfully adapt their agendas to global legal and political languages expand their reach and open new avenues for advocacy. This requires specific technical capacities and sustained engagement with international actors, but it enables organizations to remain relevant even when domestic space is restricted.

When national space contracts, strategy must expand. Advocacy does not disappear—it shifts. And those who are able to move with it increase their chances of sustaining both influence and operation.

Good Practice Model: Transnational Adaptation with Territorial Anchoring

A critical challenge in contexts of prolonged exile is the ability to maintain strong ties to the territory without physical presence. Some organizations have managed to operate from abroad without losing legitimacy or connection to the communities they serve. It is not only about adapting to exile—it is about avoiding becoming an external actor.

The key lies in reconfiguring mechanisms of intervention: maintaining reliable information flows, validating data from the ground, and combining different tools to sustain a context-sensitive understanding of reality. It is not enough to observe from a distance—organizations must continue to speak the language of the territory.

This model also entails profound organizational adjustments. Long-standing processes—such as leadership development or team expansion—may be constrained by security concerns, requiring organizations to prioritize protection over growth. Adaptation thus shifts from a tactical response to a permanent organizational principle.

An emerging pattern shows how forced displacement can become a turning point. Some organizations have moved beyond viewing exile solely as a loss and have transformed it into an opportunity to scale their work. It is not only about relocation—it is about repositioning

Exile does not necessarily sever ties with the territory. But sustaining those ties requires method, discipline, and a clear political commitment. Being outside does not mean disconnecting—it means finding new ways of being present within.

Good Practice Model: Regionalization as a Strategy for Growth

An emerging pattern shows how forced displacement can become a turning point. Some organizations have moved beyond viewing exile solely as a loss and have transformed it into an opportunity to scale their work. It is not only about relocation—it is about repositioning.

One key pathway has been active integration into local ecosystems in host countries—not as external actors, but as part of the organizational fabric. This involves building alliances, participating in coordination spaces, and engaging with shared agendas. The logic is clear: to influence nationally, one must think regionally.

Another strategy involves expanding organizational scope beyond the country of origin, adopting a transnational identity. This enables organizations to diversify audiences, open new funding pathways, and connect with broader agendas. Advocacy is no longer confined by borders—it moves with networks.

In a context where authoritarianism is itself becoming regionalized, responses must also operate at a regional scale. Exile not only displaces—it creates space to redefine scale, narrative, and strategy. Growth is not always a choice; at times, it becomes the only way to sustain.

5.4 Recurring Elements That Do Not Work

The clearest—and most critical—pattern is that the ecosystem has not fully internalized that the funding crisis is structural. There remains an explicit or implicit assumption that normalcy will return. It will not. Acting as if it will keeps many organizations in a permanent state of waiting.

This translates into practices that weaken more than they sustain: dependence on a small number of donors, limited investment in internal capacities, instrumental alliances lacking strategic direction, oversized organizational structures, and frameworks of action disconnected from the real political context. Responses come too late, adjustments are insufficient, and the inevitable is postponed.

This is compounded by a deeper issue: fragmentation and mistrust. The ecosystem is not only under external pressure—it also constrains itself. Efforts are duplicated, competition over scarce resources intensifies, and the opportunity to build collective responses is lost. Without trust, there is no coordination. Without coordination, there is no scale.

5.5 Assessing Opportunities for Collaborative and Coordinated Action

Even in this context, there is room for action—but it requires a shift in logic. Opportunities exist at three clear levels.

First, in shared agendas: protection, defense of civic space, documentation, narrative, and civic education. When approached collaboratively, these lines of work multiply impact and reduce risk.

Second, in strategic synergies: coordination among actors with complementary capacities—between media operating within the territory and those in exile, between urban and territorial organizations, between technical and community-based profiles. The key is not to add more actors, but to combine strengths.

Without minimum levels of trust, sustained coordination, and flexible funding, collaboration cannot scale. Reactive alliances are not enough. What is needed is the construction of cooperation infrastructure

Third, in enabling conditions. Without minimum levels of trust, sustained coordination, and flexible funding, collaboration cannot scale. Reactive alliances are not enough. What is needed is the construction of cooperation infrastructure.

The central finding is that this is not a temporary crisis—it is a structural reconfiguration of the ecosystem. Funding has changed. The political context has changed. And so have the rules of the game.

Vulnerability does not stem solely from repression or lack of resources. It also arises from organizational responses that have failed to adapt in time. Continuing to wait is, at this point, the greatest risk.

But there is a window. There is still room to reconfigure strategies, strengthen capacities, and build meaningful coordination. Resilience does not depend only on funding—it depends on political clarity, adaptive capacity, and the willingness to act collectively.

It is not about doing more—it is about doing things differently. Not about multiplying projects, but about building responses that endure. Because in this context, survival is not enough. Transformation is required.

6 Conclusions and Reflections

The study confirms that civil society and independent media in Central America are undergoing a process of structural reconfiguration. The shrinking of civic space is no longer the exception—it is the rule. In this new environment, the ecosystem retains significant capacities for action and advocacy, but under constant tension: between acting and holding back, between visibility and protection, between sustaining operations and avoiding exposure. There is still room to maneuver—but it is increasingly narrow, and increasingly costly.

This turning point requires acknowledging something fundamental: ecosystems of civil society organizations and independent media are not peripheral actors—they are democratic infrastructure. They are the ones who document, denounce, accompany, inform, coordinate, and sustain connections with citizens when other institutions fail or weaken. Where these ecosystems are strong, there is greater capacity for social response, wider circulation of verified information, and stronger safeguards against abuses of power. Where they erode, what is lost is not only pluralism—it is national capacity itself.

At the regional level, their value becomes even more strategic. In the face of the regionalization of authoritarianism, these ecosystems operate as living networks of resistance, memory, and transnational coordination. They enable the connection of struggles, the sharing of knowledge, the sustenance of common agendas, and the amplification of voices beyond borders. In many ways, they constitute the last space where democracy continues to function actively and in connection across the region. Weakening them is not merely a sectoral issue—it is a systemic risk.

In this context, the ecosystem faces a dual challenge. On the one hand, increasingly intense external pressures: repression, criminalization, institutional capture, and a sustained reduction in funding. On the other, persistent internal fragilities: concentration of leadership, accumulated burnout, limitations in strategic management, and still insufficient responses in terms of sustainability. The threat is not only abrupt closure—it is gradual erosion.

This is the most silent risk: a civil society that continues to exist, but with diminishing capacity to influence. Organizations that operate, but with less room to act. Media outlets that inform, but under greater constraints. An ecosystem that resists, yet loses density, reach, and effectiveness. It does not disappear—it weakens.

What is at stake is not only the survival of individual organizations, but the collective capacity to sustain democracy under adverse conditions. And this reframes the central question: it is not whether the ecosystem can survive, but whether it can remain relevant.

Because at this moment, survival is not enough. Capacities must be preserved. Purpose must be protected. And above all, new ways must be found to continue exercising influence—even as the space continues to close.

6.1 Key Medium- and Long-Term Funding Challenges: Sustaining Operations in a Context of Permanent Contraction

The study identifies four structural challenges that redefine the sustainability of the ecosystem.

The first—and most critical—is that the contraction of funding is not cyclical, but permanent. And yet, this has not been fully internalized. Much of the ecosystem continues to operate as if normalcy will return. It will not. This misalignment produces delayed responses, defensive decision-making, and cumulative exhaustion that undermines adaptive capacity. The "waiting mode" becomes a trap: it allows short-term resistance but weakens long-term sustainability.

The second challenge is false diversification. While many organizations report multiple funding sources, these often belong to the same traditional cooperation circuit. In practice, this does not reduce vulnerability—it amplifies it. When the system contracts, all sources contract simultaneously. Diversifying within the same model is not diversification; it is the redistribution of risk without eliminating it.

The third challenge is the rising cost of existence. Operating in contexts of risk, repression, and exile now entails expenses that were once marginal: comprehensive security, legal support, relocation, psychosocial care, and team well-being. Institutional survival has become more expensive—and these costs are not always funded. Sustaining operations is now both costlier and more complex.

The fourth challenge is the most silent: the erosion of strategic capacities. Financial contraction does not only reduce programs and projects—it also weakens organizational infrastructure: administration, research, communication, leadership, monitoring and evaluation, and governance. These are core capacities. When they erode, organizations may continue to exist, but their effectiveness and long-term sustainability diminish. At a regional scale, the ecosystem does not collapse—it degrades.

6.2 Insufficient Innovation: When Urgency Blocks Transformation

The study shows that innovation exists—but it does not scale. It emerges under conditions of pressure, precarity, and overload. And for that reason, it fragments. It is tested, but not consolidated. Attempted, but not transformative.

In many cases, sustainability continues to operate at low levels of sophistication. Organizations identify funding sources, but not models. They implement tactics, but not strategies. What is missing are financial portfolios grounded in investment logic, scalability, and return. There is a lack of time, seed capital, and room for error.

But there is a deeper issue: creativity itself is constrained. Not by lack of ideas, but by excess pressure. An exhausted ecosystem rarely innovates. An ecosystem under constant alert does not experiment. This is the central paradox: reinvention is demanded precisely when the conditions to reinvent are weakest.

Innovation becomes reactive—activated to "get through the moment," rather than to transform. Without enabling conditions and strategic commitment, innovation disperses into isolated efforts that consume energy without generating structural change. Innovation cannot remain a luxury or an emergency mechanism—it must become a sustained priority.

6.3 Differences by Country: One Region, Multiple Vulnerabilities

Central America is not a homogeneous block—it is a system with shared patterns and differentiated expressions. The closure of civic space, exile, financial fragility, and leadership concentration are present across all countries, but they operate in distinct ways.

Nicaragua faces an extreme closure. Its sustainability increasingly depends on operating from outside the territory. El Salvador presents a critical combination: strong analytical capacity, but inhibited action—marked by self-censorship, fatigue, and sustained pressure. Honduras reflects the deepest fragmentation: low trust, weak coordination, and limited collective capacity. Guatemala retains some margin, but within an unstable equilibrium, with a real risk of regression.

There is no single solution. A dual lens is required: regional, to understand the shared logic of authoritarianism and financial contraction; and national, to respond to specific vulnerabilities. Without this dual scale, strategies fail.

Regional networks play a key role: they sustain continuity when national spaces weaken. But they cannot replace them. They, too, are under pressure—and their capacity is limited.

6.4 Territorial Presence and Effective Coordination: Where Legitimacy Is Sustained

Territoriality emerges as a strategic asset—not merely as a site of implementation, but as a source of legitimacy. Organizations with strong community anchoring are better able to interpret context, identify opportunities, and build social protection. Territory does not only provide meaning—it provides backing.

But this is not automatic. It requires investment, time, and trust. It is not built through projects—it is built through sustained presence. Without territorial grounding, advocacy disconnects. With it, it anchors.

At the same time, collaboration and coordination are indispensable—but not all forms are effective. Forced alliances do not work; strategic coordination does. This requires shared purpose, clear roles, and a minimum level of trust. It is not about adding more actors—it is about building collective action. The key is not to have more alliances, but better ones—especially those that reduce risk, avoid duplication, and amplify impact.

The public sphere is increasingly dominated by authoritarian narratives, sophisticated disinformation, and deliberate strategies of stigmatization. In this context, being right is not enough—it must be positioned effectively

6.5 Communication and Advocacy: The Battleground That Defines Relevance

Communication is no longer an instrumental component—it is the terrain where advocacy is won or lost. In Central America, the public sphere is increasingly dominated by authoritarian narratives, sophisticated disinformation, and deliberate strategies of stigmatization. In this context, being right is not enough—it must be positioned effectively.

The study confirms a critical gap: many organizations lack the capacities needed to contest public meaning. They struggle to translate their work into narratives that connect with broader audiences, mobilize support, or generate sustained legitimacy. Advocacy often remains confined to closed circuits—experts, donors, and traditional allies—while the broader arena of public opinion is lost.

This is compounded by a structural issue: advocacy is measured by activity, not effectiveness. Actions multiply—forums, campaigns, reports—but their real impact is rarely assessed. Did the narrative shift? Was the social base expanded? Was risk reduced? These questions are not central—and without them, there is no strategic learning.

Moreover, in high-repression contexts, direct advocacy can be counterproductive. Too much exposure increases risk; too much silence reduces relevance. The balance is complex and requires sophistication.

The pending innovation is significant: to build communication and advocacy strategies that are adaptive, measurable, and context-sensitive. Strategies that combine visibility with protection. That prioritize impact over volume. Because without narrative, there is no legitimacy. And without legitimacy, advocacy fades.

6.6 The New Role of Diasporas: From Forced Displacement to Strategic Infrastructure

Central American political diasporas can no longer be understood solely as a consequence of authoritarianism—they are active components of the ecosystem. They are also infrastructure. From exile, they sustain organizations, document violations, advance litigation, build networks, and keep democratic agendas alive.

In many cases, they ensure continuity when domestic space closes. They operate where there is room, connect with international actors, and amplify voices that cannot speak within their countries. Exile, rather than being only a loss, has become a space for reorganization.

However, this capacity remains fragmented. There is not yet a robust articulation between the political diaspora—more organized and connected to rights-based agendas—and the broader historical migrant diaspora, which is far larger in demographic, economic, and symbolic terms. This disconnection represents a missed opportunity.

Here lies a key pathway forward: building bridges between these diasporas. Integrating social base, economic resources, and political capacity to translate migrant identity into civic action. Turning dispersion into network.

Diasporas can reshape the scale of the ecosystem—but only if they are recognized as strategic actors and investment is made in their articulation.

6.7 Expectations Toward Donors: From Funding Projects to Sustaining Democratic Infrastructure

The current context demands a paradigm shift in the relationship between donors and organizations. It is not about increasing resources in a contracting system—it is about using them differently.

The traditional model no longer fits current realities. Organizations now need something different: flexibility, longer time horizons, and support to sustain core capacities such as administration, security, communication, and leadership—those elements that are often not as visible, but without which nothing functions.

It is also necessary to recognize the real cost of operating in high-risk environments. This includes comprehensive security, team care, relocation, and technological adaptation. These costs are real and can no longer be treated as marginal.

But the most important shift is relational: moving away from vertical logics toward shared responsibility. From control to trust. From execution to co-design. From demanding more funding to building consensus on how to use existing resources more effectively. Organizations are not implementers—they are political actors.

At the same time, civil society itself faces its own challenge: moving beyond passive dependency toward more mature, transparent, realistic, and strategic relationships.

Donors hold a critical lever: they can change incentives. They can fund real coordination and articulation. They can support transformation processes and allow room for failure. In doing so, they can enable innovation.

The question is no longer how much to fund—but what to sustain. And what is at stake today is the democratic infrastructure of the region.

6.8 Sustaining Is Not Enough—Transformation Is Inevitable

The study leads to an unavoidable conclusion: Central America is undergoing a historic shift. This is not a temporary crisis—it is a profound reconfiguration of the political, financial, and organizational environment.

The ecosystem has not collapsed, but it is under sustained pressure. And this type of pressure does not destroy immediately—it erodes. It reduces capacities, limits scope, exhausts teams, and produces a form of silent weakening.

That is the greatest risk: to continue existing, but with diminished capacity to influence. To operate, but without transforming. To resist, but without advancing.

And yet, there is still room. The experiences documented in this study demonstrate it. There are organizations that adapt, innovate, and build new ways of sustaining themselves. There is capacity, there is knowledge, and there are viable pathways.

But this margin is not indefinite. It is a window—and it is closing.

The decision is both strategic and urgent: continue operating under logics that no longer work, or embrace transformation as a condition for survival—not only for individual organizations, but for the ecosystem as a whole.

Because what is at stake is not only the continuity of individual actors—it is the possibility of sustaining democracy under adverse conditions. And in this context, the premise must shift: it is not enough to resist—reconfiguration is

7 Recommendations

The study confirms that the ecosystem of civil society organizations and independent media in Central America has entered a phase of structural reconfiguration. This is not a temporary crisis, but a new normal characterized by shrinking funding, the regionalization of authoritarianism, exile, and the rising costs of operating in restrictive environments.

This turning point requires moving beyond tactical responses and toward strategic decision-making. The question is no longer how to sustain what exists, but which capacities must be preserved, what must be transformed, and under what conditions impact can continue.

The recommendations are organized around two core principles:

1. Contraction is structural. There will be no return to previous conditions. The objective is to sustain capacity under permanent constraint.

2. Sustainability is co-responsible. It requires a horizontal relationship between donors and organizations, grounded in realism, trust, and shared decision-making.

From this perspective, the recommendations aim at a dual objective: preventing ecosystem degradation while enabling transformation.

7.1 Recommendations for Donors

Reorient Support: From Programmatic Expansion to Institutional Continuity

In restrictive contexts, the strategic priority is not growth, but avoiding degradation. Funding should prioritize core capacities that function as democratic infrastructure:

- Strong administration and financial management
- Comprehensive security (physical, digital, psychosocial)
- Governance and leadership
- Strategic communication
- Team care and sustainability

These capacities are not ancillary—they determine whether an organization can continue operating. This implies a fundamental shift: moving away from prioritizing short-term, visible outputs and toward funding sustained political capacity over time.

> **The central principle is clear: innovation cannot be demanded from organizations that are exhausted and lack room to maneuver—it must be enabled through realistic conditions and adequate resources**

De-risking: Enabling Innovation as a Process (Not Demanding It as an Outcome)

Financial and organizational innovation does not consolidate through willpower or external pressure. It requires seed capital, time, technical support, and tolerance for failure. In the current ecosystem, innovation tends to emerge as an emergency response and rarely as a strategic transformation, due to human exhaustion, precarity, and survival pressures.

For this reason, foundations should explicitly adopt a de-risking approach to institutional support by providing:

- Transition funding for organizational restructuring
- Seed capital for hybrid sustainability models
- Specialized technical accompaniment
- Learning-based evaluation (rather than penalizing failure)

The central principle is clear: innovation cannot be demanded from organizations that are exhausted and lack room to maneuver—it must be enabled through realistic conditions and adequate resources.

Funding Coordination and Articulation as Ecosystem Infrastructure

The study reveals a clear resistance among civil society organizations and independent media to forced alliances ("alliancitis"), particularly when these respond to programmatic requirements rather than genuine complementarity. At the same time, it confirms that strategic coordination is indispensable in a context of regionalized repression, dispersion through exile, and the erosion of organizational capacities.

It is therefore recommended to fund strategic coordination as a public good of the ecosystem, through:

- Shared protection mechanisms and early warning systems
- Legal support and rapid response pathways

- Non-extractive spaces for exchange and learning
- Electoral observation and oversight with regional articulation
- Coordinated narrative strategies (particularly in contexts of self-censorship)
- Safeguarding of memory, archives, and documentation in closing environments

Coordination should not be funded as mere "meetings," but as infrastructure—with clear objectives, defined roles, and concrete mechanisms.

Transforming the Donor–CSO Relationship Toward Horizontal Co-Responsibility

The study recommends a decisive cultural shift: moving away from hierarchical (client–provider) relationships and toward peer-based relationships grounded in trust, transparency, and shared realism. The most profound change required is relational.

This implies:

- Administrative simplification and reduced burdens
- Decreasing extractive information demands
- Reducing rigid indicators disconnected from context
- Co-designing objectives and adaptive pathways
- Recognizing real operational limits and risks

For donors, this transformation does not mean lowering standards, but reorienting them: prioritizing strategic clarity, coherence, and learning over formats or demands that incentivize simulation or overpromising.

7.2 Recommendations for Civil Society Organizations and Independent Media

Abandon the Logic of Waiting and Plan the Transition

The first recommendation is both conceptual and practical: to acknowledge that the contraction is not temporary. As long as the expectation persists that funding will return, decisions will remain delayed and reactive.

It is recommended to establish transition plans of 24 to 36 months that account for:

- Sustained contraction
- Legal and security risks
- Scenarios of exile or relocation
- Downsizing of teams
- Minimum preservation of core capacities

Planning the transition does not mean abandoning objectives or lowering ambition. It means protecting the ability to continue operating without collapse.

Innovate with Focus: Fewer Attempts, More Strategy

The study finds that sustainability strategies tend to be unsophisticated and highly tactical: multiple simultaneous attempts, dispersion, and unstructured experimentation. Moreover, there is little evidence of leadership driving innovation in ways that reorganize the ecosystem.

The recommendation is therefore not to "innovate more," but to innovate differently:

- Select 2–3 viable bets (not 10 parallel tactics)
- Assign clear responsibilities and realistic goals
- Invest in installed capacities (fundraising, marketing, CRM, audiences, data, finance)
- Measure costs, timelines, and return before scaling
- Abandon diversification efforts that consume energy without viability

Innovation must be part of a sustained strategic agenda—not a reaction to funding cuts.

Communication and Advocacy: Contest Meaning, Not Just Produce Content

The current sociopolitical context in Central America demands new forms of advocacy—not simply greater intensity in traditional approaches. In environments marked by polarization, disinformation, institutional capture, and stigmatization, conventional strategies—statements, forums, episodic campaigns, or isolated institutional pressure—lose effectiveness and may even increase risk.

In this context, communication shifts from a supporting function to a central pathway for sustaining public legitimacy, social protection, and political impact.

However, the study reveals a critical gap: many organizations and media outlets lack the communication capacities needed to shape narratives, expand audiences, and contest public meaning within an increasingly captured or saturated media ecosystem. This leads to a double consequence: organizations communicate primarily with already convinced audiences or their immediate networks, while losing the ability to translate their relevance to broader segments of society—thereby weakening their social base and long-term sustainability.

Beyond communication, the study highlights that the deficit of innovation is particularly visible in advocacy: there is limited measurement and review of the real

effectiveness of political and social advocacy strategies, which prevents learning and adaptation. In many cases, advocacy is confused with activity—actions and outputs accumulate without assessing whether they actually influenced decisions, shifted narratives, protected communities, or expanded operational space.

For this reason, it is recommended that organizations prioritize explicit and periodic reviews of their advocacy—not only what messages they produce, but which strategies generate impact and which produce fatigue without results.

Operationally, this implies:

- Strengthening strategic communication as an installed capacity (not episodic), including dedicated teams, tools, annual planning, and audience analysis
- Investing in narrative monitoring, public listening, and digital ecosystem analysis (not only dissemination)
- Updating language without abandoning principles: developing more effective frames in response to anti-rights agendas, criminalization, and narrative capture
- Building alliances with content creators, community radio, cultural actors, or local leadership where relevant to expand reach and legitimacy
- Institutionalizing advocacy evaluation mechanisms (e.g., quarterly or semiannual reviews of theories of change, political outcomes, emotional and risk costs, learning, and adjustments)

The central recommendation is that communication and advocacy must no longer be treated as "areas," but as a deliberate practice of strategic adaptation: contesting narratives, sustaining social base, and improving political effectiveness under restrictive conditions.

Territoriality as Strategy: Sustaining Legitimacy and Protection

Across all countries analyzed, the study shows that territorial presence and sustained relationships with communities, social movements, and local leadership constitute one of the most valuable assets for ecosystem sustainability.

Territoriality provides social legitimacy, contextual awareness, political anchoring, and a form of community-based protection that cannot be replaced by digital presence or international advocacy. In some cases, the contrast is clear: urban or institutionally focused organizations show greater strategic disorientation, while territorially rooted organizations are better able to identify pathways for action, social priorities, and opportunities to rebuild democratic fabric.

Across all countries analyzed, the study shows that territorial presence and sustained relationships with communities, social movements, and local leadership constitute one of the most valuable assets for ecosystem sustainability

However, territorial presence is under increasing pressure. Funding contraction often affects the most resource-intensive components first: offices, mobility, community work, accompaniment, and long-term processes. Additionally, rising risks—criminalization, surveillance, violence by non-state actors, social conflict, or self-censorship—can lead to the withdrawal from local work.

This creates a critical paradox: precisely when the ecosystem most needs deeper social connection, territoriality becomes harder to sustain.

For this reason, organizations should adopt territoriality as an explicit strategic axis—not merely a programmatic component. This means consciously defining what "territorial presence" entails (relationships, continuity, legitimacy, and accompaniment) and prioritizing its sustainability as part of the organizational core.

In practical terms, it is recommended to:

- Protect territorial components as democratic infrastructure (even if less strategic components are reduced)
- Strengthen and support local leadership—not as beneficiaries, but as key actors of political sustainability
- Reduce the urban–territorial gap through distributed roles: alliances with territorial organizations that complement urban capacities in advocacy and communication
- Develop specific protection strategies for territorial work (comprehensive security, temporary relocation protocols, care, risk management)
- Document and make visible the value of territorial work in terms of legitimacy and impact, so it is not the first component to be cut during financial crises

The study suggests that sustaining local presence is not only programmatically valuable—it is a condition of viability for the democratic ecosystem, especially in contexts where citizens are exposed to authoritarian narratives, fear, and demobilization.

Practical Coordination and Articulation: From Symbolic Alliances to Joint Action

The study confirms that collaboration is essential for the survival of the ecosystem. At the same time, it highlights persistent constraints: accumulated mistrust, competition for funding, ideological fragmentation, urban–territorial tensions, and the effects of exile that fragment capacities.

In addition, past experiences with forced consortia have generated resistance, sometimes blocking even necessary forms of coordination. In this context, the central recommendation is clear: it is not about promoting "more alliances," but about building practical and strategic coordination.

The key concept is complementarity. Effective coordination emerges when organizations clearly define what they contribute, what they cannot do, what risks they assume, and how roles are distributed. Coordination must therefore answer operational questions: who informs, who protects, who coordinates, who sustains territorial relationships, who operates from exile, who contests narratives, who documents, and who accompanies cases.

To advance toward practical coordination, it is recommended to:

- Establish minimum coordination agreements by country and/or sector (media, human rights defense, territorial organizations, youth, feminist movements), with focused objectives and clear rules
- Design shared response mechanisms to attacks: rapid internal communication channels, early warning systems, legal support protocols, and relocation pathways
- Create mechanisms for capacity exchange: sharing tools for digital security, database management, strategic communication, methodologies, and protocols
- Build "task-based coalitions" rather than rigid consortia: temporary coordination around concrete objectives such as elections, litigation, narrative campaigns, or territorial defense
- Prioritize exile–territory articulation: particularly between exiled media (greater freedom) and in-country media (greater access and risk), and between transnational CSOs and community leadership

Coordination should be understood as ecosystem infrastructure, not as a symbolic gesture: it reduces duplication, distributes workload, amplifies impact, and lowers individual vulnerability. In a context of prolonged constraint, coordination is not an abstract value—it is a strategy for institutional and political survival.

> **Effective coordination emerges when organizations clearly define what they contribute, what they cannot do, what risks they assume, and how roles are distributed. Coordination must therefore answer operational questions**

7.3 Immediate Priorities (Next 8–12 Months)

In a context of structural contraction and sustained closure of civic space, the next 8–12 months constitute a critical window. This is not just another period—it is the moment in which it will be determined whether the ecosystem stabilizes or enters a phase of progressive degradation that will be difficult to reverse. The urgency does not lie in responding to short-term developments, but in making structural decisions that enable the preservation of minimum capacities for political and organizational action.

Immediate priorities should focus on four fronts: protecting continuity, reducing critical vulnerabilities, installing strategic capacities, and activating practical coordination. This implies a shift in approach: moving away from prioritizing programmatic expansion or reactive responses to events, and focusing instead on securing the conditions that make the ecosystem's very existence possible.

At this stage, the central question changes fundamentally: it is no longer what new projects to launch, but what must be sustained—and how—to ensure that civil society organizations and independent media can continue to exist with operational capacity, social legitimacy, and effective advocacy.

Immediate Priorities for Donors

Reorient support toward continuity and institutional transition (not expansion)

In a context of permanent contraction, the strategic priority is to prevent closures, loss of critical capacities, and the silent weakening of the ecosystem. It is recommended to prioritize flexible institutional support schemes—even if partial—focused on core functions:

- Administration and finance
- Operational coordination
- Comprehensive security
- Strategic communication
- Distributed leadership
- Information and data systems
- Team well-being

This type of support should not be conditioned on programmatic expansion or the production of new outputs, but on a clear objective: preserving organizational viability and long-term advocacy capacity.

Activate early transition mechanisms for organizations at risk

One of the most evident failures in the ecosystem is the tendency to make decisions too late. It is recommended to establish agile funds and mechanisms aimed at transition processes, including:

- Internal reorganization
- Structural adjustments
- Orderly closure of non-viable lines
- Redesign of operational models
- Legal or financial relocation when necessary

Restructuring should not be interpreted as failure, but as strategic adaptation. Acting early reduces the human, financial, and political costs of adjustment.

Establish comprehensive security and care as a minimum standard—not an exception

The study shows that security and human exhaustion are underestimated and systematically underfunded drivers of collapse. It is recommended to integrate as standard:

- Mental health and psychosocial support
- Physical and digital security protocols
- Legal accompaniment
- Continuous risk assessment
- Costs associated with exile and transnational persecution

These components should not depend on emergency funding or be treated as add-ons. They are part of the real cost of operating in the current context.

Explicit de-risking for innovation: build capacities, not just demand results

Given the absence of ecosystem-level leadership in innovation and the reactive nature of current efforts, it is recommended to establish clear de-risking mechanisms: seed capital, technical support, space for experimentation, and learning-based evaluation.

Funding should focus on building sustainable capacities (individual fundraising, membership models, marketing, data systems, services, mirror structures), rather than supporting isolated attempts without scalability.

Fund coordination and articulation as infrastructure, not as a secondary activity

In a context of regionalized repression and fragmentation through exile, coordination is not optional. It is recommended to fund concrete mechanisms of articulation:

- Early warning systems
- Shared protection mechanisms
- Rapid response to attacks
- Coordinated narrative strategies
- Non-extractive learning spaces
- Effective articulation between actors in exile and in-country

Coordination should be treated as ecosystem infrastructure, with clear objectives and sustained support over time.

Adjust donor–CSO relationships toward real operational co-responsibility

As an immediate priority, operational practices should be transformed:

- Simplify administrative processes
- Review indicators disconnected from context
- Reduce extractive information demands
- Co-design realistic priorities

At the same time, open frank conversations about limits:

- What can be sustained
- What must be closed
- Which capacities must be protected as strategic priorities

Immediate Priorities for Civil Society Organizations and Independent Media

Install transition planning (36 months) and make anticipatory decisions

The first urgency is to abandon the logic of waiting. It is recommended to implement 36-month transition plans based on restrictive scenarios:

- Sustained contraction
- Intensification of repression
- Increasing self-censorship
- Legal risks
- Fragmentation through exile

These plans must translate into concrete decisions: phased restructuring, selective closures, preventive downsizing, and clear definition of critical functions.

Protect core organizational infrastructure as an absolute priority

Over the next 8–18 months, core capacities must be treated as non-negotiable:

- Administration and finance
- Data management
- Comprehensive security
- Team well-being
- Minimum governance

Organizations should avoid the recurring pattern of cutting these areas first under programmatic pressure. These are the capacities that ensure continuity and adaptability.

Professionalize communication and reassess the real effectiveness of advocacy

The changing context requires a qualitative leap in advocacy. It is recommended to:

- Strengthen communication as a structural capacity (teams, tools, planning)
- Incorporate audience analysis and public listening
- Update language without abandoning principles

At the same time, institutionalize periodic advocacy reviews:

- Which strategies generate real impact
- Which consume energy without results
- What risks they entail
- What lessons emerge

Advocacy must be evaluated in terms of effectiveness, not volume of activity.

Prioritize territoriality as a condition of legitimacy and sustainability

Territory is a strategic asset. It is recommended to:

- Protect community relationships as political infrastructure
- Strengthen local leadership
- Reduce urban–territorial gaps
- Develop specific security protocols for local work

Avoid allowing territorial work to be the first component cut. Without territorial anchoring, the ecosystem loses social legitimacy and real advocacy capacity.

Innovate with focus: select few pathways and sustain them

It is recommended to abandon tactical dispersion and prioritize:

- 2–3 viable sustainability pathways
- Clear assignment of responsibilities
- Investment in capacities (CRM, audiences, marketing, finance)

The goal is not to attempt everything, but to build the conditions for sustained innovation. Innovation is not reaction—it is decision.

Advance toward practical coordination, articulation, and shared protection

Coordination must move from symbolic to operational. It is recommended to:

- Establish minimum coordination agreements
- Define roles among actors
- Design rapid response mechanisms to attacks
- Share capacities (security, communication, data)
- Strengthen articulation between exile and territory

Special emphasis on:

- Coordination between in-country and exiled media
- Articulation between urban and territorial organizations

Coordination must be understood as a sustainability strategy. It reduces risks, distributes workload, and amplifies impact.

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Annex 1. Interview Guide

Interview Guide

A. Context

Aspects that can be identified through desk research (documentary and legal review):

- Government ideological orientation
- Democratic or authoritarian orientation of the government
- Repressive legislation
- Increase or decrease in criminalization

Aspects that can only be explored through interviews (focused on electoral cycles and repression):

- What type of relationship does your organization have with the government in your country, and what is your perception regarding the possibility of change or continuity in the electoral cycle? What opportunities or risks do you foresee in the upcoming electoral cycle? What role will—or would you like—your organization to play?
- What current factors will affect the future of civil society organizations (CSOs) and your organization over the next three to five years in achieving your objectives? What have been the main changes in this context over the past three to five years?
- What forms of criminalization, stigmatization, or attacks on your organization's legitimacy have you experienced? Are there less visible forms beyond legal persecution and threats?
- Do you believe that the general public supports your organization or similar organizations?
- What uncertainties do you consider most concerning or difficult to manage?
- How have you addressed similar challenges in the past?
- How have the threats or challenges faced by your organization evolved over the past three years?
- What specific factor or event ultimately triggered the decision to close?

B. Organizational Capacity

- What are your organization's main institutional strengths? What are its main weaknesses?
- How is internal burnout affecting generational transition? Are there difficulties in incorporating new leadership?
- What have you done in the past to adapt to adverse or crisis contexts?
- In which areas do you believe your organization has innovated or is currently innovating?
- When did you cease operations?
- What alternatives did you consider before deciding to close?
- What strategies did you implement in the months prior to closure to avoid it?
- Did your organization leave behind any ongoing legal processes? Who is handling them, and with what support?

C. Financial Viability

- Who are your main funders?
- Are there other relevant funders, even if their contribution is smaller?
- Which funders have stopped supporting your organization, and why?
- What sustainability strategies have you developed or are currently implementing?
- What cuts have you already made, and which are planned? Which areas are being prioritized with available funds, and which are being reduced or eliminated?
- Beyond reductions in staff, operations, or activities, how else have budget cuts affected your organization?
- How has civil society in the region adapted to funding cuts during the Donald Trump administration, and what are the main differences today? What lessons from that period are applicable now?

- Have you considered closing the organization? How likely is that scenario?
- How have the organization's finances evolved over the past three years?
- Were you able to meet all legal compensation requirements for your staff?
- Does the organization have any outstanding debts? Who will be responsible for them, and with what support?

D. Political Advocacy

- What is your organization's main political objective? Which actors or sectors of society are you trying to influence?
- How do you measure your political objectives, and how do you know whether you are achieving them?
- What strategic changes are you making to ensure these objectives are met?
- Do you believe that limiting your advocacy work has been a way to protect your organization? Was this intentional?
- Did you publicly announce the closure of operations? How and why?
- Which organizations are filling the space left by your organization?
- Do you consider the possibility of creating a similar organization in the future?

E. Sustaining Alliances

- Why do you collaborate (or not) with other CSOs, media, academic institutions, or public/private sector actors?
- What type of external support (financial, technical, political) do you consider most urgent to strengthen your work?
- Would you be willing to merge or establish permanent alliances with other CSOs if it helped your organization survive or fulfill its mission?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen the CSO ecosystem? What needs to happen in the sector to address current challenges?
- Have you discussed with other organizations the possibility of transferring ongoing projects, archives, or accumulated experience?

F. Regionalization and Diasporas

- Has exile led you to seriously consider leaving the organization? Are you considering leaving the country?
- Have you had to change your legal registration location? If so, does this pose a risk to your operations? Do you anticipate needing to do so in the next three years? Which countries do you consider safe (for operating or relocating), and why?
- Do you identify new opportunities emerging from regionalization and diasporas?

G. Final Comments

- Is there anything you would like to add or emphasize that we have not covered?
- Could you help us identify and connect with CSOs in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, or Nicaragua that have closed in recent years due to political pressure or financial constraints?
- Which other CSOs would you recommend we speak with?

Annex 2. RIOCA Index Analysis Results

Condensed Version*

*This is a condensed version of the study's quantitative analysis and the RIOCA Index. For the full version, please contact us at **info@casacentroamerica.mx**

1. Methodological Note

The RIOCA Index is an analytical tool designed to measure the organizational resilience of civil society organizations (CSOs) and media outlets operating in contexts of high political, social, and financial pressure. Its purpose is to provide a comparative assessment of the capacities that enable these organizations to sustain their work, adapt to adverse environments, and maintain relevance in contexts of shrinking civic space.

The index is constructed around six interrelated dimensions: context, organizational capacity, financial viability, political advocacy, sustainability of alliances, and regionalization/diaspora. Each dimension integrates specific variables that capture both internal and external factors.

The survey was completed by 58 organizations across Central America, using purposive sampling aimed at key actors within the ecosystem. The sample includes advocacy organizations, media outlets, territorially based organizations, and those working with the general population, distributed across El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and at the regional level.

Given its analytical nature, the results are not intended to be statistically representative, but rather to identify patterns, structural tensions, and relevant trends for ecosystem sustainability.

2. General Profile of the Sample

The sample is primarily composed of organizations with established trajectories and relatively small structures. More than 80% have existed for over five years, while approximately 70% operate with teams of 20 people or fewer.

Financially, most organizations have annual budgets between $100,000 and $500,000, with a smaller proportion operating at higher budget levels. This profile reflects an ecosystem with institutional experience but limited financial margins, directly affecting its capacity to adapt and protect itself in adverse contexts.

3. Results by Dimension

Context

The context dimension shows a regional average of 4.75 out of 10, confirming that CSOs and media operate under predominantly adverse conditions.

The deterioration of the environment is driven less by judicialization and more by political factors: hostile government relations, stigmatizing discourse, and constant pressure on organizations. Threats function less as exceptional

Financially, most organizations have annual budgets between $100,000 and $500,000, with a smaller proportion operating at higher budget levels. This profile reflects an ecosystem with institutional experience but limited financial margins, directly affecting its capacity to adapt and protect itself in adverse contexts

events and more as everyday mechanisms of intimidation, inducing self-censorship and affecting decision-making.

Country-level differences are clear: Guatemala presents a relatively more operable—though fragile—environment; Honduras occupies an intermediate position; while El Salvador and Nicaragua reflect openly restrictive contexts.

The regional environment can be described as formally operable, but politically restrictive and structurally uncertain.

Organizational Capacity

Organizational capacity reaches an average of 6.6, indicating functional structures under significant internal strain.

Strengths are concentrated in formal components: accountability, internal policies, strategic planning, and crisis response capacity. This suggests organizations that have invested in institutionalization to withstand adverse environments.

However, weaknesses are concentrated in the human factor: emotional exhaustion, concentration of leadership, and limited renewal. These variables score lowest and represent a cumulative risk to sustainability.

The ecosystem does not lack structure—what is at risk is its human sustainability and leadership continuity.

Financial Viability

Financial viability shows an average of 5.5, reflecting moderate sustainability with significant structural vulnerabilities.

Although many organizations report multiple funding sources, this does not translate into real autonomy. Self-generated income remains low, and dependence on donors is high, exposing the ecosystem to external shocks.

Key weaknesses include low liquidity, limited reserves, and concentration of funding sources. In practice, many organizations can sustain themselves in the short term, but with very limited margins to absorb crises.

Diversification exists in discourse; dependence persists in practice.

Political Advocacy

Political advocacy reaches an average of 7.1, indicating that organizations maintain influence even in restrictive environments.

However, this influence is exercised under increased risk: reduced public exposure, strategic adjustments, and greater self-censorship. Progress in political objectives often entails rising costs, requiring more careful risk management.

Advocacy has not disappeared—it has transformed into a more contained, strategic, and costly practice.

The primary risk is not immediate closure, but progressive degradation: organizations that continue to exist, but with reduced capacity to influence, narrower margins for action, and greater accumulated vulnerability

Sustainability of Alliances

The analysis reveals a structural tension: organizations maintain multiple alliances, but do not necessarily trust them or consider them decisive for sustainability.

While most organizations perceive themselves as part of a broader community, there is a low sense of real interdependence. This reflects a fragmented ecosystem, where articulation exists but does not always translate into effective coordination.

Alliances are abundant—but trust is scarce.

Regionalization and Diasporas

Regionalization and exile have reshaped the ecosystem. Although few organizations were originally created in exile, most have experienced staff displacement in recent years.

This has led to transnational operational models that combine in-country work, international advocacy, and external reorganization. Diasporas thus emerge as a functional infrastructure for continuity.

Exile is no longer merely a consequence—it is a structural condition of operation.

4. Cross-Cutting Reading of the Index

A combined analysis of the dimensions reveals four key patterns:

- The context is structurally restrictive. Organizations operate under constant pressure, even in the absence of mass judicialization.
- Organizational capacity is functional but strained. Structures endure, but human exhaustion is high.
- Financial viability is the main point of fragility. External dependence limits autonomy and adaptive capacity.
- Advocacy persists, but under new conditions. It is more strategic, more contained, and more costly.

Taken together, the index depicts an ecosystem that continues to operate, but with an increasingly fragile balance between capacity and exhaustion.

5. Technical Conclusion

The RIOCA Index confirms that civil society and independent media in Central America are not collapsing—but they are undergoing a sustained process of erosion.

Organizations retain relevant capacities—organizational, political, and operational—but face an environment that increases the cost of action, limits financial sustainability, and places growing pressure on the human factor.

The primary risk is not immediate closure, but progressive degradation: organizations that continue to exist, but with reduced capacity to influence, narrower margins for action, and greater accumulated vulnerability.

In this context, resilience does not depend solely on available resources, but on strategic adaptation, management of burnout, and the ability to build effective forms of coordination.

The ecosystem remains standing. The question is no longer whether it can endure, but under what conditions it will continue to exist—and with what real capacity to influence.

CASA
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AMÉRICA

@centroamericamx

WWW.CASACENTROAMERICA.MX