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CSM-STAND BRIEF: Priority Actions for Engaging the Private Sector to Promote Civic and Media Space

Civil Society and Media – Strengthened Together and Advancing in New Directions (CSM-STAND) includes two USAID-funded trans-regional programs that **foster independent civic forces, enhance civic engagement, and build vibrant, resilient, and more pluralistic democratic societies**. As part of its commitment to global learning, CSM-STAND aims to provide international development practitioners, civil society, and media cutting-edge technical resources to guide effective and adaptable programming.

Priority Actions for Engaging the Private Sector to Promote Civic and Media Space

Civil society and independent media are on the frontlines around the world in defending civic space and ensuring open and healthy media ecosystems. But they cannot do this work alone! Civic and media environments are best strengthened in partnership with governments committed to regulatory frameworks and norms that preserve and extend basic rights, such as speech and assembly. Furthermore, even under repressive regimes where the government is not committed to maintaining open civic space, civil society organizations (CSOs), individual activists, and journalists can benefit from mutual alliances with diverse social actors, including those from the private sector which bring unique and complementary capacities and influence.

Important resources and [policies](#) related to “private sector engagement” for development practitioners exist, but they do not focus on the opportunity and challenge of engaging the private sector as partners for preserving and growing civic space. Recognizing this gap, CSM-STAND developed a novel strategy for civil society, media, and development programs interested in cultivating alliances with businesses and other private sector actors to strengthen civic and media environments. This strategy will be deliberately tested and amended over time as CSM-STAND and its partners gain more experience. This summary document provides an overview of the rationale and recommendations for private sector engagement CSM-STAND will take forward.

The case for private sector engagement

CSOs, individuals or networks of activists, and journalists care deeply about and rely on the regulatory and normative environments that preserve space for civil society and media. Globally, they work to advocate against restrictive “NGO laws,” challenge legal and administrative actions targeting media, and defend against broader attacks on the freedom of speech and assembly. They also advance positive efforts to strengthen civic education, expand access to accurate information, and promote norms of civic participation that bolster democratic freedoms. Within many societies, however, private sector

actors may have greater social and political influence than civic actors, including with public officials. Thus, civil society and media can benefit from even modest collaborations with private sector actors to advance social issues related to protecting and promoting civic space.

Private sector actors may benefit from engagement on civic and media space issues too! At the macro level, there is a link between [economic growth and the protection of civil liberties](#). Practically, businesses benefit from rule-based business environments, which can be bolstered by regulatory systems for civil society and media that are similarly predictable. Furthermore, in certain contexts, individual private sector firms may find advantages in associating their brands with specific stances on key civic and media issues.

The case for civil society and media to engage the private sector



The private sector often has deep networks and influence with powerholders, many of which may be distinct from the networks of civil society and media

The private sector can sometimes “neutralize” or mainstream otherwise sensitive work, including engagement related to civic and political rights issues

Some private sector-driven civic organizations (such as industry associations) may have interests and concerns related to civic space that align with other civic actors

The case for private sector to care about civic and media space



Economic growth is associated with protection of civil liberties and may be most conducive of ensuring sustainable access to international markets

Rule based and predictable enabling environments for civil society and media may contribute to healthier, business friendly markets

Individual companies may strengthen their brand with key demographics through association with specific civil society and/or media-led initiatives

The challenges of private sector engagement

While the case for civil society, media, and the private sector to mutually engage in support of strengthening civic and media space and promoting democratic norms may be clear, this kind of collaboration is not easy. Companies tend to make decisions based on their individual interests and market impact, not whether actions are good for citizens or society at large. In many contexts private sector actors are complicit within (or even central to) kleptocratic power structures that are the driving forces behind crackdowns on civil society and media. Furthermore, private firms are often risk averse and avoid engagement on sensitive issues. Conversations with a range of private sector actors and experts identified numerous constraints that limit their collaboration with civil society and media, including:

 <p>Businesses lack time, money and focus and may be reluctant to engage on issues tangential to their core operations or bottom line</p>	 <p>Private sector entities are risk adverse and, even in open democratic societies, business leaders may fear backlash from political actors</p>	 <p>Businesses may align themselves with political leaders and policies that undermine civil liberties to pursue market advantage</p>
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Remember, sometimes private sector engagement is not a fit

By collaborating with private sector actors, development projects, civil society, and media can expand their influence and benefit from novel ideas and insights from new allies for how to pursue shared goals. However, private sector engagement can be difficult and time consuming, especially in highly restricted environments and where there are limited examples of private sector engagement focused on civic and media space. In some cases, for example, the issues being advanced by civic and media

advocates may be too controversial to generate direct interest from the private sector. Those pushing to strengthen civic and media environments, therefore, should use discretion in determining when there are opportunities to engage private actors for market solutions versus when it may prove a distraction from other viable strategies to advance positive change.

Recommendations for private sector engagement

There is no single recipe for success – and there is a dearth of existing practice – for engaging the private sector as allies for defending and strengthening civic space and media ecosystems. Thus, strategies must be tailored to each context and development practitioners, civic activists, and media leaders must test and adapt strategies. Acknowledging the need for flexibility and continued learning, some of the approaches CSM-STAND will take forward include the following:

1. Be clear about the purpose for engaging the private sector

Collaboration and constructive engagement between private sector actors and civil society and media actors is more likely to be achieved and worthwhile if it is **purpose driven**. Development projects, civic actors, and media organizations, therefore, should be clear about their purpose, goals, and objectives for engaging with companies, industry groups, or other private institutions. For example, alternative purposes for engagement could include the following:

 <p>Strengthen and broaden advocacy for regulatory frameworks that protect civic and/or media rights</p>	 <p>Foster alternative revenue generation models to scale and sustain civic organizations</p>	 <p>Promote public information fostering civic participation of marginalized groups</p>
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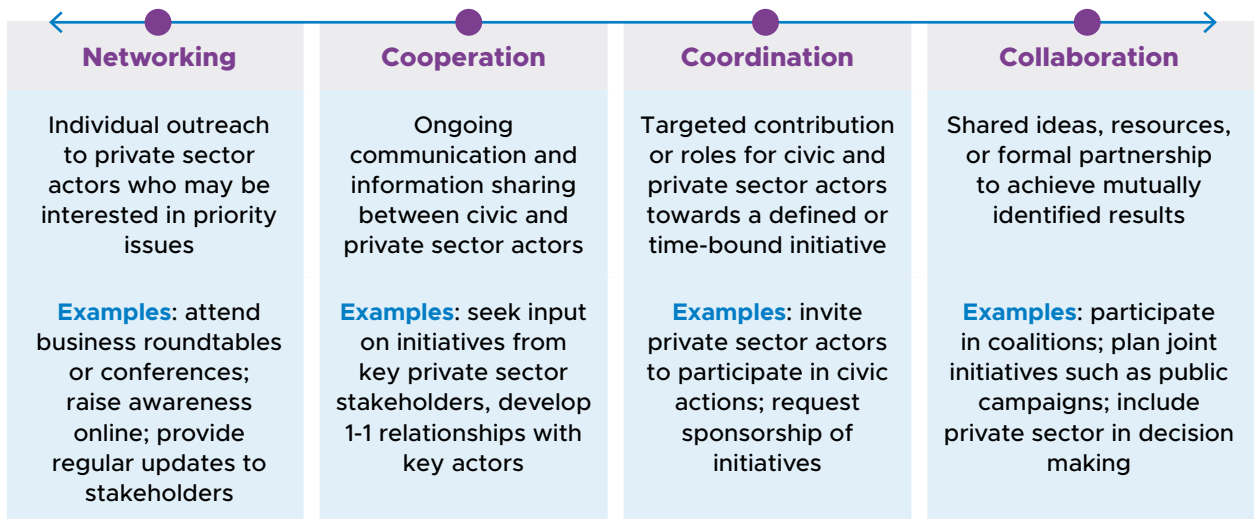
These and other alternative purposes will shape what kind of private sector actors or entities are in play as potential collaborators of civic and media actors. All other actions aimed at fostering private sector engagement will stem from establishing a clearly articulated purpose and help identify top priorities for engagement. Once the purpose and priorities for engagement are identified, civic and media actors should begin developing a contextualized and iterative strategy that captures the intended outcomes, expectations, and potential areas of collaboration across the issues for engagement with private sector actors.

2. Start small and embrace even modest engagement with private sector actors

The idea of enlisting private sector actors as full partners in the defense of civic and media space may feel intimidating or naïve, even in relatively permissive political contexts. However, those working to strengthen regulatory and normative civic environments can embrace even modest engagement with private sector actors. For example, individual companies may be unwilling to take a public stance against a proposed restrictive NGO law, but industry associations may be willing to discretely engage policymakers on the uncertainty proposed regulations could have on their ability to freely operate. Similarly, private sector actors may avoid contentious debates about civil and political rights but may be open to celebrating women's or girls' leadership and civic participation.

In many cases, civil society and media actors may find that even limited engagement with private sector actors can help positively reframe key issues and broaden how they are seen publicly. Especially in restricted or closing spaces, focusing on incremental steps for engagement with private sector actors can set the foundation for relationship building. There are levels of engagement that can either lay the groundwork for future collaboration or lead to more action when an opportunities arises.

TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT WITH PRIVATE SECTOR



3. Map and account for the diversity of the private sector

The private sector is complex and diverse. It includes large multinational companies, large national companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, industry associations, and corporate foundations among others. Additionally, the private sector covers all sectors and industries, including export-led industries, retail, service sectors, etc. These various segments of the private sector may have competing interests and pressure points that can be leveraged by civic and media actors.

In exploring options for private sector engagement, development projects, CSOs, and media organizations should map and think comprehensively about where there are opportunities and barriers to collaboration. For example, individual companies and industries geared toward a young, urban market may be interested in supporting normative campaigns aimed at bolstering the civic participation of youth. Similarly, industry associations may be open to quietly advocating for government policies that lessen international criticism. The following further considerations may help partners carry out these mapping exercises:

- **Understanding business models:** Identify the unique characteristics of the business models of the primary actors in the target sector to develop the best pathways for partnership building.
- **Building relationships:** Identify the key actors or influencers at a company, association, or organization who can be entry points for developing partnerships with targeted actors
- **Creating linkages:** If a company publicly talks about a corporate social responsibility strategy or business unit, then it may be easier to engage them in a partnership. If not, it may be more appropriate to focus initially on areas of partnership concerning their core business operations.
- **Developing Networks:** It can be more effective to work with a cohort or in coalition of private sector and civic actors to achieve greater action by strength in numbers

4. Identify and build engagement around the animating interests of private sector actors

Private sector actors should not be expected to think like civic activists and journalists. As a key principle, therefore, development projects, civil society, and media actors should build their engagement around an understanding of the guiding interests of companies and related market participants. This requires being both curious and analytical in exploring the perspectives of private actors. Animating interests

may relate to reducing market uncertainty, increasing brand awareness with priority consumers, aligning their product with key civic values, etc.

Those pursuing collaboration with private sector actors should frame their issues in ways that speak to the interests of those market specific actors. This should be done in bespoke ways that meet the needs of individual companies and firms, but it may require shifting the language and framing of topics of concern for civic and media actors:

**Thinking like a business:
Ask value proposition questions**



- Will this partnership **help with critical business operations** for the company?
- Will this partnership **advance a regulatory environment or legal framework** that will benefit the business?
- Will this partnership **help a business showcase through public relations** how is it committed to specific values or communities?

It is also possible to develop a discrete and issue-specific partnership with a business for which CSOs or media are also monitoring their business practices or impact on the issue areas. However, it is important to clarify this dynamic at the outset from a general perspective and then identify parameters for engagement early in relationship building.

Typical Civil Society or Media Framing	Possible Modified Framing for Certain Private Sector Actors
The proposed NGO Law violates the basic associational rights of formal and informal civil society	The proposed NGO Law could further destabilize our politics, invite international criticism, and worsen the business environment for key sectors of the economy
Youth continue to be disenfranchised and excluded from public decision making, driving their longer-term alienation from the power structure	Youth is the core demographic for multiple industries and firms and there are opportunities to celebrate their social and civic empowerment
Shutting down or restricting the work of media outlets threatens peoples' right to information and undermines democracy	Key industries (especially technology companies!) provide channels and platforms for communication and strengthen their brand by being seen to defend media rights

5. Prioritize due diligence

It is critically important that development projects, civil society, and media exercise strong due diligence in pursuing collaborations with market actors. Given that some private sector firms and individual agents are embedded in local power structures, those advancing civic and media-related outcomes should avoid legitimizing actors playing fundamentally destructive roles. Furthermore, it is important to monitor

and verify that private sector collaborators play their agreed roles over time. The due diligence approach, therefore, should not only include careful vetting of potential collaborators up front, but establishing basic processes and mechanisms for ongoing communication and reflection over time. USAID provides a [robust set of questions](#) to ask when looking to ensure that you have considered all aspects of a potential partner's reputational risk.

For more information

Read CSM-STAND's full strategy document.

Visit CSM-STAND Program Website:
pactworld.org/country/csm-stand

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