COLLABORATION CODE

EXPLORING COLLABORATION WITHIN AND BEYOND THE IFEX NETWORK

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SUMMARY

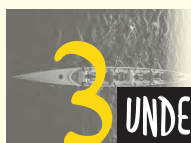Collaboration has become increasingly pertinent to **IFEX's** functioning as a network. As **IFEX** prepares for its next strategic planning process, we delved into how the network is doing in this area. While not limited to the **IFEX** network, special attention has been paid to experiences among **IFEX** members, and the role of the network itself. Specifically, we looked into what gets in the way of maintaining mutually respectful and beneficial relationships; and what conditions encourage genuine and organic collaborations.

This report emerges from 39 interviews with diverse stakeholders from the Freedom of Expression and Information (FoE&I) ecosystem (**IFEX** members, allies and donors) who agreed to share their experiences and reflections regarding collaboration. As a result of this process, we have been able to map out barriers and enablers for collaboration among Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the FoE&I space.

After codification of the interviews, four key learnings emerged from the thematic analysis. These learnings are translated into a set of recommendations and practical actions for **IFEX** to focus on over the next year, as well as to use in the preparation of its next strategic plan.

THE FOUR EMERGENT LEARNINGS ARE:

1.
There is a need to deepen the understanding of practices and principles that underpin 'genuine collaboration' among CSOs, and to continue to engage with the discomfort of talking about power and privilege.

2.
There is a need to develop tools to improve collaboration and to tackle unequal power dynamics within and beyond the IFEX network.

3.
There is a need to explore collaboration tactics and strategies to engage with non-CSO stakeholders.

4.
There is a need to strengthen the case for funding collaboration efforts with donors, and to call attention to how donor practices perpetuate power imbalances and hinder collaboration.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly evident that the usual tactics and approaches used in advocating for human rights are not getting the traction required to achieve the changes needed. With the pandemic, the rise in authoritarianism, the misuse of freedom of expression by anti-rights agendas, attacks on civil society and fluctuating funding scenarios (among many other challenges), it is more pressing than ever to shift our approaches to create the desired change. It is in this ever-changing context that collaboration has become more relevant than ever, especially for **IFEX** with its unique role as a network. At the same time, shaping genuine collaboration in a world that is increasingly fragmented is becoming more and more difficult.

As **IFEX** goes into its next strategic planning process, the time is ripe to identify advantages and obstacles to achieving the kind of authentic collaboration in the field of FoE&I that the network is committed to. It is pertinent at this point to assess how the network is doing in the implementation of this aspect of its work.

The 'Building Relationships and Alliances' sphere from the **Innovating Change Approach** and **IFEX's** allyship plan (a key objective in the **Strategic Plan**) have set out clear directions about the importance of collaboration inside and beyond the network. A starting point for action is reflection – building knowledge and understanding and creating space to hear different perspectives. This project is an important step in this direction.

This report engaged 39 interviewees representing diverse stakeholders from the FoE&I ecosystem (**IFEX** members, allies and donors). Each agreed to share their experiences and reflections on what gets in the way of maintaining mutually respectful and beneficial relationships, as well as their thoughts on the conditions for genuine and organic collaborations.

These conversations have been thematically analysed under the collaboration lens, and the main elements identified are presented in **Section Three** in an all-encompassing mapping that reflects on the experiences across the FoE&I ecosystem. Special attention was given to exploring and understanding the relationships between **IFEX** members.

The barriers and enablers presented are accompanied by anonymized quotes from interviewees to help contextualise the findings and convey their full meaning. These one-on-one exchanges were also an opportunity to inquire about the perception that different stakeholders have about **IFEX's** strengths, as well as the role that it plays (and can play) in the broader ecosystem. As a result, **Section Four** includes an overview of the perceived strengths and gaps of the **IFEX** network.

Finally, **Section Five** summarises the key learnings of this evaluation process and presents a set of recommendations and actions to guide **IFEX's** next steps in this field of work. Our hope is that this will help **IFEX** bring an enhanced approach to collaboration to their next strategic plan and advance in this aspect of their work, together.

2 METHODOLOGY

39 **semi-structured interviews** were conducted during May and June 2023. Overall, **43 people** and **38 organisations** were involved.

This was a purposeful sampling, capturing the broad diversity in size, scope, mandates and contexts of **IFEX**'s ecosystem in the FoE&I sector, including **IFEX** members, allies and donors.

Together with **IFEX's** Global Programmes and Communications and Advocacy teams, a set of criteria was established to help define who would be interviewed. Individuals who could provide a holistic understanding of their organisation's activities and role in the ecosystem were prioritised, while bringing diverse geographical and cultural perspectives.

The sampling comprised:

● **58% IFEX Members (22 organisations)**: A mix of local, regional, and international organisations that are part of the **IFEX** network.

   ○ **15 local and regional organisations:** Three organisations from each region: Africa, Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and Middle East and North Africa.
   ○ **7 international organisations**

● **29% Allies (11 organisations):** Organisations that work closely with the Secretariat and the **IFEX** members. For all the allies involved, FoE&I is an important aspect of their work, although it may not be their main or only focus.

● **13% Donors (5 organisations):** Development agencies and philanthropic donors, as well as donor advisor groups. Some of the donors involved support **IFEX's** work, but not all of them. A complete list of interviewees can be found in the **appendix** of this document.

The interviews, which lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, were conducted in English and Spanish, depending on the interviewee's preference. Our guiding questions were:

   ● What are the advantages and obstacles to achieving authentic collaboration in our work on freedom of expression and information among CSOs?
   ● What are the necessary conditions towards meaningful collaboration?
   ● What already exists within the **IFEX** network and beyond, and what still needs to be done?

IFEX's invitation to participate and contribute to this project was very well received, reflecting widespread interest in the subject matter.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes.

A first draft of the final report was shared with all the interviewees so that they could provide feedback and share any thoughts, reflections or concerns they had about the quotes included. All quotes are in the stakeholders' own words, edited only for clarity and confidentiality purposes.

3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

This section provides an overview of insights gained about what hinders collaboration, and what contributes to facilitating organic and invigorating ways of working together. It is important to note that this mapping reflects not only collaboration experiences and practices within and with the **IFEX** network, but more broadly across the FoE&I ecosystem (**IFEX** members, allies, and donors).

While it is not exhaustive, all the elements presented need to be taken into account to advance towards more cooperative, inclusive and responsive ways of working together. Anonymized quotes have been included to illustrate each point.

It is important to appreciate the complexity of collaboration. The elements presented should not be considered in isolation. Collaboration, in practice, is messy; it involves interacting simultaneously at various different levels (individual, project, and organisational).

Before diving into the mapping, it is important to highlight that there is consensus across the interviewees that, while we are still in the early days of these reflective conversations, there has been progress in recent years, especially with respect to the relationships between INGOs and local CSOs. There is a shared awareness of existing power imbalances, and changes in policies and practices are slowly happening.

Nevertheless, change is not occurring at the scale needed, and rarely penetrates to the root of the problem, making it hard to build trust. That is why it is still important to map out such elements, to point out obstacles that are not shifting (even if there is an awareness of their existence), and to encourage the advancement of practices that can help us cultivate the conditions for collaboration.

3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

3.1. Barriers to collaboration

SUMMARY OF BARRIERS	
PEOPLE	● Tendency to engage with the same people and organisations. ● Exhaustion and burnout. ● Lack of direct relationship with the specific local context or lived experience being tackled. ● Safety risks of activists, advocates and CSO staff who are working on the ground.

TRUST/ PROCESS	● Patronising attitudes and colonial tendencies in the relationship between actors from the Global North and the Global Majority.
	    ● Global agenda being set by donors and international organisations, generally based in the Global North.
	    ● Tokenizing relationships between INGOs and local CSOs under the pretext of inclusion.
	    ● Western practices and forms of engagement still rule the FoE&I ecosystem.
	● Over-reliance on standardised project management approaches are alienating and undervalue specific knowledge and local context.
	● The inability to meet in person due to the pandemic has generated a cost in terms of quality of connections and trust.
	    ● Bringing people from the Global Majority to in-person convenings and decision-making processes is becoming more difficult.

RESOURCES	● Assumption that collaboration is something that happens spontaneously, and that 'good intentions' are enough for genuine and effective collaboration. ● Programmatic and country-based funding streams lead to more transactional collaboration, limiting the opportunities to nurture the ecosystem as a whole. ● Rivalry for funding has permeated into the culture, and the ways of working together. ● Free labour assumption in the design of programs and projects that often results in unpaid and unrecognised work done by smaller CSOs.
IMPACT	● Challenge of highlighting the value of collective work, rather than individual performance, under the current system of value measurement. ● Development paradigm perpetuates narratives that undermine the agency and role of local organisations. ● INGOs taking over the whole process or intervention and claiming ownership. ● Restricted understanding of donors of the quality of relationships between INGOs and their downstream relationships.

3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

People

● **Tendency to engage with the same people and organisations**

❝I do worry in our community that there's sometimes a tendency for the same groups to get platformed, because they know how to work the system [...] but I worry about organisations that perhaps don't know how to work the system getting left out.❞

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❝It's just very nice to be in the same club of like-minded, but if you want to have an impact, we're going to have to cross over and meaningfully work with those who push this agenda, and acknowledge that it's in that complexity of partnerships that we can push back.❞

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● **Exhaustion and burnout**

❝It is difficult to try to imagine the level of precariousness that the ecosystem in which we work is making us suffer, so basically it can be very difficult for us to be civilised, both with the staff that we have, but also with organisations that we work with (....)❞

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❝A struggle for us is fighting back with our own system and government who actually surveys us all the time and tries to shut us down through different measures, right? We need to keep this in mind that is not only work and labour, it's the mental, [...] you will speak to so many people who are at the leadership positions and they are mentally exhausted, and they just don't know if they want to do this anymore.❞

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❝A ridiculous amount of people are thinking of quitting their jobs or thinking of quitting the ecosystem [...] I think we are at an inflection point that is not great as a movement. This

comes from all of these inequalities not being addressed adequately.❞

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● **Lack of direct relationship with the specific local context or lived experience being tackled**

❝Yeah, I think what normally happens is that, especially if the project doesn't involve groundwork or meeting people [...], that is easy. You can even write [about] it from abroad, but then you rely on online information to do that. And I think that's where probably the international NGOs have sapped and overlooked the contribution of the local entities.❞

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❝It's very important to not assume. The context is something that you cannot obtain otherwise – like I can learn technicalities, but I cannot learn context. So it is important to recognize that expertise in the first place.❞

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● **Safety risks of activists, advocates and CSO staff working on the ground**

❝By virtue of their distance from the 'crime scene' they exercise an unrestrained approach in commenting on everything, including compromising and exposing those that have a presence in the countries of concern.❞

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❝I think the sensitivity to those dynamics and what it means, not just in terms of freedom of expression, but in terms of safety, is critically important. And I say that because often at a global level you see international organisations stepping in and running with particular issues, without necessarily, you know, factoring in or being conscious of or respectful of the fact that local organisations and networks may be better positioned actually to advise on what kind of response is needed.❞

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3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

Trust / Process

● **Patronising attitudes and colonial tendencies in the relationship between actors from the Global North and the Global Majority**

❝The international organisations also sometimes have this saviour complex. They think they know it all. And sometimes because they have more funding, they tend to come in and then lord over the local organisations.❞

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● **Global agenda being set by donors and international organisations, generally based in the Global North**

❝I think, you know, you cannot confront [INGOs] when they are going to work on something that intersects with your work. You know, they are going to be the ones pulling that ahead, so you might just contribute to that, even if it's your field of expertise.❞

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❝We feel that so much is being driven from the Global North and by the Global North and we just tried to fit in the debate and try to correct them.❞

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❝There are some organisations that do forward funding, but they are basically telling people what to do, and that, to me, points towards the barriers because then instead of actually working together with the INGOs, local organisations end up working for themselves or becoming beholden to a funding organisation.❞

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● **Tokenizing relationships between INGOs and local CSOs under the pretext of inclusion**

❝There are also occasions where gathering the information that's required to understand what needs to happen in a particular country is done in a way in which the national organisation doesn't really get a fair piece of the pie at the end [...] they're insulated from information that they've given to the project funding [process].❞

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❝We feel at some point that they [INGOs] just want the attendance list with the names of the participants and their contacts.❞

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❝With most INGOs, we feel this exploitation and this lack of ethics and of acknowledgement of intellectual property. They frame the projects in front of the donors as a project in collaboration with local society to empower local society, when we are only treated as direct implementers.❞

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● **Western practices and forms of engagement still rule the FoE&I ecosystem**

❝You have to use English [...], conversations that we have been having, for example, how our MENA, Africa and Asia teams have to get up at ungodly hours to have meetings that are in the US time zone because our main time zone is New York.❞

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❝English is just the lingua franca and it has been established like that. I mean, this happens at conferences and in a million meetings with other organisations. [...]. It's just the way it is, you have to speak English. And that's just an example of the things that get in the way of actually collaborating with people, because most of these organisations are not comfortable at all speaking in English.❞

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● **Over-reliance on standardised project management approaches that are alienating and undervalue specific knowledge and local context**

3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

"What I see happening is that the huge international global organisations [...] have a tendency to become very bureaucratic, losing sight of the vision. There is more attention paid to the process, so once the process is right: mission accomplished [...] everybody kind of mechanically does this thing, and they lose sight of what all of this is about. I think that is what happened."

"International donors are used to dealing with big agencies like international organisations or UN agencies, etc., so they expect local organisations to have the same structures. [...] for example, we don't have a procurement department. It's one person doing the job because we have only one big project that we're dealing with, so we don't have a dedicated department. When they do their assessments or when they come to you with their requirements, sometimes they are shocking. You feel like... What are you talking about?"

• The inability to meet in person due to the pandemic has generated a cost in terms of quality of connections and trust

"We are now three years behind where we would have been in terms of the network effect of being able to meet each other and forming personal connections and relationships. That enables collaboration to happen in a much easier way."

"I feel the lack of in-person is particularly important for IFEX. As you know, one of the huge values I think of IFEX is that conference, and the fact that it brought people physically together and made people feel part of a community and allowed people time and space to talk about their own issues."

• Bringing people from the Global Majority to in-person convenings and decision-making processes is becoming more difficult

"Global and international conferences on freedom of expression have become quite exclusive and very difficult for national actors to attend based on finances, based on visas, based on the kind of political will of the host country to actually try to facilitate travel. So I think that's also a big inhibitor to collaboration."

"It's getting more and more difficult. Travelling is expensive, visas are a nightmare for people from the Global South."

Resources

• Assumption that collaboration is something that happens spontaneously, and that 'good intentions' are enough for genuine and effective collaboration

"Collaborating or participating in collective spaces is not easy. Nobody teaches us how to do that, nobody knows how to do that. It seems to be easy to do it, but almost no one in these networks has received any training on how to facilitate these exchanges."

"Although donors talk a lot about collaboration, there is no real space for this to be possible. For example, if you say in a global project that you will dedicate 20% of the budget to collaboration, learning, and exchange issues, I think it is unlikely that project will be funded."

"In eight years [as a donor], I have never seen a proposal with a line budget saying 'networking' or 'trust building'. It's taken for granted, to the point that the organisations don't make the argument and the donors don't have the conversation."

3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

● **Programmatic and country-based funding streams lead to more transactional collaboration, limiting the opportunities to nurture the ecosystem as a whole**

❝[...] Very few funders, as you know, are prepared to give support to fund the ecosystem, it's not only the quantity but also the quality of the funding that matters for building the partnerships that you're talking about.❞

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❝A lot of the thinking, especially by government and institutional donors, is about country-based improvement. That creates two things: it creates a geopolitical preference for some countries and under-resourcing of others. [...] and it inhibits cross-country learning, as people have to focus on country-based development schemes rather than making use of lessons learned elsewhere.❞

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❝What they [funders] focus on is short-term policy outcomes, like they want to influence this and they want to do that and they want to go big and they want to adopt that other thing. But they don't understand that within the ecosystem that kind of work requires the necessary trust. Yeah, they aren't necessarily so interested in that.❞

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● **Rivalry for funding has permeated into the culture, and the ways of working together**

❝Some organisations may be competing between them for funding, right? So the challenge is in highlighting the nexus of what brings us together and what are our interdependencies. And it's difficult.❞

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❝I think culturally some organisations just are not naturally disposed to be transparent about what they're working on. And I don't think that may [just] come out of a sense of competition on resources [...] I think it's also a cultural thing.❞

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● **Free labour assumption in the design of programs and projects that often results in unpaid and unrecognised work done by smaller CSOs**

❝If you are already overextended and you are already overloaded, and you're working on six different projects, to be asked to put aside any amount of time for a specific thing, when there isn't an economic retribution or they are not paying for that time, it is just not possible.❞

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❝It would be important to ask ourselves — how much free labour have we given so far? [...] We should avoid harmful narratives that suggest people should work for free because they care about their community.❞

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Impact

● **Challenge of highlighting the value of collective work, rather than individual performance, under the current system of value measurement**

❝Probably it is still also due to the fact that many donors are still fascinated with the idea of being able to measure outcomes. And it's so much easier to measure the outcome in terms of a change in law, changing the case law or ally, but achieving allyship solidarity and change at an international level is so much more time-consuming.❞

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❝It doesn't sound particularly sexy in your strategy to say the outcome is that we will continue maintaining ecosystems, you know, globally and in every region where we work. And so, you know, you need to be able to show that this ecosystem is producing something, right? And that's challenging.❞

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3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

● **A development paradigm perpetuates narratives that undermine the agency and role of local organisations**

❝So if one is working within a paradigm of development age, you then have a particular understanding of what development assistance looks like. You have a particular understanding of how it is that stories need to be packaged in order to be able to tell – which allow you to be accountable to people in other lands where you are raising money, so it becomes a very, very – it becomes shot through with power, and it becomes colonial, or neocolonial in particular ways, I think. And that's a tension, right?❞

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❝Our success stories become the success stories that a middle organisation tells the donor or donors. Therefore we are not pictured as humans taking risks and doing the actual work, we are as success stories in the reports."

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● **INGOs taking over the whole process or intervention and claiming ownership**

❝When we issue a statement they request contacts from us, but then they do not include us in further conversations and they tend to treat relationships with less care, which often affects us since we are the ones who remain in the country.❞

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❝There is a lot of extractivism that is really complicated, especially in terms of visibility, a lot of these groups really struggle for funds and they struggle for visibility. And many times larger and international organisations end up getting all the spotlight.❞

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❝There are organisations on the ground in certain countries that are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the way that global organisations work. They hear a journalist gets arrested, they get the information and then they release the press statement. They rely on local organisations or local media to provide them with information. But there's no real exchange in any meaningful way. Or, you know, they're certainly not supporting them financially, and sometimes they also don't even give them credit.❞

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● **Restricted understanding by donors of the quality of relationships between INGOs and their downstream relationships**

❝Of course, we [donors] do like field visits, interactions like that, but nevertheless you see it through a lens of your primary partner and if your primary partner wants to paint a certain picture, then that's the picture you see. Yeah, I would say that's a challenge.❞

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❝Donors should go beyond perhaps what they hear or what they are told. They themselves should be doing research and investigating to ascertain the real situation on the ground because, like I said earlier, there are people who are genuinely not happy with the influx of international organisations, particularly in Africa, implementing projects and activities that sometimes the local communities have started.❞

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3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

3.2. Enablers for collaboration

SUMMARY OF ENABLERS	
PEOPLE	• Looking inside: self-reflection. • Long-term thinking and relationships. • Shared vision, combined with hands-on practical approaches and individual leaderships.
TRUST/ PROCESS	• Being upfront with everyone's agenda, areas of expertise and boundaries. • Creating space to question, unpack and tackle power and privilege. • Acknowledging the expertise of local actors in all the phases of the collaboration, not as an afterthought. • Embracing the conflicts that arise when a cross-section of people are brought together. • Being flexible to changing the course of planning, taking time to pause, sense, and try something new. • Meeting people in person and getting an opportunity to build a personal relationship.
RESOURCES	• Developing an understanding of what is already available in the ecosystem. • Funding more experimental, playful and relationship-oriented opportunities that contribute to building the field and nurture the ecosystem.
IMPACT	• Prioritising trust and relationship over quick or impactful public facing communications. • Amplifying the voices of local actors.

3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

People

● Looking inside: self-reflection

66We all need to do self-reflection, and local organisations also need to. I think sometimes it's easy to blame, right? Like, oh, the power imbalance, it's there. I mean, by all means, but I'm fiercely critical of everyone.99

66I'm not sure how self-reflective everybody in the media freedom and in the advocacy FoE&I space are […] especially on this tactical strategic level, I don't think we are talking enough about who does what, and why.99

66So there's something about the consciousness that organisations and individuals need to bring to this work that I think is critically important so that we're not replicating the practices that we are actually fighting against. That's not always straightforward or easy.99

● Long-term thinking and relationships

66Collaboration is looking forward to long-term projects instead of having just very isolated points of collaboration, because if they are too isolated, normally there is no collaboration, it is all transactional.99

66Some of the staff members have prior knowledge and experience working at a local level and as part of other movements […] and that makes it more conducive to establishing trust.99

66Providing long-term, flexible support and funding is critical for nurturing the ecosystem and to not just go behind the new, sexy, glamorous subject issue.99

● Shared vision, combined with hands-on practical approaches and individual leaderships
66Nothing goes forward if someone does not take the leadership. This leadership is part of the commitment to collaborate […] There needs to be a person or a team that takes on this responsibility as part of the collaborative efforts.99

Trust / Process

● Being upfront with everyone's agenda, areas of expertise and boundaries

66You really need to and should take more effort in the beginning, to reach an agreement and define what we want to achieve together, early in the process.99

66This is what I'm capable of; this is what we're able to do. This is what we're not able to do. And it's so important, for everybody when you come together to collaborate, just to say: 'I can't do this' and 'I can do this'. And then deliver.99

● Creating space to question, unpack and tackle power and privilege

66How are we navigating our own power and privilege in relation to those that we are supposedly in service of? […] With that I mean not getting instrumentalized and decentralised and extractive.99

66So I think there are layers and layers and layers of complexity that we sometimes are not tuned into, because we think, because we don't interrogate our power and privilege […] Sometimes we don't factor in the realities of where communities may be at, and we start from our own position. As a result we don't ask enough questions.99

3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

● Acknowledging the expertise of local actors in all the phases of the collaboration, not as an afterthought

66 I think the first thing is the acknowledgement of your expertise as a local actor. Our successful experience with this same INGO was because the relationship between this program manager and us was built on that acknowledgement. 99

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66 Being in the inception phase of the design, so this is one thing. And then, when we come to the implementation, acknowledging your experiences and trusting them in everything that you are doing. 99

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● Embracing the conflicts that arise when a cross-section of people are brought together

66 I think when you are engaged in supporting communities, to build and strengthen movements, formations, and networks, you often are going to deal with conflict, because of the nature of our intersectional identities and diversities but also because you are needing to build the broadest cross-section of people to be able to lean in, right, on a particular issue, and those people may be positioned differently [...] you have a whole cross-section of people in a vibrant movement ecosystem, and so you're going to get conflict."

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66 Everybody does something slightly different, and that is something that should be celebrated. But if everyone is flexible enough to take a little step in a certain direction, we might be able to make global progress, right? 99

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● Being flexible to changing the course of planning, taking time to pause, sense, and try something new

66 We have to disrupt our natural tendency to be focusing on outcomes, and say: 'Hey, wait, what has just happened?' And take time to focus on trust [....] Because we were doing that, people trusted the process. 99

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66 We all know that sometimes the approach or intervention or methodology changes according to the ground, acknowledging that is very important, and also not splitting the work in a way that does not complement each other's work and expertise. 99

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66 So, we don't necessarily work in a traditionally narrow, role-specific way; there are times when we will step out of our roles in support of a particular project or piece of work or undertaking. 99

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● Meeting people in person and getting an opportunity to build a personal relationship

66 Not just knowing more people, but knowing them better. And actually having a relationship of trust [....] And I think it's often personal. It is so often underestimated how important it is. 99

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66 There are people who I've met once at an event, we have spent some time together and that personal bond gives enough social capital for us to be, you know, working really well together for years. And it's a relatively small amount of time spent together. But that social capital lasts so long. 99

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3 UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATION

Resources

● **Developing an understanding of what is already available in the ecosystem**

❝Having an overview of who's doing what, it's important, because otherwise you're blind. […] It's about understanding the abundance of the ecosystem.❞

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❝Information sharing is actually at the core of trust, because when you learn about what others are doing, when you understand their point of view, then you can grow, evolve or develop together.❞

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● **Funding more experimental, playful and relationship-oriented opportunities that contribute to building the field and nurturing the ecosystem**

❝Spaces where people can learn about each other and become familiar with their work, explore divergences, as well as the areas in common; strategize and forecast together. So we're not even talking about collaboration yet.❞

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❝There is a need for thought-provoking spaces in which you can look ahead and try to imagine alternate futures together. […] I think we need to be looking at what kind of enabling conditions there are for creativity.❞

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❝There is resistance from funders. Like, if you're doing something that's a bit radical and a bit different, then there is resistance. Internal resistance and external resistance.❞

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Impact

● **Prioritising trust and relationships over quick or impactful public-facing communications**

❝I mean, patience, in a way, when you're working in a situation where you're relying on others it often takes more time than when you do it yourself […] But it doesn't have the same meaning.❞

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❝It has to do with respecting some of the agreements on the ground in terms of power holders that could put people at risk. I think the sensitivity to those dynamics and what it means – not just in terms of freedom of expression, but in terms of safety – is critically important.❞

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● **Amplifying the voices of local actors**

❝We seek to amplify their voices, you know, so many [local CSOs] are working in many restricted contexts, facing high levels of prosecution, we seek to help get their messages across, through the channels that are available to us.❞

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4 IFEX ROLE

This section includes some of the reflections and perceptions shared by interviewees regarding **IFEX's** ways of working and its unique role in the FoE&I ecosystem.

4.1. What is appreciated and works well?

● **Walking the talk and leading by example**

❝The culture seems to sometimes overwrite the structure, is what I was trying to say. In the case of IFEX, I think the culture follows the structure, which is nice.❞

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❝Creating a culture of collaboration and noncompetition – I think, the more the better. I don't see this membership as overtly competing or feeling in competition with each other, because I don't think IFEX behaves that way.❞

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● **Capacity to reflect on the ecosystem at large**

❝It's really about IFEX's core business: how do we build the spaces and bridges to be able to share information in ways that can get amplified by the network in support of movements, interests, and larger ideas that can shape thinking?❞

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● **The IFEX network as a connector, as a space to learn about what is happening in other countries or regions**

❝This is one of the reasons why IFEX is a key partner for us […] because of the fact that they work with a network of local partners in many jurisdictions. They are forced by the circumstances to fly at a level of analysis much higher than the day-to-day challenges and, at the same time, they need to be responsive to the day-to-day challenges and to deliver for a variety of constituencies.❞

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❝IFEX provides us with that critical link to national contexts, while also acting in global spaces. It helps us connect the dots from international to local, and local to international.❞

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❝The IFEX network is about connecting the dots between organisations that have similar issues, either thematically or geographically, or because of their similarities and threats.❞

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4 IFEX ROLE

● **The IFEX network as a space to develop a nuanced understanding of the intersections between FoE&I and other socio-environmental challenges (e.g. FoE&I and climate crisis, FoE&I and gender)**

❝IFEX has brought a high level of nuance to the question of freedom of expression. So if I talk about covering natural disasters, to me it strikes at the heart of freedom of expression. That's where freedom of expression becomes a reality. IFEX is one of the few organisations able to understand and amplify such an intersectional understanding of FoE&I.❞

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❝I've been to one of the big IFEX meetings, in Berlin a few years ago, and it was an eye-opener for me to see the spectrum of freedom of expression organisations and stakeholders, because I come from the journalism and media world. So it was very revelatory to see how all these things somehow belong together [...] this is where I see their role: bringing these voices and concerns together.❞

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❝IFEX can play a role in bringing voices together and do shared learning, and in the meantime, use that for evidence-based advocacy in all those global networks.❞

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● **The unique role of the IFEX General Meeting and Strategy Conference as a space where the values of the network are embodied**

❝In particular, for IFEX I really feel that lack of in-person, you know, one of the huge values of IFEX is that conference [General Meeting] and the fact that it brought people physically together and made people feel part of a community and allowed people time and space to talk about their own issues.❞

. . . .

❝I'm sure that it was very, very complicated to organise, and very expensive, but they always did a fantastic job, moving all those people from all around the world. And that was always a fantastic, fantastic event, the general meeting. [...] Those events were extremely useful for everybody to exchange, face to face. So let's hope that those general meetings will happen face to face again, at some point.❞

. . . .

● **A caring and responsive team that acts as a facilitator supporting national actors**

❝I think IFEX's added value is its management, in how they really take care of their members [...] we are a member of many international networks and forums; at IFEX we feel that our voice is heard and our needs are taken into consideration.❞

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❝We always feel privileged and we feel this emotional support that IFEX is really keen to provide to its members. This is something that you don't feel in other networks [...] you don't feel this personal support and the relationship.❞

. . . .

● **A broad and flexible operating environment**

❝They try to release you from all the burdens, despite the existence of these burdens. So this is the approach that they use to ensure the needs of the members are really cared for and responded to. I think it's very, very important.❞

. . . .

❝IFEX has worked at the national level, but it doesn't conduct work directly. It doesn't displace or replace art with force.❞

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4.2. What could work better?

● **Break the cycle of engaging with usual suspects and contribute to advancing 'unusual alliances'**

❝Looks like it's the same people and the same organisations talking about the same things for 10 or 15 years. It's important to break the circle or to go out of it. [...] Sometimes staying in your small circle, you tend to lose perspective and dramatise things too much.❞

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❝So what would be a bold agenda, something that I would love to see IFEX discuss with its members and figure out, is whether there are some unusual alliances to be made outside, between this network and other networks, that are not the natural suspects or allies, necessarily. This is it in a nutshell.❞

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● **Go beyond the traditional workshop model and enabling more playful spaces of engagement, especially for cross-regional exchange and learning**

❝You could think about things like online happy hours, or events that bring people together around a particular subject. I mean, that's something I would be interested in [....] I would definitely attend an IFEX 'meet and greet' that perhaps focuses on a couple of members so that we could get to know each other better.❞

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❝You need to create places that feel playful and fun, and thought-provoking [...] spaces that can trigger new ideas and new relationships.❞

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● **Do more to facilitate coordination across stakeholders, and to develop a more strategic understanding of the ecosystem**

❝The biggest issue for us is there are so many networks and people asking us to join, and a lot of them, you know, many are very important and worthy. And we would definitely say that for us, being an active member is probably the most challenging part.❞

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❝If we are bumping our heads, it's just like we're doing a bad job in coordinating and exchanging and strategizing [...] and I think we end up creating competition where there shouldn't be, and I think at a level we need to be honest, as there is a level of competition.❞

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KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents key learnings that have emerged through this evaluation process and translates them into specific recommendations and actions for **IFEX**.

1. There is a need to deepen the understanding of practices and principles that underpin 'genuine collaboration' between CSOs, and to continue to engage with the discomfort of talking about power and privilege.

▶ Recommendation 1

Enable spaces for collective reflection on collaboration.

IFEX is in a unique position to leverage the network to facilitate collective conversations around the roles that different stakeholders play in the broader ecosystem. These group conversations would be a good opportunity for members to gain perspective on their own practices and explore some of the barriers. Spaces for collective reflection could follow a 'sharing lessons learned' model to enhance mutual growth and bonding across the network, recognizing that we are all part of the same team.

Action items for IFEX

- Be open about **IFEX's** ongoing learning process.
- Plan and facilitate a conversation with a number of members to get feedback on the findings/recommendations.
- Host group sessions that provide opportunities for self-reflection while helping develop the understanding of the interdependencies among stakeholders.
- Bring external people who can inspire the network to share their experiences and reflections on collaboration.

▶ Recommendation 2

Frame reflections on collaboration and solidarity in broader conversations on decoloniality.

Continue unpacking how Global North/Global Majority hierarchies are manifested across the network and within the broader FoE&I ecosystem at a practical level, uncovering some of the ways in which colonial attitudes, practices and behaviours are manifested.

Action items for IFEX

- Acknowledge unequal Global North/Global Majority power dynamics within the **IFEX** network.
- Embrace uncomfortable conversations about power and privilege in the context of partnerships and collaboration.
- Stimulate further dialogue and exchange within the **IFEX** network, creating spaces to interrogate power.

► Recommendation 3

Deepen the understanding of some critical assumptions that underpin the ecosystem.

Through the interviews, we have been able to identify a number of assumptions that, regardless of the extent to which they hold any truth, still determine how the FoE&I ecosystem operates. Revisiting these assumptions and unbundling them, collectively, is key to identifying what aspects need to be reframed and rethought in order to shift the direction of the overall ecosystem.

Assumptions that emerged through the interviews can be found in the **appendix** of this document.

Action items for IFEX

- Use the assumptions as a starting point for conversations among diverse stakeholders.
- Create a visual footprint of the 'nuanced' understanding of these assumptions. Use this resource to trigger richer discussions and group discussions.

2. **There is a need to develop tools to improve collaboration and to tackle unequal power dynamics within and be-yond the IFEX network.**

► Recommendation 4

Develop tools for member organisations to perform 'self-checks' and facilitate conversations about the conditions for collaboration.

Provide tools (e.g. guidelines, frameworks, language) for the FoE&I sector to use in the development, application and oversight of their collaborative efforts. These tools can invite members to question their own policies and practices, encouraging the development of organisational cultures open to critique, and also serve to shine light on power imbalances when working with other organisations.

Action items for IFEX

- Based on the **IFEX** network's own experiences and learnings, and in consultation with members, develop a set of tips or checklists for members to reflect on how to engage in collaboration with different stakeholders. This effort can build on the "Cultivating care and experimentation" sphere from the **Innovating Change Approach**.
- Test the proposed tools with members, evaluate, and iterate.
- Create an open 'living resource' that evolves and grows with the learnings of the network.

► Recommendation 5

Propose a set of Principles for Collaboration for future collaborations between local, regional and international civil society organisations.

IFEX is in a unique position to propose a set of principles for working together. These principles can help trigger a public and shared network commitment on how to advance the FoE&I agenda further and more fairly, together.

Action items for IFEX

- Use the engagement sessions to identify key points to be included in these principles.
- Draft the principles working closely with diverse **IFEX** member organisations interested in contributing to this piece of work.
- Share the principles with **IFEX** members, ideally for feedback and approval at the next General Meeting (Berlin, 2024).
- Publish **IFEX's** Principles for Collaboration so that other stakeholders in the ecosystem can use them as a source of inspiration.

3. **There is a need to explore collaboration tactics and strategies to engage with non-CSO stakeholders.**

▶ **Recommendation 6**

Enhance the capacity of members to engage and advocate with non-CSO stakeholders, especially in the corporate sector.

Through the interviews it became evident that one of the challenges facing members is related to their need to engage with non-CSOs in a more sophisticated way, as members quickly default to either full collaboration or full confrontation.

Working with non-traditional stakeholders requires the ability to use language and arguments that are not rights-based, often departing from an awareness-building language and agenda. Furthermore, it is important to be aware that power dynamics unfold differently when working with non-CSOs. Enabling opportunities to explore the spectrum of tactics to engage with the corporate sector can be valuable to expand access to the levers of change.

Action items for IFEX

- Use the **Innovating Change** approach to explore the 'Building relationships and alliances' sphere with members.
- Through upcoming engagement opportunities, develop an understanding of relevant stakeholders, as well as of key barriers and enablers perceived by members when working with non-CSOs.

▶ **Recommendation 7**

Lead an exploratory role in the rapidly changing ecosystem.

The spaces for influence keep multiplying, making it much harder for organisations to understand what is needed in the ecosystem, and what are the potential levers of change. The ability to reflect on the ecosystem at large, combined with the opportunity to harness the expertise and diversity of the network, places **IFEX** in a unique position to cover this function.

Action items for IFEX

- Map alternative spaces where there is opportunity for meaningful engagement and impact. Identify the skills and experiences needed to be effective in acting in those spaces.
- Highlight and make visible the interdependencies and potential synergies among different stakeholders.

4. **There is a need to strengthen the case for donors to fund collaboration efforts and to call attention to how donor practices perpetuate power imbalances and hinder collaboration.**

▶ **Recommendation 8**

Become a thought partner for donors to reflect on the value of relationships and collaboration in sparking change.

Working with donors to create a better understanding of the value of field building and network engagement for social change. Enacting a reflection that invites donors to develop a critical understanding of how their processes support (or hinder) the ability of the ecosystem to trigger systemic change. Fostering a broader understanding of what collaboration means and raising awareness of the resources needed to enable and nurture genuine collaboration across the ecosystem. Advocating for donors to look more closely at how they contribute to the barriers to collaboration and to recognise and respond to the need for funding that enables collaboration.

Action items for IFEX

- Create a space for donors to dive deeper into some of the insights of the report and to collectively discuss them.
- Make the case for donors to change practices that hinder collaboration, and fund efforts that spark collaboration (e.g. convenings, networking, learning exchanges, coordination time, etc.).

5.1. Recap of key learnings and recommendations

LEARNINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
There is a need to deepen the understanding of practices and principles that underpin 'genuine collaboration' between CSOs, and to continue engaging with the discomfort of talking about power and privilege.	**1.** Enable spaces for collective reflection on collaboration. **2**. Frame reflections on collaboration and solidarity in the broader conversations on decoloniality. **3.** Deepen the understanding of some critical assumptions that underpin the ecosystem.
There is a need to develop tools to improve collaboration and to tackle unequal power dynamics within and beyond the IFEX network.	**4.** Develop tools for member organisations to perform "self-checks" and facilitate conversations about the conditions for collaboration. **5.** Propose a set of Principles for Collaboration for future collaborations between local, regional and international civil society organisations.
There is a need to explore collaboration tactics and strategies to engage with non-CSO stakeholders.	**6.** Enhance the capacity of members to engage and advocate with non-CSO stakeholders, especially the corporate sector. **7.** Lead an exploratory role in the rapidly changing ecosystem.
There is a need to strengthen the case for donors to fund collaboration efforts and to call attention to how donor practices perpetuate power imbalances and hinder collaboration among CSOs.	**8.** Become a thought partner for donors to reflect on the value of relationships and collaboration in sparking change.

APPENDIX

Glossary

- **Global Majority:** Global Majority is a collective term that refers to people who are Black, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and / or have been racialized as 'ethnic minorities'. Globally, these groups currently represent approximately 80% of the world's population, making them the global majority.

- **Allies:** Organisations, irrespective of their area of activity and geographic coverage, that have the possibility, the willingness and the interest to work with **IFEX** in reaching shared strategic goals. They may share an interest in promoting and defending freedom of expression or may benefit from **IFEX** experience in this area to enhance their work. It is a relationship established between like-minded organisations with a potential to work together, share resources, and crowdsource strategies and tactics for achieving mutually beneficial objectives.

- **Collaboration:** Initiatives involving multiple organisations including **IFEX** members, partners/ allies, and/or the **IFEX** Secretariat, each providing inputs, feedback, and direction in the design and implementation of the initiative.

- **Cooperation:** Initiatives involving multiple organisations including **IFEX** members, partners/ allies, and/or the **IFEX** Secretariat, in which organisations provide support in implementation of the initiative.

Assumptions to revisit collectively

- Assumption that it is almost impossible for international organisations to be non-extractive in their relationships with local organisations

- Assumption that donors and INGOs can/should be grouped in a unique category (e.g. Global North organisations) when reflecting on unequal power dynamics

- Assumption that donors are the ones who should be envisioning the ecosystem

- Assumption that global advocacy on press freedom and FoE&I can be done separately from the work done by local media actors

- Assumption that local organisations aren't able to handle large budgets responsibly

- Assumption that current accountability mechanisms are sufficient to understand the quality of relationships across the ecosystem, especially in large scale projects involving INGOs and local organisations

- Assumption within the FoE&I networks and coalitions that 'we' are all good (referred to NGOs) and 'they' are all bad (referred to non-NGO stakeholders involved in the field)

List of interviewees

	NAME	ROLE	ORGANISATION
1.	**Itxaso Dominguez**	EU Advocacy Officer	7amleh
2.	**Cristina Zahar**	Executive Director	ABRAJI
3.	**Felicia Anthonio**	#KeepItOn Campaign Coordinator	AccessNow
4.	**Marianne Diaz Hernandez**	#WhyID Campaigner	AccessNow
5.	**Wesley Gibbings**	Board Member	Association of Caribbean Media Workers
6.	**Elisabet Catenys**	Executive Director	ACOS Alliance
7.	**Ika Ningtyas**	Secretary General	Alliance of Independent Journalists
8.	**Remzi Lani**	Executive Director	Albanian Media Institute
9.	**Paula Martins**	Social and Environmental Justice Programme Manager	Association for Progressive Communications
10.	**Julie Broome**	Director	Ariadne Network
11.	**Silvia Chocarro**	Global Head of Protection	ARTICLE 19
12.	**Chak Sopheap**	Executive Director	Cambodian Centre for Human Rights
13.	**Jessica Ramirez**	Senior Attorney	Center for Justice and International Law
14.	**Leslie Piquemal**	Senior (EU) Advocacy Representative	Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
15.	**Sandor Orban**	Director	Center for Independent Journalism - Hungary
16.	**Paul Kimumwe**	Senior Programme Officer	CIPESA
17.	**Mandeep Tiwana**	Chief Programmes Officer	Civicus
18.	**Mark Fodor**	Defenders in Development Campaign Coordinator	Coalition for Human Rights in Development
19.	**Jodie Ginsberg**	President	Committee to Protect Journalists
20.	**Jamila Venturini**	Co-Executive Director	Derechos Digitales

List of interviewees

	NAME	ROLE	ORGANISATION
21.	**Nighat Dad**	Executive Director	Digital Rights Foundation
	Shmyla Khan	Director Research and Policy	
22.	**Jan Lublinski**	Head of Department, Policy and Learning	DW Akademie
23.	**Claire Fernandez**	Executive Director	EDRi
24.	**Alberto Cerda**	Program Officer, International Technology and Society Program	Ford Foundation
	Iva Dobichina	Programme Officer, CEG-I	
25.	**Leon Willems**	Senior Advisor	Free Press Unlimited
26.	**Poonam Joshi**	Director	The Funders Initiative for Civil Society
27.	**Tom Law**	Deputy Executive Director	Global Forum for Media Development
28.	**Jesper Højberg**	Executive Director	International Media Support
	Colette S. Wahlqvist	Global Safety Adviser	
29.	**Jeanne Bourgault**	President	Internews
30.	**Amy Brouillette**	Director of Advocacy	International Press Institute
	Scott Griffen	Deputy Director	
31.	**Shereen Essof**	Executive Director	JASS
32.	**Roula Mikhael**	Executive Director	Maharat Foundation
	Layal Bahnam	Program Manager	
33.	**Vivian Affoah**	Programme Manager	Media Foundation for West Africa
34.	**Tabani Moyo**	Regional Secretariat Director (MISA), and Executive Director (MISA Zimbabwe)	Media Institute of Southern Africa
35.	**Susan Valentine**	Division Director, Media, Expression	Open Society Foundation
36.	**Romana Cacchioli**	Executive Director	PEN International
37.	**Paul Pouchoux**	Senior Advocacy Officer	Reporters sans frontières
38.	**Oliver Vujovic**	Secretary General	SEEMO
39.	**Ali Gharavi**	Senior Programme Specialist	Sida