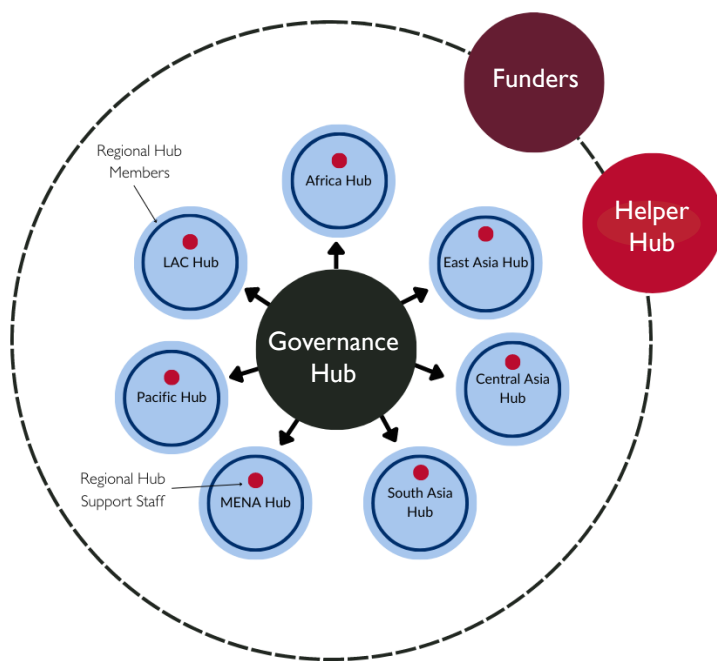# THE CIVIL SOCIETY INNOVATION INITIATIVE & THE GREATER INTERNET FREEDOM PROJECTS:
A case study in locally led development

This case study profiles USAID's Civil Society Innovation Initiative (CSII) and the Greater Internet Freedom (GIF) projects. Both projects were designed to strengthen the capacity and resilience of civil society through the development of networks to ensure the long-term and wide-ranging ability for local actors to tackle their respective development challenges. Highlights from this case study include:

» USAID's use of co-development during project design supports communities in setting priorities that meet their needs, enabling long-term buy-in to shape their future development.

» By acting as a convener, USAID can create spaces for international and local partners to take the lead in sharing information, learning from each other, collaborating, and taking ownership of local and regional development priorities. Through this approach, both CSII and GIF have worked to ensure the power to implement real and effective change is given back to local organizations, facilitating their sustainability beyond the completion of each project.

» Incorporating diverse actors, both in terms of areas of expertise and geographical areas (i.e., local, regional, global) provides network participants with the opportunity to tap into a wealth of expertise and increased exposure.

BACKGROUND: CSII, also known as Innovation for Change, was created in 2014 to support the cultivation of global networks of civil society organizations, activists, and leaders working together via regional Innovation Hubs. The project was initially funded by USAID and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The second and current award is co-funded by USAID and implemented by the Tides Center. Each hub's network connects actors within a particular region, as well as across the globe to support one another in addressing key development challenges and sharing best practices. Since inception, the program has expanded from 45 to 30,000 members — consisting of individuals and organizations — in 143 countries. Each member within the network serves in one of four key groups (or roles):

Participants in a National Youth Volunteer Fair organized under CSII and held in the Dominican Republic to engage young people in the efforts of civil society organizations to promote transparency.

1. The **regional hubs** are made up of members from across a specific region who want to connect and share ideas on how to respond to attacks on civic freedoms. They largely govern themselves and work together to determine the hub's structure and priorities. As of 2020, there were seven regional hubs in Africa, Central Asia, East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific.

2. The **members** of each hub consist of individuals and organizations from countries within each region. These members co-develop initiatives and activities based on the needs of their locality, country, or region more broadly. Through advocacy efforts, research, and education and training initiatives, the members within each hub work together to strengthen civil society and combat the repression of the freedoms of speech, assembly, and association.

3. The global **governance circle**, similar to a Board of Directors, includes two representatives from each regional hub. The circle makes key strategic, organizational, and financial decisions that affect CSII as a whole.

4. The **helper hub** is a global team that aids in the daily operations of CSII. The helper hub includes a designated member for each region, assigned to provide necessary guidance and support. The helper hub currently includes the international partner Tides, who provides technical support and acts as a fiscal agent.

CSII's structure

Collectively, networks identify the issues that are most important to them, their communities, and their countries, and design activities based upon these issues. The focus of these activities varies vastly and have included projects that aim to undertake advocacy to protect human rights, combat disinformation, and

Countries participating in the GIF program (note: countries with sensitive contexts have been omitted).

strengthen digital security, among others. Once a priority is identified, regional hubs and their members design associated activities and decide which members within their networks will be awarded grant money to pursue the activities. Examples of possible efforts to tackle these challenges include advocacy campaigns, workshops, trainings, online research and information sharing platforms, and innovation labs. After an activity, or several activities, have been decided on, the hubs submit proposals to Tides. These grants – valuing on average from $200,000 to $300,000 – are often administered on a regional basis, where members work together to ensure success within their broader region. This process occurs annually.

In 2020, USAID began funding GIF, a four-year project utilizing a similar design to CSII, that is, one that aims to create local, regional, and international networks to meet its objectives. In this case, the project's objectives are two-fold: (1) to improve the digital security practices and capabilities of civil society, human rights defenders, and the media; and (2) to facilitate sustainable engagement on internet governance by civil society, thus enabling local

communities to tackle digital repression on their own terms. To achieve these objectives, GIF relies on a consortium of actors across eight regions and 38 countries. The project is centered around regional partners, who lead the implementation of activities in each region, and each of whom engages with several local partners, including civil society and media actors. Led by Internews, who acts as the prime implementor and coordinator, the consortium also includes several international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide technical and network-building assistance as well as mentorship. To support locally-led activities, GIF provides grants to Regional Partner Organizations and local partners. It also provides grants to technical experts working with international NGOs to support in the transfer of specialized skills. Activities funded by GIF are wide-ranging. Examples include digital hygiene training and toolkits to ensure software is up to date and data is backed up, security audits, public advocacy campaigns, digital security curricula, and regional and local incident response platforms, among other interventions.

ACHIEVEMENTS: CSII and GIF create an enabling space for partners to determine their own priorities and activities, and work as conveners facilitating partner collaboration and knowledge and resource sharing.

A prime example of both of these practices at work took place under CSII's Hub Africa. There, members organized to combat non-governmental organization and public order management laws that sought to restrict the work of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and journalists in Africa. In response to these laws, the regional hub's members planned and executed a media training for civil society organizations in Mauritania and Mozambique. The training taught participants skills in social media, blog writing, marketing, and photography. Since the training, participants have made a Facebook group where they continue to collaborate on advocacy campaigns surrounding digital rights and repression. By creating a media skills group, participants hope to share media trainings with local NGOs and create a new generation of changemakers. One participant described the training as enabling Africans to communicate "more efficiently with other civil society organizations. [We] are speaking out together against political violence while advocating for development."

Similarly, in response to a newly introduced draft law giving the government overly broad surveillance authorities, six organizations within the GIF network in Serbia banded together to conduct a large public awareness campaign focused on how the draft law would violate citizens' rights. As part of this work, individuals from these organizations made over 90 media appearances in which they detailed the likely negative effects of the proposed surveillance laws. The public awareness campaign was so successful that the draft laws were pulled down within two weeks of their proposal.

In these examples, shared grievances and challenges built and strengthened the networks in each

community, thus encouraging active engagement. Both stories exemplify the efficacy of networks that give local actors the platform, confidence, and authority to make decisions for themselves and their communities, thus advancing sustainable change.

CSII and GIF's regional hubs were also successful in making space for regional partners to work together independently of international organizations. For example, a local partner in GIF's West and Central Africa network noted, "We are today able to exchange information, opportunities, activities with the people from the Central African Republic, Angola, and Mozambique without necessarily going through Internews or GIF. So, indeed, thanks to these projects, me, personally, in what concerns me and what concerns my organization, we have the feeling of being part of the networks."

> "I truly believe in this effort and that we can redefine the way civil society works. There is a big need for a space to coordinate and design and undertake activities, share good practices, and exchange knowledge."
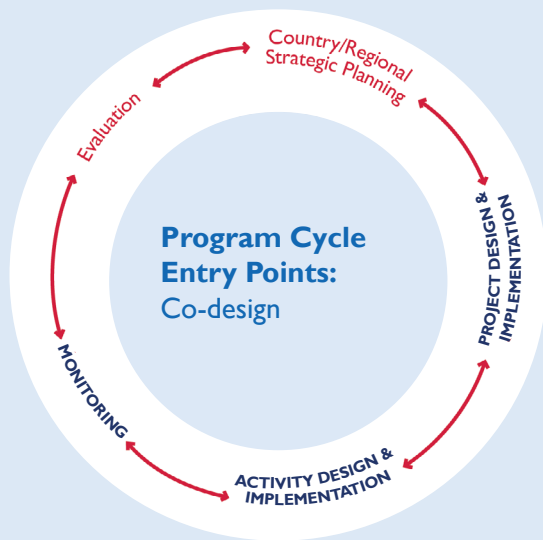>
> -Julissa Guerra, CSII LAC Hub

A stakeholder engagement meeting on the digital rights advocacy in Tanzania organized under GIF.

ENTRY POINTS FOR PROGRAMMING THAT SUPPORTS LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

Both CSII and GIF successfully enabled locally led development to create sustainable change. The employment of the following practices was particularly central to their success.

CO-DESIGN

Program Cycle Entry Points: Co-design

Country/Regional Strategic Planning · PROJECT DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION · ACTIVITY DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION · MONITORING · Evaluation

TIPS FOR SUCCESS: CO-DESIGN

• Using co-design during project design can mitigate the establishment of traditional power dynamics and ensures local voices are elevated from project inception.

• Co-design supports communities in setting priorities that meet their needs, and enables long-term commitment to shaping their future development.

"We feel involved…It was not a program that was imposed on us. In fact, we helped make it up."

-Local Partner from GIF's West and Central Africa Region

Though the concept of a system of regional civil society support hubs under CSII originated with USAID and Sida, the project was further developed through a co-creation process that involved three key steps. First, the project was defined; under this step, an initial cohort of 64 representatives from 48 diverse civil society organizations were selected through an open call and invited to join a co-creation workshop. Second, the project was further explored; as part of this step, partners Reboot and CIVICUS interviewed the selected organizations, as well as the convening partners, to understand the variance of challenges facing civil society around the world. Finally, the project was designed during a three-day workshop, facilitated by Reboot and CIVICUS, in which the regional hubs and global programs were further theorized and refined. This initial process allowed for USAID and Sida to take a backseat, preventing the establishment of traditional power

dynamics and ensuring the project elevated civil society voices from its very inception.

Activities undertaken by CSII hubs are also designed by its members following a needs identification process. For example, members of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Hub identified the need for digital security trainings given the life-threatening risks that civil society activist face should their personally identifiable information be compromised. In response to this need, the Hub organized trainings in Tunisia, Lebanon, Morocco, and Jordan, targeting 28 civil society actors. Importantly, the trainings were customized to respond to the digital threats and needs identified by the activists in each of the represented countries. Additionally, following the completion of this activity, participants took the initiative of replicating the trainings in their

local communities, a clear demonstration of their commitment to the development objectives they established for themselves. Actors from the Hub went on to train approximately 1,000 people from across the region in digital security.

Though the GIF project did not rely on co-creation from the outset of the project—something highlighted as a potential gap in the project by several partners—much like CSII, it sought to employ a collaborative approach in setting priorities and designing activities. Specifically, GIF partners were able to choose from a set of pre-determined activities related to digital security and media. These activities were created following consultations with local and regional partners, which gave them space to describe some of the issues faced by their countries and regions and some of the solutions that might be appropriate to address these issues. Additionally, GIF aimed to ensure that these activities allowed for flexibility to be dynamically sustainable. One local partner in the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region described their ability to contribute to activity design: "It was a very open process. We had very good correspondence with [the regional partner] and we had enough freedom to propose things and to also negotiate if that was even necessary." The central role partners played in activity design was crucial to ensuring that the activities were relevant and helpful, and therefore that activity outcomes would be sustainable. Local partners also implemented activities

A GIF event in Kazakhstan

they helped design through subawards. Indeed, much like in the aforementioned CSII example, GIF opened the door for partners to be able to lead trainings outside the GIF network using expertise and skills learned under GIF. For example, a local partner from the East and Southern Africa region described "the demand is quite high, so sometimes we end up with our own off-GIF trainings […] we have trained slightly over 100 people from media, civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and freelance journalists."

USAID AS A CONVENER
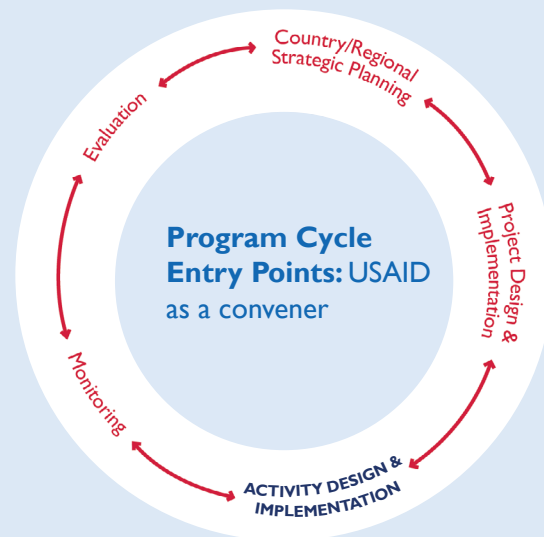
USAID's role as a convener under both CSII and GIF has been central to the success of both projects. Beyond creating space for local actors to lead in the design of activities to help achieve their development objectives, the network connections established or strengthened by CSII and GIF have provided opportunities for local actors to share information, learn from each other, collaborate, and take ownership of local and regional development needs. In doing so, both projects have worked to ensure the power to implement real and effective change is given back to local organizations facilitating their sustainability beyond the life of the project. An example of such network-based change was orchestrated by CSII's LAC Hub, which sought to address increasing violence and corruption in the Northern Triangle by partnering with Jóvenes Contra la Violencia to organize a youth-led, multi-day coding competition. This competition, known as HackCR3A, brought together civil society organizations, technologists, and innovators to seek out new ways

to address regional challenges, such as gang violence and forced migration. HackCR3A attracted private organizations in Latin America to work with the competition participants. The three winning projects received funding from a local bank, Banco Davivienda, to test their ideas in a real-world setting. In response to this event, Carlos Santos, the Social Responsibility Manger at Banco Davivienda stated, "HackCR3A was a great opportunity for us as a bank to invest in projects that have the potential of changing the reality of the Northern Triangle of Central America."

A clear benefit of a network-based approach to development is the sustainability of outcomes as exchange and collaboration between network actors can occur organically outside of the purview of a USAID-funded project. This benefit was demonstrated in both the CSII and GIF projects. In the case of CSII, with the exception of the project's initial co-design meetings, USAID did not participate in any of the regional or annual co-design meetings over the course of the project's six years of operation. In other words, they handed complete agency to local partners, demonstrating and enabling local partners' ability to work together to address common challenges without the need for ongoing shepherding by donors. In the case of GIF, a local partner from the Western and Central Africa region provided contacts for digital rights legal experts to a regional partner, allowing them to undertake a legal analysis. In another example, a local GIF partner from the Southeast Asia region supported another partner in its network that was working on organizing trainings in other countries by assisting in the recruitment of participants and identification of venues, as well as the provision of resources, like projectors.

Another key strength of the network-based approach adopted by CSII and GIF is the diversity of expertise and exposure, both in terms of issue expertise as well as geographical areas (i.e., local, regional, or global), it allows participating members to tap into. As described by one of GIF's regional partners: "What is interesting is the diversity of the local partners that we worked with through this project because some of them are more related to the media and disinformation […] but also there are organizations that deal with human rights, some specifically with

TIPS FOR SUCCESS: USAID AS A CONVENER

• Creating an enabling space for local partners to build the project or work on activities from the ground up.

• Encouraging ownership through network development empowers partners to sustain activities over the long-term. It brings together local, regional, and global actors with a common goal and nurtures a space for shared understanding and development.

• Building a network of diverse stakeholders to work on solving common development problems can help ensure that solutions are sustainable, even after the completion of projects. The network members can continue to share information and collaborate with each other, even without the support of a funding agency.

"We have initiated exchanges and discussions to see how we are going to implement joint activities, the two of us, our two organizations, because our countries are neighboring and have the same realities […] It is only because we participate in these networks and thanks to what we call sustainability […], we want to continue our networks, our contacts beyond the GIF project."

-Local Partner from GIF's West and Central Africa Region

LGBTQ rights and rights of marginalized groups, and also organizations that deal with the security issues […] This project really helped us broaden our own network of partners that we work with but also helped those local organizations." Moreover, smaller participating organizations are able to benefit from the capacity strengthening and network building afforded to them by virtue of sharing a network with larger international organizations.

According to a local GIF partner from Southeast Asia, "this is a great way to build the capacity of local NGOs, because internationally, we've started to get recognized and are getting a lot of opportunities through the GIF project."

A member of CSII leadership noted that while donor and implementing partner skepticism toward localization remains, CSII is proof that local leadership works, and local and regional partners will continue to grow their own networks if given the chance. The growth of CSII's global network, from 45 to 30,000 members, exemplifies this progress, especially considering that members self-select, and thus are encouraged to join the project through word of mouth and outreach from other members in their regions. Local actors also echo this sentiment. For example, when the Central Asia Hub sought to utilize their network to aid individuals with disabilities in the region, a member noted, "This is still such an opportunity for the future. This is more than just help for the people. There are great moments of integration, when people come in contact, work together and learn new capabilities, skills, and ideas."