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POLICY BRIEF

BUILDING DIGITAL RESILIENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Contents

Executive Summary

Civil society organizations (CSOs) across the world are operating under growing pressures as civic space narrows, digital regulation expands, and international funding for rights-based work declines. Governments are increasingly regulating online expression, surveillance, and digital platforms in ways that shape how CSOs communicate, mobilize, and advocate. At the same time, major technology companies influence public discourse through algorithms and content moderation systems that CSOs cannot control. These external pressures intersect with internal challenges, including limited digital skills, weak institutional systems, and fragmented learning opportunities, leaving many organizations struggling to adapt to rapidly evolving digital civic environments.

This document examines how digital tools can serve as strategic enablers that help civil society navigate constrained civic environments while strengthening institutional resilience. Drawing on evidence from South Asia, it highlights both the strong demand for digitally enabled advocacy and the persistent gaps in cybersecurity, digital rights awareness, monitoring systems, and organizational capacity. The brief argues that digital adoption should be treated as an institutional strategy rather than a technical add-on, supported by sustained mentoring, flexible funding, and collaborative learning ecosystems. Initiatives such as the DDI South Asia illustrate how modest financial support combined with mentoring and skills development can help CSOs integrate digital tools more effectively while strengthening accountability, impact communication, and long-term sustainability.

Purpose, Rationale, and Context

Civil society organizations (CSOs) across the world are operating under multiple, overlapping pressures that are reshaping how civic action is organized, expressed, and sustained. First, civic space is shrinking in both formal and informal ways, with governments increasingly restricting freedoms of expression, association, and assembly through legal, administrative, and political means. According to global civic space monitoring, a majority of the world's population now lives in countries where civic freedoms are either obstructed, repressed, or closed (CIVICUS, 2024)[1]. This contraction is no longer confined to physical spaces as it is increasingly mediated through digital environments where public debate, mobilization, and dissent now predominantly occur.

Second, the regulation of digital space has expanded rapidly. Governments are introducing and enforcing cybercrime laws, platform regulations, data governance regimes, and surveillance frameworks that directly affect how CSOs communicate, mobilize, and document their work. While these measures are often justified in the language of security, misinformation control, or data protection, their cumulative effect has been to raise compliance burdens and legal risks for civic actors, particularly those engaged in advocacy or accountability work. Global assessments of online freedom show a sustained decline in digital civic space, with civil society actors frequently among the most affected (Freedom House, 2025)[2].

Third, these civic space pressures are unfolding at a time when democracy, governance, and human rights are being deprioritized within international development and foreign policy agendas. Traditional Western donors are increasingly cutting on philanthropic allocations and focusing only humanitarian response, climate security, migration management, and geopolitical competition. The shift has resulted in declining funding for rights-based civil society work, shorter funding cycles, and a stronger emphasis on measurable outputs over long-term institutional development. For many CSOs particularly smaller, advocacy-oriented, or grassroots organizations, this has translated into greater financial precarity and limited space to invest in internal systems or innovation.

At the same time, civil society faces persistent internal challenges that constrain its ability to adapt to these external shifts. Across regions, including South Asia, many organizations continue to operate with limited digital skills, weak institutional systems, and organizational cultures shaped by decades of predominantly offline engagement. Digital tools are often adopted in an ad hoc manner and are scarcely embedded within organizational strategies. Skills related to digital campaigning, cybersecurity, data management, online storytelling, and digital risk mitigation remain uneven, while opportunities for continuous learning and mentoring are limited. As a result, adaptation to digital realities is frequently slow, incremental, and fragile.

Digital tools are frequently presented as solutions to civil society's challenges. Platforms, applications, and online services promise greater reach, efficiency, and visibility at relatively low cost. However, in practice, many CSOs struggle to integrate these tools meaningfully into their work. Constraints include limited technical capacity, inadequate financial resources, weak governance systems, and leadership hesitancy to invest in organizational change whose benefits may not be immediately visible. In some contexts, the risks associated with digital engagement such as surveillance, online harassment, or legal exposure, further discourage proactive adoption (OHCHR, 2025)[3].

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[1] https://civicusmonitor.contentfiles.net/media/documents/GlobalFindings2024.EN.pdf
[2] https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2025/uncertain-future-global-internet
[3] https://docs.un.org/en/A/80/341

This policy brief examines how digital tools and platforms can be leveraged as strategic enablers to help CSOs navigate constrained civic environments while strengthening their institutional resilience. Specifically, the brief explores how digital approaches can support organizations to remain visible and relevant in contested civic spaces, communicate impact more effectively, build partnerships, and develop low-cost systems that enhance accountability and sustainability.

Civic Space and Institutional Constraints

Across regions, civic space is increasingly being reshaped through digital governance, with governments exercising greater control over how citizens and civil society communicate, organize, and mobilize online. Regulatory interventions now extend well beyond traditional restrictions on assembly or association to include the regulation of social media platforms, online content, data flows, and digital identities. States are expanding surveillance capabilities, introducing broad cybercrime and national security legislation, and criminalizing forms of digital expression and mobilization that were previously considered legitimate civic activity. Global monitoring shows that restrictions on online civic freedoms have intensified year after year, with civil society actors frequently among the most affected groups (Freedom House, *2025*)[4].

Large technology platforms now possess unprecedented capacity to curate, amplify, suppress, or monetize information through algorithms, content moderation policies, and data-driven targeting.

While governments often justify these measures as necessary to combat misinformation, terrorism, or cybercrime, their practical effect has been to increase legal uncertainty and risk for CSOs engaged in advocacy, accountability, or rights-based work. The growing tension between freedom of expression, the industrial-scale influence of digital corporations over information flows, and the regulatory responses of states make things worse for traditional civil society actors. Large technology platforms now possess unprecedented capacity to curate, amplify, suppress, or monetize information through algorithms, content moderation policies, and data-driven targeting. These capabilities allow private corporations to shape public discourse, political narratives, and social behavior at scale, often in ways that are opaque, commercially driven, and weakly accountable. Governments have increasingly responded to this concentration of informational power through regulatory crackdowns framed around misinformation, national security, public order, or social harmony.

While some regulations of platforms are both necessary and overdue, in many contexts particularly in developing world, these measures have expanded state discretion over speech and expression rather than strengthening public accountability. The result is a tightening of controls that often affects civil society actors more directly than large corporations, which possess legal resources, lobbying power, and transnational leverage that many governments struggle to match.

For civil society, this creates a uniquely constrained position between powerful state, which regulates and polices expression, and equally powerful corporations, which mediate and monetize visibility. CSOs have to navigate platform rules they do not shape, algorithms they cannot audit, and legal environments that increasingly penalize digital speech. Unlike governments or large corporations, civil society lacks both coercive authority and market power, making it disproportionately vulnerable to content takedowns, de-platforming, surveillance, and legal intimidation. These dynamics are particularly

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[4] https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2025/uncertain-future-global-internet

pronounced in South Asia, where digital regulation intersects with long-standing political polarization and fragile rule-of-law environments.

Across the region, cybercrime laws, counterterrorism frameworks, and platform regulations are often drafted in broad or ambiguous terms, granting authorities significant discretion in their application.

At the same time, restrictions on foreign funding and enhanced compliance requirements have placed additional administrative and financial burdens on civil society organizations. In politically polarized contexts, these legal and regulatory tools are frequently deployed unevenly, heightening uncertainty for organizations working on sensitive issues such as governance, minority rights, land, labor, or accountability.

Digital space has nonetheless become the primary arena for public discourse and political contestation in South Asia. Social media platforms, messaging applications, and online news ecosystems now shape narratives, mobilization, and public opinion at scale. For CSOs, this creates a paradoxical environment. While digital engagement is increasingly unavoidable for relevance and reach, yet it is also increasingly risky.

Alongside these external pressures, many CSOs face internal institutional constraints that limit their ability to navigate digital civic space effectively. Digital skills remain uneven across organizations, with significant gaps in areas such as digital campaigning, cybersecurity, data management, and online storytelling. Leadership buy-in for digital transformation is often slow, particularly where organizational cultures are rooted in face-to-face engagement and donor-driven project cycles. Learning pathways are frequently fragmented, relying on one-off trainings rather than continuous, practice-oriented capacity building. Moreover, incentive structures within organizations often prioritize short-term project delivery over investment in systems, governance, and institutional learning.

These internal constraints are not merely technical; they are organizational and cultural. Digital tools are frequently treated as auxiliary functions managed by communications staff or individual champions rather than as strategic assets embedded in organizational planning and decision-making. As a result, even when organizations adopt digital tools, usage tends to remain superficial, inconsistent, or vulnerable to staff turnover.

What Evidence Shows

Recent empirical evidence from South Asia provides a clearer picture of how civil society organizations are responding to digitally mediated civic constraints. A multi-country capacity and needs assessment conducted under Accountability Lab's Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI), across eight South Asian countries, reveals a sector that is programmatically active and largely ready to engage, yet unevenly equipped to adopt digital tools in a sustained and institutionalized manner.

One of the strongest signals emerging from the data is the high demand for digitally enabled advocacy and civic engagement. The key priority areas defined by the majority of surveyed organization for financial or non-financial support include, by order of priority, digital campaigning and advocacy, community mobilization using digital tools, media and content creation, and improving digital platforms or tools. These findings suggest that CSOs increasingly view digital engagement not as a supplementary

communications function, but as central to reach, relevance, and influence in contemporary public discourse.

At the same time, the assessment highlights serious protection-related and rights-based capacity gaps. Overwhelming majority of organizations cited high or critical need for support in cybersecurity and digital safety. In parallel, around two thirds of organizations reported high or critical need for support in digital rights awareness and legal literacy, pointing to uncertainty around cybercrime legislation, online speech regulation, and compliance obligations.

Beyond outward-facing engagement, the evidence reveals deep institutional capacity gaps that constrain long-term effectiveness and sustainability. An overwhelming majority of organizations reported moderate to high or critical need for support in monitoring, evaluation, and learning, underscoring widespread challenges in documenting outcomes, learning from practice, and communicating impact. Financial management and compliance also featured a similar critical need in organizational development and internal systems. In a context of shrinking and more competitive funding, these weaknesses directly affect organizational credibility, donor confidence, and regulatory compliance.

Importantly, the assessment points to a clear preference for mentoring and sustained accompaniment over one-off training interventions. While trainings remain valued, majority of surveyed organizations reported high or critical need for mentoring and coaching and expression of intent of connecting with a mentor through a structured support mechanism.

Taken together, the evidence points to the absence of coherent pathways for skills development, practice, and institutionalization. CSOs are not resistant to digital transformation, nor unaware of its importance. Rather, they operate in environments where learning opportunities are fragmented, resources constrained, and incentives favor short-term project delivery over long-term system building. Without sustained support that links digital skills to organizational systems, leadership engagement, and protection, digital adoption risks remaining partial and fragile.

Digital Tools as Strategic and Institutional Infrastructure

Digital tools are often framed within civil society as instruments for communication, outreach, or visibility. While these functions are important, such a framing understates their broader strategic value. In contemporary civic environments marked by shrinking space, regulatory uncertainty, and funding constraints, digital tools increasingly function as core infrastructure that enables both external civic engagement and internal institutional strengthening. When adopted deliberately, they can enhance effectiveness, resilience, and accountability rather than merely amplifying activity.

From a civic space perspective, digital tools play a critical role in advocacy, coordination, and public participation. Equally important is the role of digital tools in coordination and coalition-building. Secure communication platforms, shared workspaces, and collaborative tools can lower the transaction costs of collective action, allowing networks of organizations to coordinate messaging, share resources, and align strategies. In contexts where physical convening is restricted or risky, digital coordination can help sustain alliances and issue-based coalitions.

Digital tools also enable new forms of public participation, particularly among youth, women, and marginalized groups who may face barriers to traditional civic engagement. Online consultations, social

media engagement, digital feedback mechanisms, and virtual dialogues can complement offline participation and extend civic reach. However, realizing this potential requires skills in audience engagement, platform governance, and ethical digital practice, as well as sensitivity to digital divides and exclusion.

Beyond civic engagement, digital tools are increasingly essential for institutional strengthening, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Low-cost digital systems can support core organizational functions such as financial management, compliance, monitoring, evaluation, and internal communication. For many CSOs, these systems are no longer optional. Donors and regulators increasingly expect timely reporting, financial transparency, and credible documentation of results, even as funding cycles shorten and administrative requirements grow more complex.

Digital financial management tools, cloud-based documentation systems, and simple monitoring platforms can reduce reliance on manual processes and individual staff capacity. When embedded within organizational culture, such tools improve continuity, reduce error, and strengthen institutional memory. Similarly, digital communication tools can enhance internal coordination across teams and geographies, supporting more efficient decision-making and reducing silos between programmatic, administrative, and leadership functions.

Digital systems also contribute to increased accountability in tighter funding environments. Reliable data systems and digital records make it easier for organizations to track expenditures, document outcomes, and respond to donor or regulatory scrutiny. This, in turn, can strengthen trust with funders and partners, particularly where competition for limited resources is intense. Accountability Lab's Digital Democracy Initiative''s Survey evidence indicates that while many organizations are programmatically ready to implement initiatives, gaps in systems related to monitoring, learning, and financial compliance remain widespread.

Reframing digital tools as strategic infrastructure has important implications for capacity building and funding.

Investments in digital adoption should be aligned with organizational missions and long-term strategies, rather than driven solely by short-term project needs.

This requires leadership buy-in, attention to organizational culture, and sustained support that links tools to practice. For smaller and grassroots organizations in particular, fragmented or poorly integrated digital adoption can impose hidden costs, reinforcing the case for coherent, system-oriented approaches.

Ultimately, digital tools do not replace political agency, community trust, or sustained funding. However, when understood and supported as strategic and institutional infrastructure, they can provide civil society organizations with critical leverage to navigate constrained civic environments, strengthen internal resilience, and remain credible and effective actors in an increasingly digital public sphere.

Communicating Impact Through Digital Tools

As civic space tightens and competition for resources intensifies, the ability of civil society organizations to communicate impact clearly and credibly has become as important as the ability to deliver activities. Digital tools offer a powerful opportunity to shift how CSOs tell their stories from reporting what they do to demonstrating why it matters. The so-called activity-centric approach reflects deeper organizational

patterns. In many cases, digital communication is driven by short-term project requirements, donor reporting formats, or social media visibility, rather than by a deliberate strategy to link day-to-day work with organizational mission. As a result, the connection between activities and impact often remains implicit or fragmented. The absence of a strong culture of impact communication not only weakens public narratives, but also limits organizational learning and strategic clarity.

Digital platforms can help civil society organizations overcome this gap by enabling more intentional, mission-driven storytelling. When combined with basic monitoring and learning practices, digital tools allow CSOs to translate data, experiences, and outcomes into accessible narratives that explain how and why change occurs. This includes using visual content, short-form narratives, dashboards, and interactive media to connect evidence with human experience.

One of the most underutilized opportunities lies in beneficiary-centered storytelling. Digital tools can amplify voices that are often marginalized in policy discourse, allowing communities to articulate their own experiences of change. Short videos, audio testimonies, digital diaries, and participatory content can humanize abstract development outcomes and challenge dominant narratives. Such approaches not only strengthen impact communication but also reinforce principles of inclusion and agency (UNDP, 2024)[5]. However, strong ethical and consent standards must be adhered in digital storytelling.

Beyond narrative, digital platforms enable stronger evidence-based communication. Simple digital systems can support the collection, visualization, and dissemination of data related to outcomes and contributions. This does not require sophisticated technology as low-cost tools can help organizations track progress, reflect on results, and present evidence in formats that are intelligible to non-technical audiences.

Stronger impact communication has tangible strategic benefits. For donors and partners, clear and credible narratives of change enable more meaningful engagement with programs, moving beyond activity or output-based reporting toward an understanding of contribution and learning. This can support longer-term partnerships and greater flexibility, particularly in environments where donors themselves face pressure to demonstrate value and results. For the public, consistent and transparent impact communication builds trust, counters misinformation, and reinforces the legitimacy of civil society action.

At the organizational level, impact communication helps align day-to-day work with long-term mission. A 2025 grantee mapping survey conducted by DDI indicates a clear misalignment between civil society organizations' long-term visions, missions, and strategic priorities, and the programs they implemented over the past five years. The findings highlight persistent resource constraints that limit CSOs' ability to pursue their own strategic priorities, compelling them instead to align their work with donor-driven agendas. Digital tools offer organizations a unique opportunity not only to accurately assess their contribution to change but also to sustain alignment with their long-term strategies, even in contexts of limited or no donor support.

Over time, digital tools can also support more informed attribution by helping organizations understand the scope and limits of their contribution within complex change processes. While digital tools cannot

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[5] https://www.undp.org/africa/blog/connecting-change-storytelling-and-data-drive-impactful-results

resolve attribution challenges on their own, they can improve clarity around assumptions, pathways of change, and areas of influence.

Digital Adoption as Organizational Transformation

Digital adoption within civil society organizations is often framed as a technical challenge that can be addressed through short trainings, new software, or individual hires. However, evidence increasingly suggests that the core challenge is organizational rather than technical. Digital transformation requires changes in how organizations learn, make decisions, allocate resources, and define success. When these institutional dimensions are overlooked, digital adoption remains slow, uneven, and vulnerable to reversal.

A central constraint is the limited availability of affordable, relevant, and continuous learning opportunities for civil society actors. Many CSOs, particularly smaller and grassroots organizations, lack access to structured digital learning pathways that are tailored to their contexts. While a wide range of online resources exists, navigating these options requires time, guidance, and baseline digital literacy that are not always available. As a result, learning often occurs through trial and error, informal peer exchange, or reliance on individual staff members who may not remain with the organization.

According to DDI assessment, CSOs recognize the strategic importance of digital tools but they struggle to translate this awareness into sustained organizational practice. It highlights that skills acquisition is frequently episodic and person-dependent, with limited mechanisms to embed learning into organizational routines or systems.

Digital adaptation can be accelerated through open-access learning resources, peer learning, and mentoring. Open online courses, toolkits, and knowledge platforms offer low-cost entry points for skills development, particularly when curated and contextualized for civil society use. However, open resources alone are rarely sufficient. Peer learning networks allow organizations to share practical experiences, troubleshoot challenges, and adapt tools to local realities. Mentoring and coaching provide the sustained support needed to translate knowledge into practice, helping organizations navigate both technical and organizational barriers.

Effective digital adoption requires leadership commitment. Organizational leaders play a decisive role in setting priorities, allocating resources, and signaling the value of change. Where leadership views digital tools as peripheral or risky, adoption tends to remain confined to communications functions or individual champions. When leaders frame digital capacity as integral to mission delivery and institutional resilience, organizations are more likely to invest in systems, learning, and cross-functional integration.

In parallel, organizations require internal incentives that reward learning and adaptation. Project-driven funding models often discourage investment in systems or experimentation, as success is measured by immediate outputs rather than long-term capacity. Without incentives to document learning, refine processes, or improve data use, digital tools are unlikely to be adopted in ways that alter organizational behavior. Aligning performance metrics, reporting practices, and donor expectations with learning-oriented approaches is therefore critical to enabling transformation.

It is important to recognize that slow digital adaptation is a structural issue rather than an organizational failure. Civil society organizations operate in environments characterized by resource scarcity, regulatory uncertainty, and political risk. Many organizations lack the financial buffers or institutional

slack required to experiment or absorb the costs of transition. In such contexts, caution and incrementalism are rational responses, not signs of resistance or incapacity. Framing slow adaptation as failure risks obscuring the systemic constraints that shape organizational behavior.

Shared and Collective Digital Models

In an environment characterized by shrinking funding, uneven digital skills, and rising compliance demands, individual civil society organizations often struggle to sustain the level of digital capacity required to remain effective. For smaller, grassroots, or theme-focused organizations, the cost of building and maintaining in-house digital expertise, systems, and infrastructure can be prohibitive. In this context, shared and collective digital models offer a pragmatic and scalable pathway to strengthen civil society capacity without duplicating costs or effort.

One promising approach is the pooling of technical expertise across organizations. Rather than each CSO attempting to recruit or train specialized staff for digital security, data management, monitoring, or communications, shared technical resources can provide on-demand support to multiple organizations. This model not only reduces costs, but also helps ensure a minimum standard of quality and protection, particularly in sensitive areas such as cybersecurity and data governance. International experience suggests that shared service models are especially effective where individual organizations lack the scale or resources to sustain specialized functions independently.

Closely related is the use of virtual teams that work across organizational boundaries. Advances in collaboration platforms and remote working tools make it possible to assemble distributed teams that provide communications, design, research, or technical support to multiple CSOs simultaneously. Virtual teams can operate across geographies, enabling organizations to access skills that may not be locally available while retaining contextual relevance. For regional civil society ecosystems, virtual teams also offer a way to respond rapidly to emerging issues, coordinate advocacy, and sustain engagement when physical convening is constrained.

Shared digital platforms represent another critical component of collective models. These can include common monitoring and reporting systems, shared knowledge repositories, or collaborative advocacy platforms that allow organizations to aggregate data, align messaging, and amplify collective voice. Shared platforms reduce the administrative burden on individual organizations and make it easier to demonstrate collective impact, particularly in donor-facing or policy-engagement contexts. In regions like South Asia, where many CSOs work on overlapping thematic issues, shared platforms can help overcome fragmentation and strengthen coordination without undermining organizational autonomy.

Beyond coordination and efficiency gains, shared digital models offer strategic benefits for civil society resilience. Collective approaches can help mitigate risks associated with digital engagement by spreading exposure and responsibility across networks rather than isolating individual organizations. They can also strengthen bargaining power with donors, platforms, and service providers, enabling civil society to negotiate better terms, advocate for fairer policies, or co-design tools that reflect sector needs. In environments where civic space is constrained, collective digital presence can also provide a measure of protection by making repression more visible and politically costly.

However, shared models are not without challenges. They require trust, clear governance arrangements, and agreed norms around data use, decision-making, and accountability. Without careful design, shared

systems risk reproducing power imbalances or becoming underutilized. In the context of shrinking funds and uneven digital readiness, shared and collective digital models should be seen not as interim solutions, but as strategic investments in civil society ecosystems.

Limits, Risks, and Trade-Offs

While digital tools offer significant opportunities to enhance civil society effectiveness, they also introduce clear limits, risks, and trade-offs that must be acknowledged. Treating digital adoption as an unqualified good may lead to unrealistic expectations about what technology alone can achieve. A balanced assessment is therefore essential, particularly in politically constrained and resource-scarce environments.

One of the most immediate constraints is the upfront and recurring cost of digital adoption. Even low-cost tools require investment in hardware, connectivity, software subscriptions, cybersecurity, and technical support. These costs are rarely one-time expenditures as systems must be maintained, updated, and secured over time. For many CSOs operating on short funding cycles, such recurring costs compete directly with programmatic delivery. In the absence of flexible or core funding, organizations may be reluctant to commit resources to digital systems whose benefits are realized over the long term rather than within a single project cycle.

Digital transformation also entails organizational and cultural challenges, particularly during periods of leadership transition. Introducing new systems can disrupt established workflows, expose gaps in accountability, or require changes in decision-making practices. Resistance is often less about technology itself and more about uncertainty, perceived loss of control, or fear of increased transparency. Where leadership turnover is frequent, digital initiatives may stall or be abandoned altogether.

A further and more serious trade-off relates to heightened exposure to surveillance, online harassment, and digital harm. As civil society engagement shifts online, organizations become more visible not only to supporters but also to hostile actors, including state agencies, political groups, and coordinated disinformation networks. Weak digital security practices can expose sensitive data, beneficiaries, or staff to significant risk.

At the same time, digital tools have clear functional limits. They cannot replace sustained funding, political organizing, or trust-based community work. Digital engagement may amplify messages or facilitate coordination, but it does not automatically generate legitimacy, social capital, or political power. Offline relationships, community presence, and long-term organizing remain central to civil society effectiveness, particularly among marginalized or digitally excluded populations. Over-reliance on digital platforms risks reinforcing exclusion or substituting visibility for depth of engagement.

Another significant risk lies in the coercive nature of the medium itself. Social media platforms are designed to commodify attention and reward crude, emotive, and populist content. Once a civil society organization gains traction on digital platforms, monetization opportunities begin to emerge. These income streams driven by views, shares, and engagement metrics, can subtly but powerfully incentivize CSOs to align their messaging with populist sentiment rather than principled, mission-driven agendas. Over time, this dynamic encourages vulgarization of discourse, simplification of complex issues, and the de-prioritization of long-term advocacy goals. The organization risks drifting from its core mandate and

gradually transforming into a digital media influencer, driven more by algorithms and revenue imperatives than by civic purpose.

Recognizing these limits does not weaken the case for digital adoption; it strengthens it. A realistic approach allows civil society, donors, and intermediaries to design interventions that combine digital innovation with institutional strengthening, protection, and long-term support. In constrained civic environments, the value of digital tools lies not in their promise of transformation in isolation, but in their ability to complement and reinforce the fundamental work of civil society-organizing, advocating, and building trust over time.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Strengthening civil society in digitally-mediated and constrained civic environments requires coordinated action by multiple stakeholders. Digital tools can enhance effectiveness and resilience, but only when embedded within supportive institutional, funding, and regulatory ecosystems. The implications below outline priority actions for key actors.

For CSOs

For CSOs, the primary implication is the need to treat digital adoption as an institutional strategy rather than a technical upgrade. Organizations should align digital tools with their mission, governance structures, and learning systems, ensuring that skills and platforms support long-term objectives rather than short-term visibility. This includes investing in basic digital security, integrating monitoring and learning into communication practices, and embedding digital responsibilities across teams rather than isolating them within communications functions.

At the same time, CSOs should actively seek collective and shared solutions where individual capacity is limited. Peer learning, shared platforms, and virtual teams can help reduce costs and accelerate adaptation.

For Donors

Donors play a decisive role in shaping incentives for digital adoption. The evidence underscores the need to move beyond project-centric funding toward support for systems, learning, and institutional capacity. This includes financing digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, monitoring systems, and staff time for learning and adaptation. These costs are often excluded from traditional grants.

Donors should also recognize that digital transformation is iterative and context-specific, requiring flexible funding, longer time horizons, and tolerance for experimentation. Stronger digital systems can enhance transparency and impact documentation, enabling donors to engage more meaningfully with evidence and learning rather than relying solely on activity-based reporting. Such approaches can strengthen trust and contribute to more durable partnerships, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

For Intermediaries and Support Organizations

Intermediaries and support organizations occupy a critical position between donors and civil society. Their role should evolve from delivering isolated trainings to facilitating learning ecosystems that combine mentoring, peer exchange, and practical application. Curating open-access resources,

supporting shared digital services, and hosting regional learning hubs can help address the fragmentation of skills development identified across the sector.

Intermediaries are also well positioned to support collective digital models, including shared platforms and pooled expertise, that individual CSOs cannot sustain alone. By lowering transaction costs and providing trusted coordination, intermediaries can help ensure that digital investments translate into institutional change rather than tool proliferation.

For Governments and Regulators

Governments have a responsibility to ensure that digital regulation protects public interest without undermining legitimate civic activity. The findings in this brief highlight the importance of clear, proportionate, and rights-respecting digital governance frameworks. Cybercrime laws, platform regulations, and data governance regimes should be designed and implemented in ways that safeguard freedom of expression, association, and privacy, particularly for civil society actors working in the public interest.

Constructive engagement with civil society in the design and review of digital policies can help reduce unintended harms and build trust. International human rights standards provide a clear framework for balancing security concerns with civic freedoms in the digital age.

For Digital Platforms

Digital platforms increasingly shape civic discourse and participation, giving private companies significant influence over public space. Platforms should recognize their role in enabling or constraining civic action and take steps to enhance transparency, accountability, and fairness in content moderation and data practices. Engagement with civil society can help platforms better understand local contexts, risks, and needs, particularly in politically sensitive environments.
Partnerships between platforms, civil society, and intermediaries can support safer digital engagement, improve reporting mechanisms, and strengthen protections for civic actors, contributing to healthier digital public spheres.

DDI as a Model Pathway

Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI) offers a practical illustration of how integrated, modest, and well-designed interventions can strengthen civil society capacity in digitally constrained environments. Rather than treating digital transformation as a technology problem or a one-time investment, DDI demonstrates how combining small-scale financial support, mentoring, and skills-focused digital capacity building can generate meaningful institutional gains, even within tight resource and political constraints.

At the core of DDI's approach is the recognition that modest funding, when strategically deployed, can unlock disproportionate value. Through small grants, typically in the range of USD 5,000, DDI supports CSOs to experiment with digital tools, strengthen basic systems, and advance issue-based digital engagement without exposing organizations to unsustainable financial or operational risk. DDI's contribution lies not in funding alone, but in how financial support is embedded within a broader learning and accompaniment framework. Evidence from South Asia consistently shows that CSOs prefer mentoring and sustained support over one-off training interventions. DDI responds to this preference by pairing financial support with mentoring, peer learning, and practical guidance that helps organizations

translate skills into institutional practice. This approach addresses a recurring challenge identified throughout this brief: the gap between digital awareness and durable organizational change.

The initiative also places a strong emphasis on skills-focused digital capacity building, aligned with both civic engagement and institutional needs. Rather than prescribing tools or platforms, DDI supports organizations to identify context-specific priorities. This flexibility allows CSOs to align digital adoption with their mission and operating realities, reinforcing the principle that digital transformation must be organizationally owned rather than externally imposed.

Importantly, DDI operates at the intersection of individual capacity, organizational systems, and ecosystem support. By working with cohorts of organizations across multiple countries, the initiative creates opportunities for peer learning, cross-border exchange, and collective reflection on shared challenges. These networked dimensions amplify learning beyond individual grantees and contribute to a broader digital civil society ecosystem. Such an outcome is difficult to achieve through isolated project funding.

DDI also offers lessons for donors, intermediaries, and policymakers seeking scalable and context-sensitive approaches to civil society support. It demonstrates that impact does not depend solely on funding size, but on alignment between resources, learning, and institutional incentives. By lowering barriers to entry, encouraging experimentation, and prioritizing accompaniment over compliance, DDI reduces the risks associated with digital adoption while strengthening accountability and learning.

At the same time, DDI does not present itself as a universal solution. Its relevance lies in showing what is possible within existing constraints, not in replacing the need for sustained funding, political reform, or long-term investment in civic space. Rather, it illustrates a model pathway one that complements broader efforts by equipping CSOs with practical tools, confidence, and institutional foundations to navigate increasingly complex digital and political environments.

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About Accountability Lab

Accountability Lab (AL) is a think and do tank with main focus on making governance work for the people by supporting active citizens, responsible leaders, and accountable institutions. Our approach reimagines how to build accountability, envisioning a world where resources are used wisely,decisions benefit everyone fairly, and people lead secure lives.

Unlike traditional organizations working in accountability, rule of law, or anti-corruption, AL integrates accountability as a core value across themes such as governance, human rights, education,climate justice, and health. Through positive storytelling, cross-sectoral collaboration, and "insider- outsider" networks, AL continues to build spaces where diverse voices shape meaningful and sustainable change.