

PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT
FOR CIVIC AND MEDIA SPACE:

**STRATEGY FOR CIVIL
SOCIETY AND INDEPENDENT
MEDIA TO COLLABORATE
WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR**



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Civil Society and Media - Strengthened Together and Advancing in New Directions (CSM-STAND) consists of two regional USAID-funded five-year Leader with Associate (LWA) Awards to foster independent civic forces; enhance civic engagement; and build vibrant, resilient, and self-reliant civil society and media sectors that cultivate more pluralistic, democratic societies. CSM-STAND is comprised of leading global, regional, and technical organizations specializing in different sectors who bring extensive practical experience and knowledge of fundamental principles, key issues, current practices, and emerging trends in the democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) community.

The private sector strategy is for the use of the CSM-STAND consortium and the country and regionally based programs. CSM-STAND will use the strategy to navigate the process of purposefully designing and implementing activities to leverage private sector actors in efforts to protect civic space. CSM-STAND hopes that other implementers, especially those seeking to strengthen democracy, human rights, governance, will find this strategy applicable.

Pact led the development of the strategy with research and writing support from Tethered Up.

Pact is an international nonprofit that works in nearly 40 countries, building solutions for human development that are evidence-based, data-driven and owned by the communities we serve. Founded in 1971, Pact works with partners to build resilience, improve accountability, and strengthen knowledge and skills for sustainable social impact.

Tethered Up bridges engagement with the private sector, guiding common problem solving between development partners and socially conscious businesses.

This strategy was developed with support from the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the Civil Society and Media – Strengthening Together and in New Directions (CSM-STAND). CSM-STAND is a USAID-funded, five-year Leader with Associate (LWA) cooperative agreement implemented by a Pact-led consortium. The contents do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.



INTRODUCTION

As authoritarianism rises globally, civil society and independent media actors preserve and rebuild civic space, nurture social trust, and fight back against the negative effects to our information economy and social networks. Civic and media organizations also contribute to stable, sustained, and inclusive economic growth. To continue this work civil society and media organizations at the local, regional, and international levels need to find new and diverse allies to advance democratic values and protect civic space.

The private sector is one of several actors that can serve as powerful allies when they see that it is in their interests to advance initiatives led by civil society and independent media organizations and to support shared causes related to democratic values and civil liberties. Individual business leaders, companies of all sizes, and corporate interest groups have unique capacities, tools, relationships, and resources to leverage. However, productive partnership building between civic actors and private sector actors can be challenging and requires deliberate planning.

The Civil Society and Media – Strengthening Together and Advancing in New Directions (CSM-STAND) program includes two USAID-funded trans-regional programs that “foster independent civic forces, enhance civic engagement, and build vibrant, resilient, and more pluralistic democratic societies.” This strategy for civil society and media to engage with the private sector, developed by Pact through CSM-STAND, aims to inform collaboration with potential private sector allies to respond to issues or events that impact civic space.

Building from USAID’s own Private Sector Engagement policy, these guidelines are aimed at pursuing a long-term goal of “more deliberate, consistent, and frequent engagement with the private sector¹” as an ally on the issues that affect civil society and independent media organizations. At the same time, they are based on an understanding that private sector and civil society/media collaboration is often challenging and that even small-scale engagements can be pursued to build new models of collaboration.

This strategy lays out how development partners, civil society organizations, and independent media can operationalize practical steps at the global, regional, and national level to enable partners to improve social cohesion by building effective partnerships with the private sector. The strategy is organized into the following sections:



CASE FOR PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT



WHAT THE PRIVATE SECTOR BRINGS TO THE TABLE



PRIORITY AREAS FOR CIVIC ACTORS TO ENGAGE THE PRIVATE SECTOR



GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARTNERSHIP BUILDING

¹ [USAID Private Sector Engagement Policy](#) pg. 9

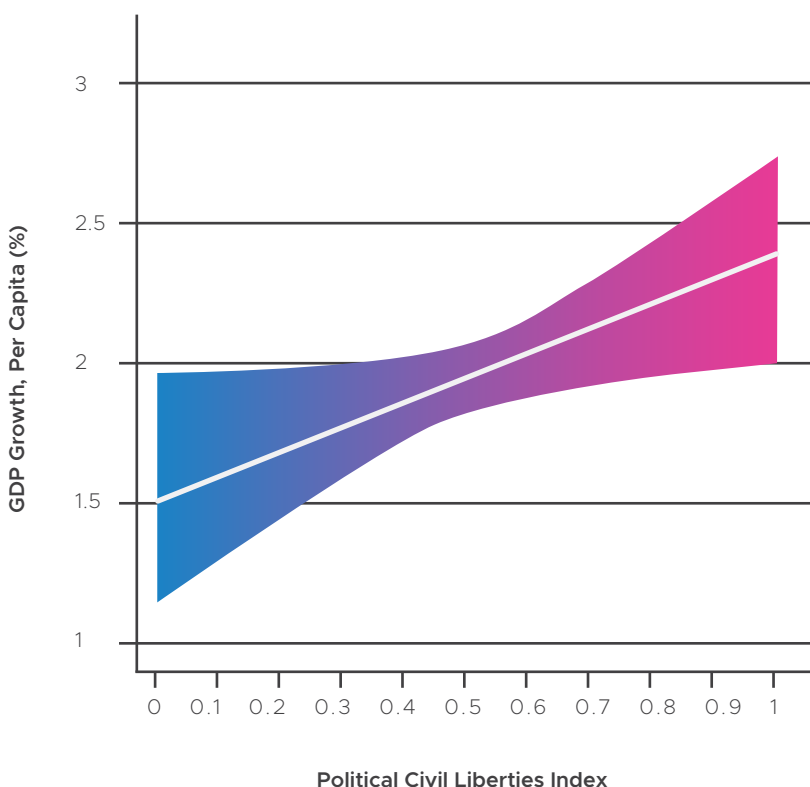


THE CASE FOR PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT FOR CIVIC AND MEDIA SPACE

Evidence-based arguments help make the case for private sector actors' involvement in promoting democracy and protecting open civic space. Examples of evidence that civic actors can build on in their engagements with private sector actors include:

1. **Shrinking civic space is bad for economic growth:** Research has shown a clear link between economic growth and civil liberties. The B-Team, a global collective of business and civil society leaders, conducted a study with V-Dem to unpack the relationship between V-Dem's Political Civil Liberties Index, GDP, and other human development indicators across countries. It found that restrictions on civic freedoms are connected to negative economic outcomes and the model projects that a move from 0 to 1 on the index would increase GDP per capita by an average of 1.3% over 5 years. If a country were on this growth trajectory it could expect to double its income levels in 50 years. This finding was buffeted by a strong relationship between human development indicators and protections on civil liberties.¹

CORRELATION OF ECONOMIC GROWTH RATES AND PROTECTION OF CIVIL LIBERTIES



Moving from 0 to 1 on the V-Dem Civil Liberties Index increases GDP per capita by an average of 1.3 percent over a period of five years.

This is significant: a country that increases GDP from 0 to 1.3 percent will double its income level in just over 50 years. This means that the improvement of civil liberties is clearly linked to a substantial increase in income and growth.

¹ [The Business Case for Protecting Civic Rights](#) pg. 3 The B Team, 2018



2. **Weak governance threatens business operations:** Business owners benefit from responsible government and a voice within it. Businesses must manage risks in any operating environment. Predictability (a hallmark of good governance) grounded in the rule of law is essential for businesses to remain confident in their ability to manage risks, make considered investment decisions, and to achieve targets. Sound legal and regulatory codes backed by the rule of law must also exist for businesses to thrive in a market-based economy. For example, the insecurity of capital, potentially caused by unevenly enforced weak property rights or contracts, can create expensive operational and legal challenges for private companies. Contexts with shrinking civic space, often characterized by the law being applied in a selective manner, can magnify these risks and can pose material risks to both staff and investments – making doing business in certain contexts unprofitable and dangerous. As Freedom House has found from recent experiences in Africa, “Businesses want predictable and transparent government regulation, the ability to operate freely, and fair enforcement of the law. Investment goes where it is welcome and stays where it is treated well.”²
3. **Businesses rely on high-quality information to make informed investments:** As a political system becomes less transparent and as societal trust decays, businesses become exposed to greater risks because of a lack of available trusted information. Consequently, government transparency and the proactive disclosure of accurate information, often through a right to information that is regularly enforced, helps businesses thrive. The ability of media actors to access, analyze, and share this information to a range of audiences is also critical to positively inform a business’ decision from how to engage in a specific context and how to engage a particular customer base. For example, CSOs and media organizations that conduct oversight – advocating for and then utilizing public data – equip businesses to navigate operational, reputational, and fiduciary risks.
4. **Shrinking space can stunt growth within a specific market:** Threats to freedom of association and assembly can negatively impact the ability of businesses to build a robust understanding of, and relationship with, their customer bases. Strong trade unions and civil society organizations help companies to secure the social license (i.e. public acceptance of a company’s business practices) necessary to operate. They also play a role in alerting companies to risks that may disrupt their business operations and damage their brand.

² [Africa’s Next Chapter: Driving Growth through Rule of Law and Transparency](#) Freedom House, 2016



WHAT PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS BRING TO THE TABLE

Promoting and protecting civic space is not the responsibility of watchdog civil society and media organizations alone. In healthy democracies, these groups are successful because of deep, embedded relationships with academia, civic and voluntary associations, faith-based groups, religious institutions, trade unions, and the private sector. As threats to civic freedoms emerge, organizations monitoring the overall environment are able to call upon existing relationships to identify the problem and develop adequate responses together. Based on the specific issue at hand, these allies in the private sector and elsewhere may or may not respond based on their own specific interests.

The private sector is a broad term used to represent a diverse range of entities – it encompasses all for-profit businesses that are not owned or operated by the government.³ The private sector is not monolithic. It includes large multinational corporations and big firms, but also contains businesses of different sectors, sizes, and motivations, led by individuals from all parts of society.

USAID's private sector engagement policy⁴ defines the private sector as the following:

- For-profit, commercial entities, and their affiliated foundations;
- Financial institutions, investors, and intermediaries;
- Business associations and cooperatives;
- Micro, small, medium, and large enterprises that operate in the formal and informal sectors;
- American, local, regional, and multi-national businesses; and
- For-profit approaches that generate sustainable income (e.g., a venture fund run by a non-government organization (NGO) or a social enterprise).

Positive business leadership currently spans a wide spectrum. It includes corporate social responsibility and philanthropy. It also includes partnerships with civil society to improve cooperate practices and reduce negative impacts. Furthermore, it includes joint advocacy focused on shifting policies and incentive structures to transform market-wide behavior.⁵ For civic actors specifically, the benefits of engaging private sector partners can include:

- **Private sector actors can be powerful advocacy allies:** In many contexts, business leaders and their firms have significant influence. Civic actors need to engage with powerholders of all kinds to shape public debate and relevant policies. In many democratic systems, private sector actors can influence public policy through direct lobbying or drive collective action by way of partnerships with local business associations, chambers of commerce, and think tanks. For example, an important segment of civil society is voluntary business associations that act as a voice for businesses, bringing the issues companies face and possible solutions before policymakers. Through public policy advocacy, associations mobilize business perspectives, analyze options, and communicate them to

The Economic Impact of Restrictive NGO Bill

In Kenya, the CSO Reference Group – a civil society platform focused on improving the governance, accountability, and transparency of the civil society sector – used research effectively to build an alliance with private sector to push back against proposed restrictions on NGO financing from foreign sources. They showcased the severe effects the proposed rules would have on general employment and specific social sectors such as health care. Ultimately, the government dropped its efforts to change the law.

³ [Private Sector Definition \(investopedia.com\)](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/private-sector-definition.asp)

⁴ [USAID Private Sector Engagement Policy](#) pg. 6

⁵ [Can Business and Civil Society Save our Democracies?](#) Civicus and The B Team, 2017



decision-makers. These voices can be particularly influential to policymakers who may be swayed by economic arguments over normative ones.

- Private sector actors play an influential role in the new public square:** Businesses now more than ever shape social discourse through their ownership of traditional media outlets and social media platforms. Given their reach, and in some cases the creation of entirely new information ecosystems, they have significant influence over what information and ideas are shared and discussed in the public sphere. Businesses can also play a central role regarding who has access to the internet, especially in emerging markets. Civil society's direct engagement and advocacy with these actors can shape their decision-making and improve their platforms in favor of civic action and trusted information.
- Collaborations with the private sector can "neutralize" otherwise sensitive work:** In environments with shrinking civic space, some CSOs who work on potentially sensitive or controversial topics (including governance reforms, accountability, and human rights) are often faced with restrictions and may be forced to consider how they can continue operations safely while serving their communities. Building strong relationships within and across a network of stakeholders, including private sector, can support CSOs in making this shift and identify pathways to continue to work. Private sector actors can also play an important role in promoting good governance, transparency, and ethical conduct within their own operations that have a positive impact on civic space. Civic actors can engage with private sector organizations on their social impact through corporate social responsibility policies or environment, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives.
- The private sector's incentives to develop market-based interventions, continuously innovate, and support sustainable development:** The private sector often has more flexibility than the public sector as it has a financial incentive to respond quickly to opportunities and develop solutions for new markets. Activities that make use of market-based solutions, or are rooted in the needs of the market, are likely to continue to be supported by the private sector once the project is finished. Countless examples exist of locally owned and sustainable solutions developed with the private sector to address the challenges facing communities in energy, agriculture, healthcare, and education. In relation to addressing, solving, and advancing issues associated with civic space, the private sector's flexibility and the innovation that accompanies it has led to solution-building in media and information (providing access to the internet to marginalized and resource poor communities), advocacy (application of technologies to carry out research and present findings in new and

Technology for Democracy Cohort

Access Now, an organization focused on defending and extending digital rights, partnered with the government of the UK and Estonia to lead a multi-year effort to bring together civil society, government, and private sector companies across 40 countries to develop projects to enhance connectivity, and promote inclusivity and transparency. They presented the progress of this dynamic group at the March 2023 U.S. Summit for Democracy, which encouraged private sector companies to make commitments in four areas: countering the misuse of technology, fighting corruption, protecting civic space, and advancing labor rights.

Economic Empowerment for Women

While social norms underly gender inequalities, focusing on economic empowerment can not only help women or marginalized groups gain economic autonomy, but also promote their civic participation. By including the private sector, CSOs can also influence business practices to meet diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments, or goals towards zero-tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse.



compelling ways), and public policy (contributing to platforms that enable citizens to report on and monitor government activities). As such, deeper collaboration and information sharing between civic and private sector actors offers the potential for the work of all parties to be more agile and responsive to the needs of communities.

- **The private sector offers unique resources, investment capabilities, and technical expertise:** Private sector organizations can provide significant financial resources to support development initiatives and programs, such as funding for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), infrastructure development, and economic growth, or initiatives to improve governance and transparency in government. Private sector actors can provide in-kind support to civil society organizations and government institutions, such as office space, equipment, and other resources needed for program implementation. Private sector organizations can also provide specialized expertise and technical assistance in areas such as business management, strategic planning, and marketing, which can be valuable in building the capacity of civil society organizations and government institutions.

In each of these ways, private sector partners can add value to the organizations, campaigns, and initiatives of civil society and independent media.

Leveraging Resources

TechSoup, a CSM-STAND partner, has programs, such as media and literacy-based trainings and education that improve the ability to counter disinformation more effectively, connect services and products from technology companies to support resilience and civil society in environments with increasingly shrinking space. To achieve these goals, the organization leverages its relationships with the top global technology companies.

Obstacles to Private Sector Involvement

CSM-STAND works in many countries where populist and autocratic national leaders actively challenge arguments in support of civic freedoms. These leaders typically warn that civic space is not good for business because it could lead to greater instability and that restrictions are necessary to maintain order. These leaders make the case that their policies produce stable environments for business, arguing that autocratic governments like China are good for economic growth.

Even if private sector actors don't find these arguments convincing, business leaders in such contexts weigh the corporate risks and opportunity costs of actively engaging in civic issues. The following considerations of these leaders often hinders their engagement in civic matters:

- **Lack of time, money, and focus:** Even if they agree in theory that an open society will be good for the economy, they may not feel they have the luxury to take action. Businesses in all settings focus primarily on their bottom-line goals. In more volatile contexts, business leaders with profitable companies follow the politics primarily to hedge against risks – such as government instability, corruption, and regulatory changes – that could negatively impact their business operations.
- **Corporate risk:** Business leaders may also fear a backlash from political actors or public opinion if they take a stance on controversial issues. For example, in Belarus cooperation between CSOs and the private sector decreased due to the widespread repression in the country and the risk to businesses of engaging with liquidated CSOs.⁶
- **Divergence of interests:** In many cases, what's in the interest of a broader economic sector may not be in the interest of individual companies. Business leaders may prioritize short-term financial

⁶ [CSO Sustainability Index for Center and Eastern Europe and Eurasia](#) pg. 41 USAID, ICNL, and FHI360, 2023



gains or the interests of their particular company over broader societal goals. In some cases, the preference for the status quo may include supporting the government, even as it suppresses political opposition and limits access to information. In other cases, such interests may lead to straddling the fence on issues of political or social reform. How businesses position themselves can create tension between the private sector and civil society, as well as among different businesses within the same sector. It is important therefore to note that partnership or collaboration on civic issues should be with private sector actors that are already supportive of civic issues or those sitting on the fence, whereas the best approach to engaging with those actors that are part of the problem is persuasion and advocacy on the benefits of open civic space.

Depending on the political environment, civic actors prioritizing engagement with private sector actors should be strategic and tailor their approach to the context. For political systems in transition, it may be possible for civil society, private sector, and the government to identify areas of common interest that can result in positive short- and long-term change. However, in restricted, oppressive, or closing spaces, civil society organizations will face greater challenges given the prospects of open government hostility against them or potential private sector partners.

PRIORITY AREAS FOR CIVIC ACTORS TO ENGAGE PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS

Three priority problem sets for civil society and independent media organizations are:

A. **Protecting civic space for civil society and independent media:** Civil society and independent media organizations are deeply concerned about their operating environment and safeguarding rights, freedoms, and resources that enable them to function effectively. Private companies can play a role in the evolution of the legal framework and enabling environment for civil society organizations, independent media, and individuals to operate, freely, and safely without fear of reprisals and harassment, including physical and digital violence. To find allies in the private sector to address these highly contextualized issues, organizations can:

- Engage global companies on issues of digital rights, security, disinformation, and surveillance, exploring with them how they function in countries with narrowing civic space and seeking their insights and ideas on how civil society and independent media agencies can work with local private sector and host governments to create safe online and offline spaces.
- Explore technical partnerships with private sector actors at global, regional, and national levels. Many technology companies – whether multinational or startups – are developing customized tools and systems for civil society and media groups, such as the protection of websites and vulnerable communities and systems to monitor and counter disinformation.

B. **Supporting the sustainability and scale of civic organizations:** Civil society and independent media organizations acknowledge that traditional models of building, maintaining, and growing successful, impactful, and sustainable non-profit organizations can have significant limitations. There is power in networks, market systems, and technology in scaling solutions

Examples of Technical Partnerships

Jigsaw is a special unit within Google that explores threats to open societies and builds technology that inspires scalable solutions. The subsidiary is focused on using technology to tackle global security challenges, such as protecting freedom of expression, privacy, and countering online propaganda and misinformation. Likewise, Microsoft Philanthropies prioritizes the protection of human rights, including by partnering with non-profits on cybersecurity solutions. Given their technical expertise and core business mandates, these companies and others with similar characteristics may be important starting points for exploring partnerships.



in ways that public resources could never achieve. To find allies in the private sector to solve these relevant issues within civil society and independent media organizations, these organizations can:

- Identify their organizational or project needs and then seek targeted support in transforming their operations, such as testing and validating their value with their core audiences, improving their internal systems and products, and diversifying their funding streams to strengthen financial independence.
 - Explore new business models with private sector partners through entrepreneurial opportunities that integrate new technologies for a strategic purpose, or leverage the reach and efficiencies of national, regional, or global firms through design and implementation of joint initiatives.
 - Understand and replicate what works through peer learning with similar organizations and networks in-country, regionally, and globally.
- C. **Norm building alliances:** Civil society and independent media organizations understand the potential of building effective coalitions and diverse networks to rally and showcase widescale support of their causes.⁷ Given their oversized influence in many countries, private sector actors can be some of the most effective partners in showcasing their commitment to important norms for a free, transparent, and inclusive society. By working in coalitions or cohorts with both private and civic actors there is a possibility of greater action by strength in numbers. To find allies in the private sector **to advance** these norms and values, especially in challenging and politically fraught contexts, organizations can:
- Rally private sector around specific issues, such as promoting the agency and civic voices of women online and offline, celebrating the sanctity of the vote, or committing to the protection of critical natural resources for marginalized communities.
 - Explore relationships with local companies, multinational companies (and their local business networks), and business leaders on softer issues to build trust for conversations on more sensitive matters in long term.

In some cases, it is civil society's role to hold private businesses that are part of the problem accountable by calling out irresponsible behavior and advocating for inclusive business investments that have a positive social and environmental impact on communities. It is also important to understand

Thinking Like the Private Sector

IREX, a CSM-STAND partner, engages independent media organizations as businesses first and foremost. They support their partners to test and validate their value with their core audiences, improve their internal systems and products, and diversify their funding streams to strengthen financial independence. Likewise, Tech Soup, a consortium member, provides people around the world with the information they need to make smart decisions about technology at their organizations.

Alliance Building

Pact, a CSM-STAND partner, leads work in the Democratic Republic of Congo on responsible mineral sourcing and artisanal mining sector to make this critical livelihood safer, more formalized and productive, and free of human rights abuses. The programs partner with a wide range of stakeholders including communities, local civil society organizations, private industry, and national, provincial, and local government institutions to work together for positive, collective action to advocate for improved policies and protections for the community.

⁷ [Collective Impact](#), FSG 2011



the impact that public private partnerships can have on marginalized groups. A report from the Gender and Development Network outlines negative effects engaging the private sector can have on gender equality and women's rights.⁸ For example, companies are accountable to their shareholders, so they may have limited incentive to meet social goals. This can result in higher cost or reduced services that create barriers to access for women or marginalized groups. In these cases it is the role of civic actors to engage both the government and the private sector to ensure these partnerships are beneficial to broad sections of the wider public.

GUIDELINES FOR PARTNERSHIP BUILDING

Recognizing that the private sector can represent an untapped ally for civil society and media actors working to protect and expand civic space, CSM-STAND has developed a set of working guidelines to inform those interested in constructively engaging the private sector. These guidelines are built from the practical experience of CSM-STAND consortium members, existing literature, and consultations with private sector stakeholders and other actors. However, because existing guidelines of this kind do not exist, they need to be tested and are subject to further development as they are rolled out. Further learnings from the direct application or uptake of the strategy by CSM-STAND programs and initiatives will be reviewed on a regular basis and incorporated into the strategy.

Building relationships and partnerships with the private sector involves strategic considerations that organizations should explore internally before engaging such as:

- a. Identifying problem sets that would benefit from the comparative advantages of private sector actors in specific industries.
- b. Understanding the interests and motivations of key private sector actors.
- c. Framing key messages that speak to the core interests of these actors.
- d. Engaging target actors in a collaborative way to develop partnerships that could be integrated into implementation plans and advance the effectiveness of the program or partners.

Priority Actions for Engaging the Private Sector

As a supplement to this strategy Pact developed specific recommendations and examples for civil society and media actors to consider when developing partnerships with private sector actors on civic space.

[Read the Priority Actions Brief here.](#)

Begin with your goals

Collaboration or constructive engagement between the private sector and civil society and media actors is more likely to be achieved if it is purpose driven. Civil society and media organizations, therefore, should be clear about the goals that they are pursuing through engagement with companies, industry groups, or other private sector actors.

A development project, civil society organization, or media organization's strategy and approach to engaging private sector will depend significantly on the goal objectives being pursued. In advance of direct engagement with private sector partners, it can be helpful to clarify the type of support which may be required. Some examples of framing include:

- Is your organization looking for allies **to address** the problem with you (it is an ecosystem-wide issue that cannot be solved immediately or by any one actor)?

⁸ [Impact of PPPs on Gender Equality and Women's Rights](#) Gender and Development Network, 2020



- Is your organization looking for allies **to solve** the problem with you (it is a technical issue for which private sector partners have unique comparative advantage)?
- Is your organization looking **to advance** the understanding of an issue and solutions to it (it is a normative issue that requires further public support)?

These goals, for example, may link to any of the above-mentioned work streams:

Expanding/defending civic space	Sustaining civic and media organizations	Norm building
Address regulatory frameworks that protect civic and media rights	Foster alternative revenue generation models to scale and sustain civic organizations	Advance increased civic and political participation for marginalized communities

Developing a contextualized plan for private sector engagement can help clarify expectations of the private sector and list out potential areas of collaboration across different segments of the private sector. All other guidelines outlined below – including *stakeholder mapping*, *interest identification*, *message crafting*, and *due diligence* – build from these goals because different potential allies come into play depending on the goals in question.

Map private sector actors connected to your goals

Next, map the private sector actors that are directly and indirectly linked to that goal or objective. In conducting this mapping, the exercise should be deliberately expansive in identifying actors with a connection to the issues tied to that goal or objective. That may mean, for example, considering local and international companies, as well as industry associations and related structures that may have a relevant connection. If those leading the mapping exercise do not have direct knowledge of the various private sector actors that are connected to the goal in question, they can do basic desk research or have consultations with local experts and ecosystem actors to better understand who potential allies and spoilers might be.

The private sector actor map does not need to be complicated. The “map” can be as simple as being a list of private sector actors with a relationship to the goal, or it may be useful to outline or visualize the relationship between different actors or their likely “temperature” in supporting your goals. The [priority actions brief](#) provides some basic guidance for conducting private sector actor mapping and conveying the resulting information. However, the information should be anchored with a clear understanding of the private sector actor’s role in the relevant system (i.e. local or national politics and economy), as well as any potential embedded relationships to make informed decisions around how and with whom to engage.

Tech Companies and Scalability

Technology companies prioritize the scalability of their business solutions, as well as their philanthropic partnerships. This objective motivates how they organize themselves. As such, they generally want to engage on problems and solutions that cut across multiple similar organizations, networks, or countries, and can impact as many people as possible. Civil society and independent media agencies should approach them with this preference in mind, and also understand that these companies generally do not build up large staffing footprints in emerging markets. Instead, these companies rely on local partnerships with IT vendors, resellers, telecommunication firms, banks, and digital skills-building organizations. Therefore, these local entities may be good or even better conduits for partnership building on specific issues.



Identify the interests of target actors

Private sector actors generally pursue an initiative when it ties directly to their business or industry interests. Private companies and industry associations may be open to listening to the concerns of civil society and media, but they will be compelled to act when they see alignment with their own concerns. Private sector interests can span from corporate philanthropy and CSR to expanding their market share for a product or investments. By clearly understanding the interests of potential private sector allies, civil society and media can lay the groundwork for effective outreach.

Sometimes the compelling interests of private sector actors are directly financial in nature. However, programs and organizations should think expansively about other possible interests that drive the decisions and behavior of would-be allies. These may be issues related to company or industry brands. For example, companies may be interested in strengthening their reputation, brand, or association with certain demographics that are affected by (or linked to) issues of concern. Below is an example of how civil society may find alignment or mutual interest when engaging with different private sector actors based on their business interest that tie to the goal of a civil society or media organization:

Example of mapping private sector interests

GOAL: Sustaining civic and media organizations by fostering alternative revenue generation models	INTEREST: Selling Services or Products to Civil Society/ Media Organizations	INTEREST: Brand Building and CSR Initiatives	INTEREST: Growing in Your Area/ Country/Region
Global Technology Company	High	Medium	Low
Regional Financial Institutional	Low	Medium	High
Country Level Telecommunications Company	Medium	High	High
Citywide Radio Station	Medium	Medium	High
Community Level Renewable Energy Company	Medium	Low	High

As CSOs or media groups think through engagement with any private sector actors, it is important to think through questions such as:

- What specific resources can partners and networks bring to the table (which the private sector actors may not have) to develop common solutions with these partners and achieve desired outcomes?
- What value does civil society's influence and networks bring to the table (which the private sector partners may not have) in advocating for policy and regulations?
- What approaches and solutions to these issues have we already considered that might be starting places for discussions with the private sector partners?



Craft messaging that speaks to identified interests

The next step is to translate the purpose of your engagement into language that speaks to the interests of the potential private sector ally. This statement should be free of technical jargon and communicate succinctly the problem set and intended outcomes. For example, what is the nature of the problem, why does it matter to your organization and why does your organization assume it might matter to the identified private sector partner(s)? While potentially uncomfortable, it is also important to identify for your potential private sector partner specific challenges that your organization and other civil society/independent media agencies face in addressing or solving the problem or advancing an understanding of the issue and possible solutions.

To speak directly to the interest of your targeted ally, think through the value solving the issue will bring to the private sector. They should think expansively about how might this ally benefit directly from a partnership (new clients or revenue streams, solving a specific pain point such as a regulatory challenge, or reputationally in specific communities). Additionally, to understand private sector actors' interest and incentives to partner, it is important to do so with a mindset of desired outcomes and solution-oriented problem solving.

For example, CSOs and independent media agencies in emerging democracies, as well as closed and closing societies, face uncertainties and risks related to constantly evolving regulations around civic and media rights. Through a recent set of exploratory interviews with global technology companies, CSM-STAND learned that this difficult regulatory environment also poses operational and business challenges to some of these companies as well as their local and regional partners. In fact, most of the companies noted that they highly value engagement with civil society groups in dealing with policy and regulatory issues, such as access to internet and "open internet" regulations, censorship regulation, and skills development for youth and marginalized communities. They cited how these partnerships can help them build stronger cases with government policymakers and regulators, as well as stronger advocacy coalitions.

Private Sector Interest in Civic and Media Regulations

TYPE OF COMPANY	EXPRESSED INTEREST IN POLICY/ REGULATION ISSUES OF COMMON CONCERN
Tech company focused on publishing software	Low
Cloud computing company	Low
Social Media Companies	High
Technology company focused on business solutions and cloud computing	Medium
Tech enabled financial services company	Medium

Prioritize relationship building and due diligence

The final step is to start engaging with the partners that can provide the most value to solving the identified problem and whose interests may motivate them to help. While building the relationship, it is important to recognize that the private sector ally should not have to agree on everything. The position



with potential allies should never be one of lecturing but of developing trust incrementally. This relationship building may not at first have specific known outcomes. What is important is that there is a shared vision – *ensuring alignment on the aims and objectives of the initiative and ensuring transparency in the value proposition for each actor contributing and the positive impacts on people and the planet.*⁹

- **Defining Type and Terms of Relationship:** Relationships in the private sector are often defined by the commitment and alignment of resources (such as staff, funds, and branding). Identifying early on what type of relationships you are seeking to build with a partner can expedite processes:
 - » *Client-based relationship:* Are you seeking a customized product or service from the partner? If so, it is important to clearly communicate your needs and expectations, and to establish a mutual understanding of timelines, deliverables, and quality standards. Your organization may also need to negotiate pricing, payment terms, and any contractual obligations that arise from the partnership.
 - » *Technical:* Are you seeking existing internal expertise or information from the partner to help solve a problem? If so, it is important to define the scope of the problem and the specific areas where you need assistance. Your organization may also need to clarify the level of involvement you expect from the partner, such as whether they will provide recommendations, perform research, or collaborate on implementation. Additionally, your organization may need to agree on any intellectual property or confidentiality issues that may arise from the partnership, as well as any limitations or restrictions on the use of the information provided.
 - » *Financial:* Are you seeking resources from the partner whether directly or indirectly? If so, it is important to clearly define the type and amount of resources your organization needs.

Utilizing cross-sector networks is an effective coalition-building strategy that is critical to aligning incentives between diverse actors, fostering trusted relationships and shared learning, and identifying priority interventions and solutions. Civic actors can broaden their existing coalitions to partner private sector actors or develop new networks that include private sector actors to increase the possibility of greater action through strength in numbers. If there is popular demand or support for a particular issue, then civic actors can use the momentum to their advantage to influence private sector actors to be part of positive change.

- **Reputation/Due Diligence:** Equally important is conducting due diligence when entering any partnership, particularly in sectors where the relationship between civil society and businesses has been charged (such as the extractives sector). Due diligence means that some potential allies that have been identified may indeed turn out to be spoilers. It is important to recognize and be clear that civil society and private sector actors can experience different or disproportionate exposure to risk in the partnership. Decisions need to be made on the effective allocation of operating and political risk to the parties best placed to minimize and manage such risks.¹⁰ It is also important to note that solely relying on market-based solutions or transferring responsibility to the private sector to solve social issues through investments, especially for marginalized or under-represented populations, can have unintended consequences that further drive inequalities or create more harm¹¹.

When determining whether to collaborate with specific private sector actors, it is important to assess the potential development impact of the proposed collaboration and the reputational implications of working with the proposed partner. This analysis should cover the private sector actor's active role in either advancing civic issues, or blocking progress, particularly when it comes to business interest. Seek responsible partners whose financial, social, and environmental policies and practices are consistent with your organization's mission and values, as well as any obligations under relevant law and policy.

⁹ [Can Business and Civil Society Save our Democracies?](#) Civicus and The B Team, 2017

¹⁰ [The Kampala Principles: Online Toolkit for Civil Society](#) pg. 11-13 The Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation, 2019

¹¹ [Impact of PPPs on Gender Equality and Women's Rights](#) Gender and Development Network, 2020



Prospective partners that are eager to move forward with the proposed partnership or collaboration are often quite proactive in providing information. 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. These questions can be found in the [Private Sector Engagement and Due Diligence: Reputational Risk Assessment](#).

CONCLUSION: LEARNING TOGETHER

When engaging with the private sector, CSM-STAND will focus on learning what does and does not work to reduce organizational uncertainties and increase the civic actors' knowledge on how to adapt and iterate to foster genuine and impactful partnerships among the civic, media, and private sectors. The countries covered by the CSM-STAND consortium vary and will have different challenges, opportunities, and paths to engagement with private sector partners. This strategy is intended as a broad guide and it is essential that it is adapted to specific local circumstances. Local knowledge and adaptation are critical to the implementation of any kind of strategy.

CSM-STAND programs will be encouraged to incorporate a monitoring, learning and evaluation framework to their engagement with private sector to develop evidence that collaboration between private and civic sectors works. As partners pilot this new strategy, CSM-STAND will leverage those experiences to help its partners articulate which courses of action are most productive. In the longer term, CSM-STAND will compare experiences in applying this strategy, co-creating best practices in applying this work in different contexts. This approach provides the opportunity to find parallels on what works in countries facing similar challenges, building critical knowledge for those designing and implementing future civil society and media programs.

Additional References:

- [Beyond Integrity: Exploring the role of business in preserving the civic space, Charities Aid Foundation, 2016](#)
- [The Business Case for Protecting Civic Rights, The B Team, 2018](#)
- [Shared Space Under Pressure: Business Support for Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders, Business and Human Rights Resource Center and International Service for Human Rights, 2018](#)
- [USAID Private Sector Engagement Policy, 2022](#)

