

The Funders' Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) brings together private philanthropy from around the world to help ensure that the space for civil society is free and open, with engaged citizen participation that is free of restriction from governments.

Our aim is to support an enabling environment for civil society in which all civil society actors – including philanthropy – can thrive.

This publication sets out our three-year strategy from July 2017.

We look forward to working with you.



Introducing the Funders'  
Initiative for Civil Society

# Our Strategy

FICS is a collaborative donor initiative hosted by Global Dialogue, registered as a charity (1122052) and a limited company (5775827) in England and Wales.

FICS is overseen by an Advisory Board, which includes representatives from American Jewish World Service, Arcus Foundation, Ariadne: European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights, Asfari Foundation, EuroMed Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Fund for Global Human Rights, Global Dialogue, Human Rights Funders Network, Oak Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Sigrid Rausing Trust, and Wallace Global Fund.

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## About the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society (FICS)

FICS brings together private philanthropy to develop strategies to ensure that the space for civil society is free and open, with engaged citizen participation that is free of restriction from governments.

We foster collaboration and learning with philanthropy and other stakeholders to strengthen our responses to the closing space trend.

### How can I get involved?

If you are engaged in private philanthropy – either as a funder or stakeholder – and want to understand how you could become more actively engaged with FICS and the closing space agenda, contact [FICS@global-dialogue.eu](mailto:FICS@global-dialogue.eu)

### Sign up for updates

To register for email updates, please email [FICS@global-dialogue.eu](mailto:FICS@global-dialogue.eu) with the subject line FICS News. <http://global-dialogue.eu/funders-initiative-for-civil-society/>

### Join our community

FICS hosts a number of online communities to help colleagues share information and learning about the latest developments and engage with others concerned about closing space for civil society.

- **Closing Space Cross-sector Discussion Group**  
A safe space for civil society actors and organisations, agencies and funders, to come together to access and discuss the latest research into closing space trends, to exchange ideas, seek support and develop new collaborations.
- **Donor Community on the Enabling Environment for Civil Society**  
Eligible funders can access a private community designed for funders to share intelligence and new strategies for taking action in support of civil society with their peers. This community is jointly supported by Ariadne: European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights, the Human Rights Funders Network, and the European Foundation Centre.

To access either community, please contact [FICS@global-dialogue.eu](mailto:FICS@global-dialogue.eu) with the subject line Ariadne Portal.

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## Introducing FICS

Established in early 2016, The Funders' Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) brings together private philanthropy, from around the world, to help ensure that the space for civil society is free and open, with engaged citizen participation that is free of restriction from governments.

**Our overall aim is to support an enabling environment for civil society in which all civil society actors – including philanthropy – can thrive.**

We believe in the fundamental right of all people to participate and that the regulatory environment in which civil society operates should be underpinned by freedom of association, assembly and expression.

## Context

Many philanthropic actors will recognise – through the organisations they support or new restrictions on their own operations – the growing challenges being posed to the legitimacy of civil society by governments around the world. Restrictions don't just impact those on the front line of human rights or environmental campaigns; they can impede the work of development actors, educational charities, or humanitarian organisations. Increasingly, civil society is being targeted as an 'enemy' of the state, including in Western democracies. According to the Civicus Monitor, civil society is frequently framed as representing "terrorists, traitors, foreign puppets, or dis-connected elites"<sup>1</sup>. We call this the closing space trend.

In this context, private philanthropy has been targeted directly by governments and the media as representing unwanted 'foreign agents'. Many grantees are being shut-down as cross-border philanthropy becomes increasingly prohibited. Within countries, too, whereas philanthropy previously remained below the radar, it is now facing direct and open targeting from governments – including in Western countries, such as the US.

Civil society and civic participation is, by many, no longer accepted as a fundamental right, let alone of value for the health of a robust and more equal society. While threats to civil society have been a long-standing trend, in recent years these seem more acute. Insecurity, populism, and inequality are all contributing to the ways in which the legitimacy of civil society can be challenged.

## Our overarching goals

**FICS will strengthen philanthropic capacity to support civil society's efforts to create a more enabling environment and coordinate donor-led strategies to push back against the closing space trend.**

To achieve this, we will:

1. foster a more enabling environment for civil society and improve the regulatory environment in which civil society operates;
2. strengthen the environment for cross-border and local philanthropy to support civil society organisations, activists and others who are essential to a well-functioning and open civil society space.

## FICS theory of change

FICS' role is to ensure that the donor community is aligned and responsive to the issue of closing space and that funders have the knowledge and capacity to best support civil society's efforts to build a more enabling environment. Our donors bring a range of resources – both financial and non-financial – to this agenda. FICS' role is to strengthen and harness these resources and align our strategies. This means building on knowledge and work across a range of organisations and initiatives that are also working to foster a more open civil society; it means investing in activity that can have a positive impact on the enabling environment; and it means supporting the donor community more widely to be active and engaged.

### FICS theory of change



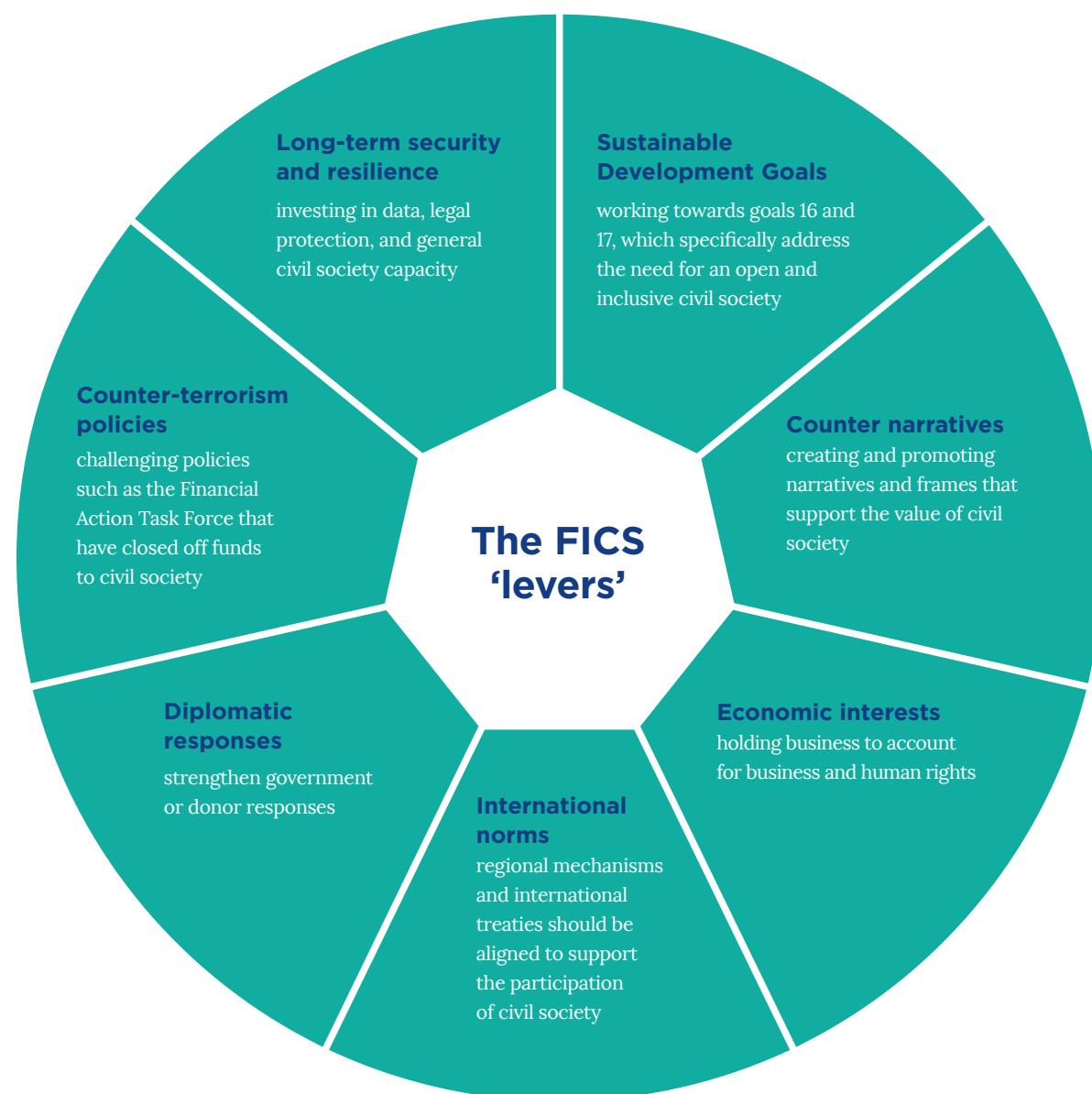
<sup>1</sup> Civicus (2016), 'State of Civil Society 2016' <http://www.civicus.org/index.php/socs2016>

## The FICS 'levers'

In October 2014, FICS' founding donors identified a series of drivers and levers to help define how funders could start to address closing space.<sup>2</sup> The environment has developed significantly since, but a number of these levers continue to provide a useful frame for FICS. For example, a key part of our strategy will be to support working groups that act on these issues

and/or develop tools that provide more information about how the levers can be built into practical grant-making.

We will revisit these levers in the first year of this strategy, and will continue to update and refresh them as our knowledge and expertise grows.



## Key assumptions for our planning

FICS is operating in an environment where 'closing space' is now much higher on the international agenda than previously, as legal restrictions against civil society and foreign funding have snowballed in recent years. This has organisational implications for FICS. It means that we need to be very careful to avoid duplication and ensure that our strategic direction adds value. It also means that the demands on our limited resources could potentially be overwhelming, as more people want to engage on the issue and want our support. More positively, it means that as there is energy behind the issue and an increasing appetite to address it among our constituents.

At the same time, while awareness has increased significantly, the political environment has become more hostile. Western governments are dealing with urgent domestic matters, retreating from their human rights commitments overall; thus 'closing space' becomes harder to get on the political agenda.

<sup>2</sup> Funders' Initiative for Civil Society (2016), 'Challenging the Closing Space for Civil Society: A Practical Starting Point for Funders' [https://ihrf.org/sites/default/files/ClosingSpaceReport\\_May2016\\_DigitalVersion.pdf](https://ihrf.org/sites/default/files/ClosingSpaceReport_May2016_DigitalVersion.pdf)



## Key assumptions for our planning

	Assumptions	Implications for FICS
Contextual assumptions	That the external political environment will continue to be impacted by populism and division. Illiberal democracies are on the ascendant across the world, including in Asia, Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the US.	That FICS will need to look at different areas of influence, depending on the context: national, regional or international approaches will be required. FICS will also need to work with its allies on the narrative to support civil society and philanthropy. This does risk FICS being spread too thinly and will mean a need to prioritise carefully (see Strategic risks).
	That the issue brings philanthropy under greater political and public scrutiny: philanthropy itself is under attack, not just grantees, by both national and international actors.	That FICS will have to defend the broader role of philanthropy itself as a key strategy to combat closing space – and it may need to be more vocal than previously. We will need to be able to move swiftly from ‘defence’ to ‘offence’.
	That, in the longer-term, conventional grantor/grantee relationships between Western philanthropy and civil society actors in the Global South are not viable politically.	That FICS must collaborate with national as well as cross-border philanthropy and philanthropic initiatives, in order to build local legitimacy. It must experiment with different operational models and approaches.
Operational assumption	That there are a number of research, legal, and other initiatives, focusing on the closing space trend.	That we always use the lens of private philanthropy, and that we will collaborate with other initiatives wherever possible on projects and strategy.
	That the human rights funding community is more aware of closing space than many other funding networks.	That FICS needs to invest time in building capacity across different funding sectors. FICS will need to engage and encourage other funding networks to collaborate and help support their members’ learning.
	That our partner networks will also continue to respond to the closing space trend through a range of means, including education and research activities to support funders.	That FICS’ focus will be on strategic efforts to create the enabling environment not on broader, more general strategies to support civil society (recognising that different contexts may require more long-term systemic thinking). FICS will collaborate with our networks and partners to ensure our particular value-add and avoid duplication and overlap.
	That budgets are limited.	That FICS operationally should remain focussed and work through and with others to achieve its aims. This means that we will need to prioritise our activities with diligence (see Strategic risks).
	That combatting closing space is unlikely to be achieved through existing models of philanthropy.	That FICS will need to work with its partners to push the boundaries forward, sourcing new ideas for innovation in philanthropic practice. FICS will need to support partners to pilot and evaluate new, context-sensitive programmes. We will need to share this learning to enable strategic action and avoid duplication across sectors, geographies and levers.

## Our strategic priorities



## What we will do and how we will do it

Strategic Priority	What we will do
<p><b>Strengthening our resources:</b> To facilitate new knowledge and action on closing space by philanthropy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• generate and share emerging information on closing space and its impact on cross-border and national philanthropy</li> <li>• develop and share tools to enable philanthropy to respond more effectively, both in the short and long-term</li> <li>• mobilise funds from the funding community, directed towards combatting closing civic space (vs. long-term civil society support or general civil society resilience)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Building alliances:</b> To develop coordinated responses to closing space by philanthropy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work across philanthropic sectors to build solidarity and support</li> <li>• ensure appropriate coordination for cross-cutting, transnational actions on closing space</li> <li>• create opportunities for joint national strategic action in closing space environments by philanthropy</li> <li>• create and promote a shared counter-narrative that recognises the value of cross-border philanthropy in the context of a free and open civil society</li> </ul>
<p><b>Using our influence:</b> To raise the voice of the funding community in defence of philanthropy and the importance of civil society space</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• build allies outside philanthropy through dialogue and debate</li> <li>• influence decision makers by enabling the funding community to engage in direct advocacy where appropriate</li> <li>• broadcast and communicate our narrative</li> </ul>

How we will do it
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Convene and participate in learning opportunities on closing space (e.g. events, seminars, conferences).</li> <li>2. Provide grant-makers with insight and intelligence to inform their strategies (e.g. trend/gap analysis of resources going to this area of work, and targeted country briefings developed with local civil society).</li> <li>3. Monitor resources going to this area of work, and sharing this information in a clear and timely way in order to inform reactive grant-making.</li> <li>4. Create a bank of case studies of closing space grant-making; share learning and showcase effective grant-making practices.</li> <li>5. Coordinate a working group on Innovation, which will consider new forms of grant-making to combat closing space (e.g. flexibility options, new funding models or grant-making approaches, and root causes).</li> <li>6. Develop practical guidance and mechanisms to support the funding community to engage in effective closing space grant-making (e.g. convening thematic working groups to align global action).</li> <li>7. Assess and coordinate strategic opportunities for supporting and collaborating with cross-cutting international initiatives and/or organisations aimed at combatting closing space; provide the funding community with insight and intelligence.</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Network across philanthropic sectors, build shared understanding of the issues and generate dialogue between diverse philanthropic communities.</li> <li>2. Create or co-convene working groups across philanthropy and other sectors using the FICS levers and other issue-specific areas (e.g. a LGBTI working group, led by the Global Philanthropy Project).</li> <li>3. Engage a wider, global funding community in FICS and the closing space agenda, including ensuring philanthropic actors from the Global South are represented within FICS governance and activity.</li> <li>4. Provide sector-based discussion papers to highlight the impacts of closing space across civil society (e.g. on development or environmental actors).</li> <li>5. Convene grant-makers to pilot specific joint responses in identified countries across a range of contexts to demonstrate which approaches can work.</li> <li>6. Create and promote a narrative defence of cross-border philanthropy and re-set the debate about the value of philanthropy in the context of a healthy civil society.</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Build links with other constituencies. For example, a working group co-convened with the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre and the World Economic Forum in order to activate stakeholders from the business community.</li> <li>2. Lead and facilitate joint funder-led advocacy on closing civil society space, where appropriate and useful, building and sharing learning about when and how funder advocacy can work and when it can cause harm.</li> <li>3. Collaborate with other key institutions or collaboratives working globally on closing civic space, including Civicus, ICNL, the Transparency and Accountability Initiative or International Civil Society Centre. This should include joint strategic planning so as to avoid duplication and overlaps and encourage complementarity.</li> <li>4. Act as an outward facing voice on behalf of the funding community, communicating through channels including events, the media and public platforms.</li> </ol>

## Operational approaches

FICS has core funding for a small operational team until the end of 2019, with a limited budget for research and convening during that time. Activity will be informed by the following principles:

- We will ensure a collaborative approach to our work across the funding community, drawing funders from a wide range of sectors, locations, and approaches to participate in our core governance, working groups and events.
- We aim to work through our funding networks and with other partners wherever possible.
- We will prioritise our activities, or, where there is demand and interest to do so, seek funding for additional activity from among our advisory board or partners.

By way of illustration, two of FICS' key operational approaches are our collaborative **working groups** and **country convenings**.

### FICS working groups

FICS will convene working groups on an ad hoc basis to provide more focussed attention to particular issues.

At the time of publication, agreed working groups include:

- **Innovation**  
This working group will consider new and emerging ways to support civil society which could be effective in countering closing space trends, such as supporting informal civil society actors or unusual partnerships.
- **Economic Interests**  
*in partnership with the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre.*  
This working group will explore the key role business can play in supporting the enabling environment for civil society, and aims to articulate further how funders can activate this lever, either through grant-making, influencing strategies or partnerships through grant-making or influencing strategies.

- **LGBTI**

*led by Global Philanthropy Project.*  
In many countries where space for civil society has closed or is closing, LGBTI groups are often the first to be targeted. This working group will look at lessons from this community and strengthen approaches to funding that can support what is often the first line of defence when civil society is under attack. It will also share this learning to build more understanding and solidarity.

We are also exploring working groups on **International Development** and **Environment**, seeking to build greater collaboration with these causes' respective funding communities.

### Approach to country convenings

FICS will seek to undertake approximately two country convenings with donors each year. We will pilot different contexts and methodologies and develop best practice for this approach.

Criteria for specific interventions will include: a country with regional or global significance; opportunities for testing existing or new levers; at least a limited degree of open civil society already but where there is a palpable threat to close space further; opportunity to add value to other initiatives seeking to undertake country-level activity on closing space; and, an identified demand from our philanthropic partners to coordinate a donor response with strong contacts on the ground.

FICS will network with the relevant identified actors to determine an agreed process, and the actions that will be taken. Actions on convening may include:

- convening engaged philanthropists in the country;
- developing a briefing for the funding community;
- coordinating with local civil society to put together a brief statement of need;
- leveraging in other actors for resourcing;
- developing a funder-led advocacy plan, where appropriate to do so;
- operationalising funding models.

## Monitoring our success

Effective push back against closing space is a long-term endeavour and there are many working towards this aim. It is FICS' explicit approach to work with and through others. As such, attributing "cause and effect" will be challenging.

For each of FICS' strategic priorities, we have sought to map some clear outcome pathways, showing what we intend to do to measure our contribution to a more enabling environment for civil society overall.

**Each year, we will undertake a collaborative evaluation review with our stakeholders – our Advisory Board and key partners – to determine if FICS is meeting the needs of the philanthropic community, and to strengthen our approaches and refine our Key Performance Indicators.**

Strategic Priority	Our Aim	Measuring Success
<b>Strengthening our resources</b>	To facilitate new knowledge and action on closing space by philanthropy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement with FICS' online and offline community, in particular beyond our founding members.</li> <li>• An increasing number of funders both within the FICS advisory board and beyond identify direct grant-making to closing space activities.</li> <li>• Feedback from participants that our activities have strengthened knowledge and capacity of those who have engaged with us.</li> </ul>
<b>Building alliances</b>	To develop coordinated responses to closing space by philanthropy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• FICS participants represent national and cross-border philanthropic actors from multiple sectors and locations.</li> <li>• FICS will have developed substantial, action-oriented partnerships with targeted constituencies, across at least three of our priority levers.</li> </ul>
<b>Using our influence</b>	To raise the voice of the funding community in defence of philanthropy and the importance of civil society space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our shared counter narrative, which explicitly values a free and open civil society, will become increasingly referenced in funding community and partner strategies, priorities and other publications.</li> <li>• Feedback from key institutions or collaboratives working globally on closing civil society space that the funding community is an increasingly engaged and informed partner.</li> </ul>



## Strategic risks

The strategy gives us a focussed direction of travel, however, there are some key risks that will need to be managed, or that could change our ability to achieve outcomes.

Risk	Mitigation
<b>Changes in the political landscape and unpredictability</b> For example, the deterioration of civil society in places such as the US and Poland couldn't have been foreseen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For country convenings, identify multiple countries so that we have options in the face of significant change</li> </ul>
<b>Overlap and duplication with other groups carrying out similar work to FICS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coordinate with other initiatives and networks</li> <li>Keep focussed on funder-led interventions</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of legitimacy among global funding communities</b> FICS has been initiated by a small group of international human rights funders, based in the US and Europe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure that FICS engages both national and cross-border philanthropy, and reaches out to funders beyond its existing networks</li> <li>Ensure that FICS' governance and activities engage key actors across a range of philanthropic sectors</li> </ul>
<b>Demand for FICS support spread too thinly, doing too much</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put in place structured, regular ways to set, prioritise, monitor, and review goals with the FICS Management Committee</li> </ul>
<b>As FICS' profile rises it may become a target of groups pushing the closing space agenda.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure strong communications strategy and systems to alert the FICS Management Committee at the earliest stage</li> </ul>

## Communications

FICS' communications will be overseen by a small committee, drawn from the FICS Advisory Board.

The objectives of FICS' communications will be to:

- Keep the funding community informed about closing space and opportunities to strengthen funder engagement with the trend, including new learnings from grant-making, country-led strategies, joint advocacy, etc;
- Provide opportunities for secure dialogue among funders and civil society;
- Influence critical stakeholders, such as business or government actors;
- Strengthen public narratives on cross-border philanthropy and civil society.

We will use digital communications, including:

1. A dedicated FICS website, launched in Autumn 2017, which will provide public-facing information on our work;
2. Strengthened secure online portals, hosted through the Ariadne portal, for donors and stakeholders.

We will also aim to use targeted traditional media channels, such as philanthropy publications (online and offline), broadcast, and print media, to increase our influence.

Over the coming months, FICS will convene a group of communications experts to strengthen our framing of the agenda such that it appeals to a wider spectrum of potential stakeholders.

## Conclusions

Threats to civil society are not new, but they are increasing in both depth and intensity.

Democracy and participation have been questioned in recent years, as concerns about global security are heightened, inequality has increased, and resource scarcity becomes the norm. Populism, nationalism, and trade-offs with societal freedoms, become the reactionary antidote to such threats.

FICS has been convened at a time when the role of private philanthropy is itself now under attack. In some ways, this should come as no surprise: private philanthropy has a long history of supporting the most marginalised in society, often supporting the voices of those that hold power to account.

As a unique civil society actor, philanthropy cannot insulate itself from the phenomenon of closing space. But it can create a more robust defence, and succeed in pushing back against the trend. By working more effectively across philanthropic sectors and in a more strategic way with civil society actors, both at the international and national levels, philanthropy can use its levers to support all those who believe that a healthy civil society is critical for a more equal and sustainable society.

Civil society and philanthropy may be under threat, but a more enabling environment is certainly within our reach. Through learning, innovation in grant-making, and collective action, we can break down the barriers and help to support a healthy civil society, in which we can all thrive, now and into the future.

If you are engaged in private philanthropy – either as a funder or stakeholder – and want to understand how you could become more actively engaged with FICS and the closing space agenda, contact [FICS@global-dialogue.eu](mailto:FICS@global-dialogue.eu)