Country
Strategy

Strengthening the Digital
Civic Space in

Colombia

CONSULTORES Y
ASESORES
TIC

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We thank the participating organizations in this process for validating the categories of analysis:

- Los hijos de Obbatala
- Unad
- Fundación Identidad Pacífica
- Fundación Artística y Cultura Ancestros
- Mesa Consultiva Afrodescendiente de Usaquén
- Natu Natu Artesanal Mujeres
- Corporación Femm
- Veeduría Ciudadana de la Política Pública Nacional LGBTI - Network of 41 LGBTIQ+ organizations
- Corporación Afrocolombiana Progresos y Lazos
- Fundación Acción Prometea
- Grupo Pro Acto
- Cabildo Indígena Muisca de Bosa
- Kuagro Moná ri Palenge andi Bakata

Likewise, we extend our special thanks to HIVOS's allies in Colombia who participated in this exercise in the articulation and co-creation spaces. They are:

- Corporación Cambio Sostenible
- Fundación SIDOC
- Colectivo NOIS RADIO

Hivos, with the support of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), is implementing the project "Connect, Defend, Act!" This project aims to "counter efforts to restrict civic space by supporting civil society in three areas: coalition-building, knowledge production, and collective action. By focusing on the most pressing local issues, the program works with actors who are best positioned to make a difference in Colombia, Indonesia, Malawi, and the occupied Palestinian territory. It engages across various sectors and interests, especially with marginalized groups such as women, youth, LGBTIQ+ people, Indigenous peoples, and displaced persons."

Consultores y Asesores TIC S.A.S. is a Colombian firm with over a decade of experience in designing and implementing social, cultural, and technological projects. Its work focuses on human rights, citizen participation, and institutional strengthening, actively collaborating with ethnic communities, grassroots organizations, public entities, and international cooperation agencies.

Within the framework of the "Connect, Defend, Act!" project, the role of Consultores y Asesores TIC is to develop the Country Strategy document. Their task is to consolidate the information from the Baseline Study conducted in 2024, complementing it with new findings obtained through a co-creation process with civil society actors. To this end, their methodology includes a documentary review of the prior study, the implementation of focus groups and surveys with participating organizations, and the drafting of the final strategic document. The goal is to produce a strategy that strengthens the capacity for action and resilience of civil society in response to the shrinking civic space in Colombia.

Contenido

SUMMARY

This document presents the Country Strategy to strengthen the Digital Civic Space in Colombia, an initiative by Hivos that seeks to empower Civil Society Actors, especially marginalized communities. The main diagnosis, built from previous studies and collaboration with grassroots organizations and key allies (Cambio Sostenible, Fundación SIDOC, NOIS RADIO), concludes that the Digital Civic Space in Colombia is a "contested space." It is characterized by territorial inequality, violence, disinformation, and structural barriers that impede free and safe participation. To address these challenges, the strategy proposes four lines of action. In essence, the strategy seeks to transform the Digital Civic Space from a scenario of risk into a space of opportunity, resilience, and equitable participation for all.

INTRODUCTION

Participation processes in Colombia are fundamental in a country marked by historical social inequalities, growing levels of poverty, and a centralism that often dictates State action. However, this context also creates challenges for human rights defenders, ethnic organizations, alternative media, and, in general, for Civil Society Actors.

Against this backdrop, civic space and its presence in digital environments represent a complex issue to address. Barriers exist both for carrying out organizational and participatory actions and for accessing the digital environments themselves. The persecution of social leaders, obstacles to organizational processes, and the violence present in the territories, combined with the technological backwardness in a large part of the country and the gap between rural and urban Colombia, have created a reality in which the Digital Civic Space is perceived more as a project to be achieved than as a consolidated reality.

Within this framework, Hivos, with the support of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), is implementing the "Connect, Defend, Act!" project. This project aims to "counteract efforts to restrict civic space by supporting civil society in three areas: coalition building, knowledge production, and collective action. Focusing on the most urgent local issues, the program works with actors who are in the best position to make a difference in Colombia, Indonesia, Malawi, and the occupied Palestinian territory. It engages across different sectors and interests, especially with marginalized groups such as women, youth, LGBTIQ+ people, indigenous peoples, and displaced persons.[1]

To this end, Hivos has financed studies and projects carried out by organizations with a presence in Colombia, which have enabled analysis of the reality of the Digital Civic Space in Colombia. Thus, in 2024[2], together with the organization Consultores y Asesores TIC, the Colombia Baseline Study was conducted, which involved a documentary review on the subject and gathered the voices of grassroots organizations and Civil Society Actors.[3]

Subsequently, in 2025, the Corporación Cambio Sostenible, as a Hivos partner, developed the Civic Space Monitoring Report in Colombia 2024. Likewise, in January 2025, with the support of the Colectivo NOIS Radio and the Corporación La Sónica, the document Uniendo Fuerzas para Ampliar el Espacio Cívico Digital (Joining Forces to Expand

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[1] Source: HIVOS website, https://america-latina.hivos.org/program/conectar-defender-actuar/

[2] Corporación Cambio Sostenible & Hivos (2025, January). Monitoring report on civic space in Colombia 2024. Retrieved from: https://cambiosostenible.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Reporte-de-

Monitoreo-del-Espacio-Civico-de-Colombia-2024.pdf

[3] Consultores y Asesores TIC S.A.S. (2024, October). Initial report: Colombia baseline study for the 'Connect, Defend, Act!' project. Hivos. Retrieved from https://america-latina.hivos.org/document/estudio-de-linea-de-base-conect-defend-act-cda/

the Digital Civic Space) was published[4]. Additionally, and based on these analyses, the SIDOC Foundation was brought on as a partner to execute the proposal Person to person: Defendiendo el espacio cívico étnico (From Voice to Voice: Defending the Ethnic Civic Space)[5], a project that is currently underway.

Finally, in May 2025, Consultores y Asesores TIC once again partners with Hivos to develop the present exercise: a national strategy that seeks to empower Civil Society Actors to protect and expand the Digital Civic Space. This strategy incorporates the conclusions and recommendations of the Baseline Study, the documents from Hivos's partners in the project, and new findings generated from the process of articulation and co-creation with Civil Society Actors. In this way, the strategy aims to be an inclusive, contextualized, and representative exercise of local realities.

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[4] Colectivo Noís Radio & Corporación La Sónica. (2025, January). Connect, defend, act! Joining forces to expand the digital civic space: A monitoring report on the digital civic space. Hivos.

[5] Fundación SIDOC. (n.d.). Concept note for the 'Connect, Defend, Act!' project: Call for the facilitation of community action in Colombia.

VALIDATION, ARTICULATION, AND CO-CREATION SPACES

After the process of reviewing and categorizing the documents that gathered the main findings regarding the Digital Civic Space in Colombia, Consultores y Asesores TIC designed two scenarios to deepen the analysis.

1. Validation Scenario with Grassroots Organizations

As a result of examining the set of key documents—which include the baseline study, monitoring reports, and the strategy that one of the allies is currently developing—four macro categories representing the predominant conditions of the Digital Civic Space in the nation were identified with the help of Atlas.ti software. These conceptual groupings are reiterated in the different reports and, in turn, house various subcategories that reflect the reality experienced in the country. For this reason, Consultores y Asesores TIC designed a first meeting that allowed the validation of the categories that emerged from the analysis with some of the entities that participated in the 2024 Colombia Baseline Study. Twelve collectives gathered there, with whom the identified categories and subcategories were corroborated. The participating groups were:

- Los Hijos de Obbatalá
- Fundación Identidad Pacífica
- Fundación Artística y Cultural Ancestros
- Mesa Consultiva Afrodescendiente de Usaquén
- Natu Natu Artesanal Mujeres
- Corporación Femm
- Veeduría Ciudadana de la Política Pública Nacional LGBTI (Red de 41 organizaciones LGBTIQ+)
- Corporación Afrocolombiana Progresos y Lazos
- Fundación Acción Prometea
- Grupo ProActo
- Cabildo Indígena Muisca de Bosa
- Kuagro Moná ri Palenge andi Bakata

BASELINE REPORT

BASELINE STUDY COLOMBIA PROJECT **'CONNECT, DEFEND, ACT!'**

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2. Scenario for Articulation and Co-creation with Strategic Allies

A second space sought to highlight the identified categories to, along with the attendees, advance a more complete understanding in which conflicting forces, territorial actors, and other variables emerged that enriched the interpretation of the Digital Civic Space. This moment was called "articulation and co-creation," as it was proposed that participants also have the opportunity to determine the most predominant needs and intervene in the design of alternative solutions. In this case, Hivos' allies in Colombia participated, each intervening in a space for dialogue and joint construction. They are:

- Corporación Cambio Sostenible
- Fundación SIDOC
- Colectivo NOIS RADIO

CATEGORIES FOR THE DEFINITION AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE COUNTRY STRATEGY
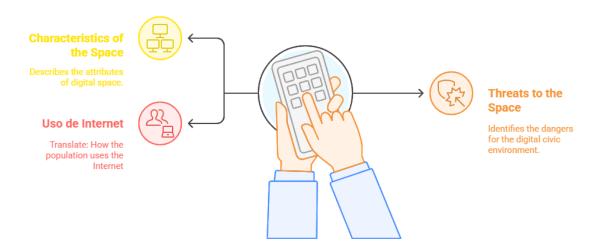
FRAMEWORK CATEGORIES	FIRST LEVEL SUB CATEGORIES	SECOND LEVEL SUB CATEGORIES
1. Characteristics of the digital civic space	Aspects that are determinants of the Digital Civic Space	Contested space
		Social cohesion
		Community knowledge
		Cultural identity
		Social mobilization
		Citizen participation
		Coalitions
		Comunicación popular, alternativa y comunitaria
		Coaliciones
		Territorial inequality
		Racism and other forms of exclusion
	Aspects that operate as limitations of the digital civic space	Surveillance
		Regulation
		Structural barriers
		Centralization of debates
		Unilateral communication
	Aspects that, despite being necessary for the Digital Civic Space, are perceived as absent	Digital Inclusion
		Digital rights
		Civic rights
		Fundamental rights
		Social cohesion
		Freedom of expression
2. Threats to the digital civic space	Violence	
	Censorship	
	Inequality	
	Disinformation	
	Territorial Control	
	Cyberattacks	
	Persecution in the digital space	
3. Internet Use	Digital Divide	

	Technological infrastructure	
	Access to information	
	Use of social media	
	Digital rights	
	Activism on social media	
	Education about the digital world	
	Cultural barriers	
	Lack of state regulation	
	Communicating the good things in the territory	

MAIN FINDINGS

For the design of the Country Strategy, it was decided to take as a starting point the findings identified in the framework studies and in the meetings with organizations and allies. These previous analyses were the basis for recognizing and characterizing the Digital Civic Space in Colombia, starting from the realities of the territories. To this end, the strategy would be based on the framework categories on the Digital Civic Space, these categories are:

Categories of the Digital Civic Space

Characteristics of the Space
Describes the attributes of digital space.

Uso de Internet
Translate: How the population uses the Internet

Threats to the Space
Identifies the dangers for the digital civic environment.

1. Characteristics of the Digital Civic Space

This first broad category emerges as an indication that the Digital Civic Space is a difficult instance to define, in which actors tend to describe it through its characteristics rather than conceptualizing it. Likewise, this perception obeys a polarity that divides the concept into two readings: on the one hand, as a product of processes related to the digital, and on the other, as an area linked to the organizational and participatory capacity of communities. That is, the "civic sphere" and the "digital sphere" are separately outlined, which results in a constant dichotomy, suggesting that in the territories it is very complex to interact in a single space that integrally articulates the organization and communication processes of Civil Society Actors with the technological environment. Within this grouping are, in turn, the following subcategories, located at three levels: - Aspects that are determinants of the Digital Civic Space in Colombia. - Aspects that operate as

limitations of it. - Aspects that, despite being necessary, are perceived as absent. The levels and the subcategories housed in each are presented below.

Characteristics of the Digital Civic Space

1

Governmental censorship

Restricts freedom of expression in digital space.

2

Online participation platforms

Facilitate active participation in the digital civic space.

3

Lack of digital literacy

Prevents effective access and use of digital space.

4

Fact-checking tools

Essential for combating online disinformation.

Aspects that are determinants of the Digital Civic Space in Colombia

- **Contested space:** The first interpretation that emerged from the documentation review is that this scenario is configured as a field of dispute. In this way, the communities that try to interact there are always in a position of defending their territories, opinions or rights, or in resistance to the different obstacles they may encounter. This suggests that what should be an area of constant articulation and leveraging of initiatives, appears, from the outset, as a much more inhospitable environment for grassroots groups and their organizations. Likewise, persistence in this place often results in new exclusions or in actions to invisibilize or erase their voices, finding new ways in which some of their freedoms are violated.

- **Social cohesion:** Despite the above, the Digital Civic Space is also the place where efforts for community articulation are resumed. In this aspect, the historical and social trajectories evidenced in each of the documents show moments, milestones, and geographies where true phenomena of unity occurred in Colombia, most of them as resistance to hegemonic dynamics. In this sense, this characteristic, inherent to the identity of social organizations in the country and, therefore, to the digital civic environment, emerges predominantly.

- **Community knowledge:** An aspect that also defines the Digital Civic Space is based on the traditions, memories, practices, and constructions unique to each community. This is what allows an ethnic group to be characterized as indigenous, a Palenquero collective to be defined as particular, or ancestral knowledge to be identified in the population of the archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina. It is the original knowledge of each people that will give a distinctive aspect to the way each group interacts with the digital environment.

- **Cultural identity:** Similarly, it is stated that the participatory scenarios of organizations are permeated by the unique characteristics of grassroots communities, and the identity of each collective and each people influences this, especially for ethnic and peasant groups. However, this condition also creates a tension, since, as studies indicate, it also becomes a factor by which many actors are excluded from the Digital Civic Space.

- **Social mobilization:** As indicated by the Baseline Study in relation to the social protest experienced in the country during 2021, key milestones and moments are also identified that trigger action by Civil Society Actors and are fundamental in defining the Colombian Digital Civic Space. In this sense, this category suggests that this space is often reactive to situations of discord

between the State and communities, security forces and the population, or armed actors and the inhabitants of the territories.

- **Citizen participation:** This refers to the different scenarios where people exercise their right to express themselves and intervene. Although this will also be mentioned as an area of tension, it also appears as something determinant of the Digital Civic Space in Colombia, as it suggests that in every territory and every community in the country, the need arises to carry out actions that allow them to be part of local processes. This does not guarantee that this intention will be achieved; however, it is evident in the reviewed documents that the social fabric of the regions is characterized by the constant search for spaces for intervention as Civil Society Actors.

- **Popular, alternative, and community communication:** Hand in hand with the above, it is identified that the Digital Civic Space in Colombia responds to a communicational identity that is anchored in previous alternative and popular exercises. In this way, the processes referred to by organizations show that, before the country entered the digital era, there were actions that allowed collectives to approach communication as an exercise of resistance and collective mobilization. For this reason, thinking about the national Digital Civic Space also reflects the history of alternative media and popular communication practices that previously connected primary technologies—such as radio or television—to people and, consequently, also mediate the connection with the technological environment today.

- **Coalitions:** It is also evident in each analysis that the articulation and associations that occur between grassroots organizations and entities at another level—such as corporations, collectives, cooperation bodies, or public organizations—are not only a characteristic of the Colombian Digital Civic Space but also a fundamental element for its survival.

- **Territorial inequality:** This subcategory brings together the various reports indicating how, both for participatory processes and communication exercises and for access to digital infrastructure, the country differs according to the geography from which it is observed. Thus, urban Colombia, located in the center of the nation, finds access and influence in the Digital Civic Space more favorable, while the "other Colombia," which lives in the regions of departments to the north, west, or south—especially in rural territories—experiences constant difficulty in entering, or even no access to this sphere. Likewise, these latter areas find it unfeasible for their testimonies, experiences, realities, and needs to be reflected in the intentions that determine opinions within the country's Digital Civic Space.

- **Racism and other forms of exclusion:** Although it would be expected that the digital environment would connect communities and bring more benefits than impediments to the territories, this is not the case. What is reported is

that the technological scenario has made visible or exacerbated practices of discrimination and racism against populations, which now not only see the threat in the physical plane but also in the virtual world and, very specifically, on social networks.

Aspects that operate as limitations of the Digital Civic Space

- **Surveillance:** This refers to the oversight exercised by state entities on the organizational capacity of Civil Society Actors, which creates a barrier that limits their organization and visibility in various areas, particularly for diverse collectives. This is exemplified by the regulatory processes the State implements for the legal formation of groups. Rather than providing support, these processes ultimately lead some groups to abandon their efforts to legalize their activities within the territory.[6].

- **Regulation:** Similar to the previous point, this is understood as a mechanism that curbs the organizational and participatory capacity of civic groups. This issue manifests in current laws and rules, which result in bureaucratic procedures that fail to recognize the true nature of these associations.

- **Structural Barriers:** This refers to obstacles faced by Civil Society Actors and their processes, as well as those that impede the population's access to and use of digital space. These barriers arise from historical, economic, and even technological conditions that limit the ability of people to interact with the Digital Civic Space. A frequently cited example in this category is the lack of infrastructure for internet access in rural areas.

- **Centralization of Debates:** The perception of many Civil Society Actors is that the Digital Civic Space is an environment where national dialogues and conversations revolve around the realities of a small portion of the population. This supports the idea that the capital city, despite being only a fraction of the country, commands the focus and attention, thereby making other regions invisible—even those that constitute the majority of the national territory. Furthermore, it is noted that those who participate in or have influence over these debates are the most privileged classes, thus continuing the cycle of exclusion by denying others the opportunity to participate in these forums.

- **Unilateral Communication:** This describes a limiting feature of interaction within the Digital Civic Space, which often becomes an exercise in one-way dissemination. In this model, state entities or mass media continue to be the

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[6] In one of the co-creation sessions, a participant commented on how the lack of support during the legal registration process for organizations, and the requirements that must be met in remote areas—such as having an accountant or a statutory auditor for collectives in predominantly rural regions—resulted in them abandoning the legalization process, without any type of support from state or mixed entities.

ones issuing the "official version" as the only possible narrative. A new actor is also introduced here that, despite its recent arrival, has already been co-opted as a hegemonic voice: social media.

Aspects that, despite being necessary for the Digital Civic Space, are perceived as absent

- **Digital Inclusion:** Allusion to this subcategory is recurrent in the analyzed documentation, indicating that within the Colombian territory, it is not yet possible for the entire population to access new technologies, especially the internet. This point refers to different factors that obstruct access to the virtual space for all regions and demographic groups, which leads to the perception that overcoming these limitations is an unattainable goal. One of the most frequently highlighted realities here is the lack of infrastructure to bring connectivity to areas remote from the country's center.

- **Digital Rights:** This point refers, on the one hand, to the fact that communities find no guarantees that their rights will be respected in the virtual world. Likewise, it highlights the limited information available on this topic, noting that in some localities, there is significant misinformation, even to the point where the subject is not even considered or discussed.

- **Civic Rights:** On this topic, the examined documentation alludes to how actions in Colombia have been systematic in their aim to persecute, stigmatize, and diminish the capacity of citizens regarding organization, public complaint, communication, and the defense of their freedoms. In this regard, it describes a climate of high tension, constant aggression, and the frequent occurrence of violent situations, both in the environment of civic participation and in digital spheres.

- **Fundamental Rights:** Hand in hand with the previous subcategory, it was evident that organizations constantly report how their guarantees and freedoms are violated, despite the country's regulations emphasizing their enforcement. This point highlights how, historically, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant groups, and the LGBTIQ+ community have seen their essential rights undermined. Likewise, the fact is stressed that the protection of these guarantees is entirely conditioned by geography; the center of the nation is where the greatest possibility of finding defense actions exists, while the rest of the territory—rural areas, the southwestern departments, or the north coast—are settings where these rights are disregarded, especially for the most vulnerable populations.

- **Social Cohesion:** This aspect is noteworthy as it involves questioning by the organizations of the very communities in which they work. It addresses the need to strengthen unity within these populations and points out how the digital space has exposed fractures among Civil Society Actors. It is noted, for example, that there are ruptures regarding the cultural practices of different age groups, or how religious beliefs lead to censorship against members of the same community.

- **Freedom of Expression:** Based on figures and the systematization of formal complaints, it is evident that the landscape for freedom of the press in the country is complex. Persecution, assassinations, and constant threats are the reality for those who choose to inform the public. This point also consistently highlights that leaders and communicators are besieged by various actors: armed groups, state forces, and regional political bodies, among others. This subcategory also includes the intimidation and attacks that have even targeted some of the participating organizations, which has forced them to consider relocating their operations.
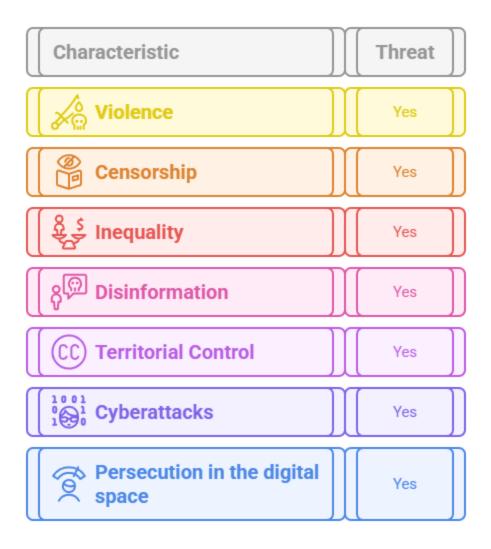
2. Threats to the Digital Civic Space

The second category corresponds to the assertion made by communities that the Digital Civic Space is a threatened sphere. This implies the existence of tensions within the territories—which in some cases are veiled—that nevertheless reveal conflicting actors for whom the participation, organization, and communication of collectives are an uncomfortable process they seek to silence or impede. From this context, the following risks are identified:

- **Violence:** This point highlights the historical aggressions that have affected populations, embodied by the presence of different armed actors, including state security forces. This phenomenon not only points to moments in Colombia's history where confrontation has shaped regional dynamics, but it also brings to the forefront the current reality of these areas, where acts of violence against inhabitants are frequent. In this context, the digital space emerges as a place where the dynamics of the physical territory are reproduced; illegal armed groups, state forces, and persecutory actions against communities are also found there.[7]

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[7] The Baseline Report identifies in its risk matrix the "Illegal Interception of Communications (Spying by the DAS)" and the "Use of Pegasus by the government for Surveillance and Espionage" as high-impact threats. It also points to the "Digital Censorship and Surveillance during the 2021 Social Uprising," which included network monitoring and content blocking, limiting the right to information and expression (Consultores y Asesores TIC, 2024). For its part, the Monitoring Report by Cambio Sostenible classifies the civic space in Colombia as "Repressed," a state in which activists

Threats to the Digital Civic Space

Characteristic	Threat
Violence	Yes
Censorship	Yes
Inequality	Yes
Disinformation	Yes
Territorial Control	Yes
Cyberattacks	Yes
Persecution in the digital space	Yes

- **Censorship:** This includes actions aimed at making the voice of civic groups invisible, questioning it, or portraying it as biased. Evident here are the silencing tactics used against leaders in each territory, as well as the stigmatization of social protest and grassroots communication as a way to discredit and nullify these voices. The organizations state that those who carry

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who criticize authorities risk suffering "surveillance, harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, physical attacks, and even murder." Similarly, under the "Obstructed" space category, it is mentioned that state authorities undermine civil society organizations (CSOs) through "illegal surveillance, bureaucratic harassment, and public defamation" (Cambio Sostenible, 2025).

out this oppression are, for the most part, state bodies, official media outlets, and economic groups.

- **Inequality:** The inequity present in Colombia also emerges as a factor that threatens the Digital Civic Space. This is embodied not only in differences in wealth distribution, but also in internet access, the use of information technologies, and the demand for justice when leaders or communicators face intimidation or attacks. This disparity is not seen as an isolated issue; rather, Civil Society Actors also point out that the political, economic, and technological structure seems designed to replicate and maintain this unjust system.

- **Disinformation:** One of the most recurring elements regarding the use of social media and the interactions that collectives have with the Digital Civic Space is the spread of false news. According to them, this phenomenon does not appear randomly; rather, it is clear to these groups that its use is intentional, seeking to divert attention from more complex dynamics or to discredit the organizational and advocacy actions of civil society.

- **Territorial Control:** An element present in many of the country's regions, regarding which organizations point to the inaction of government entities, is the presence and dominance of areas by armed actors. In this sense, new geographical configurations emerge in which invisible borders appear, resulting from actions that endanger public order and, above all, the lives of the inhabitants. Faced with this reality, the Digital Civic Space encounters yet another threat, which in many places makes it unfeasible for the population to access the digital space.

- **Cyberattacks:** An additional risk to the Digital Civic Space, present worldwide, is attacks carried out through the virtual world. This is a new phenomenon resulting from the vulnerability that the digital environment also presents. However, in Colombia, this has some particularities: in this country, cyberattacks are another way to persecute civic entities and social leaders. These individuals now not only find themselves embroiled in persecutory actions in the physical plane, but the virtual sphere has also become a place of siege. In this case, the target of the attack is not the person's physical integrity, but rather their data, their communications, and their online image.

- **Persecution in the digital space:** Linked to the above, the collectives also report that they are now subject to unjustified tracking and accusations, no longer just in physical settings or traditional media, but also on social media. This involves the use of these platforms for the exclusive purpose of persecution, attempting to attack specific individuals or groups.

3. Internet Use

The third category that emerges from the analyses and ideas put forth by organizations and Civil Society Actors refers to how the perception of the Digital Civic Space embodies, in many cases, the relationship of individuals with the network. In this sense, it is proposed that the experience of interacting with the internet determines the vision that social actors have of the Digital Civic Space. Therefore, the limitations that populations face in accessing connectivity networks become the barriers to their interaction with the Digital Civic Space. The following characteristic elements are identified in this context:
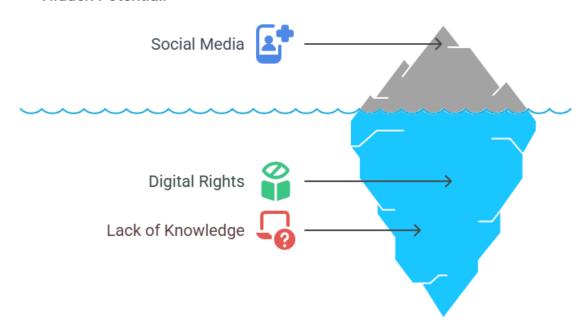
- **Digital Divide:** As a problem associated with network access, the disparity in connectivity repeatedly appears. It is identified as the phenomenon determining that internet access in the country is not equal for all Colombians. Just like education, health, or political participation, connection is only guaranteed in certain territories and for specific population groups. According to the organizations, this divide has been evident since technology first arrived in the country. Despite the fact that infrastructure has been growing, factors such as regional violence, control by armed groups, or corruption have caused the disparity to persist and, over time, become more pronounced rather than reduced.

- **Technological Infrastructure:** Linked to the above, it is evident to the communities how the availability of networks and equipment mediates the access they can have to the internet. At this point, it is key to note that, over time, investment by the State has been increasing, which has resulted in connectivity reaching more areas. However, this investment has also been subject to acts of corruption that undermine the effort to make network access a right for the population as well.

- **Access to Information:** In the testimonies and data provided by the organizations, it is evident how, since the arrival of the internet in the territory, and especially after the emergence of social media, the digital world is beginning to be referenced by the population as the primary source of information. The role previously played by formats like newspapers, radio, or more reliable sources such as grassroots groups, local communicators, or academia, is now exclusively embodied by the web. Consequently, the perception is established that "everything published online is information" and, therefore, "everything we encounter in the digital spectrum is valid and true." This is a dangerous element, considering that in reality, digitally disseminated content is not necessarily verified, and its publication is even used as a deliberate exercise in disinformation.

- **Use of Social Media:** Closely related to the previous category, the fact also arises that people equate the use and content of platforms like Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, or X with the only possible interaction in the Digital Civic Space. This is very dangerous, as the scope of these applications is mediated by a market-driven perspective that curates the publications, promoting some materials over others. This phenomenon is also driven by what is known as Zero-rating practices, which privilege Meta's tools (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) in the mobile phone plans of most Colombians by including them in data packages without additional charges. This apparent ease of connection also becomes a barrier that limits, with an additional cost, access to websites and applications that are outside of that company's control. Likewise, it imposes the logic of the algorithm that programs each social network, favoring some content over others within each platform.

- **Digital Rights:** A constant theme in the reports made by communities about the Digital Civic Space is that, while internet access is important, its guarantee is not necessarily given high priority for enforcement, neither by the State nor by the citizens themselves. In this sense, it is argued that before network connection, other conditions must be guaranteed in the territories, such as the protection of life, adequate food, health, or education. Thus, a perception is manifested that positions access to the virtual environment not as a right, but as an achievement one arrives at after other needs have been met. This perspective presents a limitation, as it fails to recognize a path for the population to claim their digital, communication, and participation rights as conditions that are already enshrined in law.

- **Digital Activism:** A phenomenon identified following the arrival of the internet in the country is activism on digital platforms. Through this, the voices of community organizations, social leaders, and alternative communicators have appropriated the virtual environment. This practice was key in moments such as the student movement protests in recent years or the 2021 social uprising ("estallido social"), where the digital world enabled mobilization and organization. Similarly, denunciations of indiscriminate attacks by security forces that threatened specific groups also appeared there; for example, aggressions against indigenous peoples in departments like Cauca or Putumayo were documented through videos that went viral online. However, this activism is not without its controversies. On one hand, due to its counter-hegemonic nature, there have been attempts to distort it, and it has been targeted with false accusations that link it to illegal armed actors as a way to delegitimize the messages and complaints it embodies. Likewise, the visibility that social media gives to spokespersons or journalists has placed them at the center of threats and even violent actions. Furthermore, some of them have been victims of fabricated legal cases ("montajes judiciales") and outright persecution, which has led them to withdraw from the platforms to protect their safety.

- **Education on the Digital World:** An aspect identified by organizations and Civil Society Actors as characteristic of internet use in the country is related to the lack of training for citizens. It is evident here that the network places countless offerings and an enormous amount of information within people's reach, which also necessitates educating the perspective with which it is accessed. On this point, it is noted that even in territories where connection is easily accessible and where there are not as many technological barriers, the use made of the web corresponds to only a small fraction of what it can offer. In this sense, the lack of audiovisual training and knowledge about virtual environments leads people to navigate the same websites and the same platforms, ignoring a large part of what the network has to offer.

- **Cultural Barriers:** In dialogue and consultation exercises with organizations, it is evident that Afro-descendant populations, indigenous groups, and the LGBTIQ+ community often perceive themselves as being outside of what the internet offers. In this sense, they find that the content, dialogues, and debates placed online cater to the interests of white population sectors from the center of the country, and that this is constantly repeated. The disregard for the traditions, practices, and constructs of each ethnic and cultural group is evident, now not only in the physical territory but also in the virtual space.

- **Lack of State Regulation:** The Digital Civic Space is described by organizations as an environment with little regulation. In this sense, it is asserted that this environment advances at a greater speed than rulemaking does in the country. It is argued that, although there have been governmental efforts to broaden the digital spectrum and improve citizen access, these actions are still scarce when faced with phenomena such as the lack of connectivity in some regions, cyberattacks, and the persecution of digital activism, among others.

- **Communicating the Good within the Territory:** However, the point made by organizations regarding the fact that the internet today also embodies the potential of each region should not be set aside. In this way, the Digital Civic Space is also nurtured by the efforts of local collectives and media to focus on the experiences, processes, and practices that strengthen the social fabric. Similar to what occurred in the 1970s with alternative radio, or in the 1990s with audiovisual projects, this shows how, in a resilient manner, communities strive to maintain spaces where they can resist attempts to align them with other realities, placing the emphasis instead on their own strengths.

The Iceberg of Social Media Participation:

The Digital Divide: Revealing the
Hidden Potential.

Social Media

Digital Rights

Lack of Knowledge

To conclude this interpretation of the internet, the iceberg metaphor is proposed to illustrate the use of the digital space in Colombia. In this scenario, a large iceberg rises from the uneven terrain, representing how the digital space is used and perceived.

The Tip of the Iceberg (What is Seen) This is dominated almost entirely by social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram). For many, social media is the digital space. At its core dynamic lies a contested space and a field of digital activism. Here, mobilization and resistance coexist: Organizations make their struggles visible and denounce rights violations. It is here that hate narratives emerge, creating an environment with a strong presence of racism, disinformation, and attacks against ethnic communities and social leaders. The discourse here is dominated by actors from urban areas, who impose agendas that are disconnected from territorial realities.

On the other hand, there is the submerged mass (The Invisible and Underutilized): Herein lies the enormous unexplored potential of the Digital Civic Space: other platforms, organizational tools, access to open data, government portals, and, fundamentally, knowledge about digital rights. The majority of actors, especially in rural areas, are unaware of the existence of this part of the "iceberg" or lack the skills to access it, limiting their participation to the visible tip.

STRENGTHENING PROPOSALS

It is also worth including here some elements proposed by the organizations that strengthen the Digital Civic Space and function as proposals. These solutions were identified primarily in the co-creation setting, where new interpretations and analyses emerged. This not only allowed for the articulation of diverse needs but also for the prioritization of aspects that could be the root of both the challenges and the potential solutions in the territories. Thus, key elements were identified that are important to strengthen within the Digital Civic Space, since doing so could resolve many of the identified problems. These elements are:

Inclusion: A civic and digital space must be inclusive, not only through differentiated practices, but through its openness to diverse communities, languages, knowledge systems, and agents. Inclusion is presented here as a fundamental aspect upon which actions must be built. Once established, these actions will allow for the elimination of access barriers for many communities.

Infrastructure Improvement: This is one of the elements most frequently identified as necessary to bring the internet to all territories; however, it is seen as largely unattainable or as a responsibility that depends entirely on the State. Despite this, in the co-creation sessions, the urgent need arose for Civil Society Actors to generate actions to advocate for regulations that effectively guarantee investment in technological infrastructure by national and local governments. Likewise, it is proposed to change the perspective within communities that technology investment is secondary to the guarantee of other rights, so that it is considered a first-order necessity, just like education or health.

Strengthening of Organizations: In the conversations held, it is clear that improving infrastructure and guaranteeing internet access do not by themselves ensure access to the Digital Civic Space. Therefore, it is evident that if the collectives and organizations in each territory are not strengthened in parallel, the digital space alone will not enable community participation. In this regard, Hivos's partner organizations comment that part of their experiences represents an effort to strengthen collectives in the territories, especially in the most vulnerable parts of the country.

Technological Appropriation: Strengthening the Digital Civic Space cannot be reduced to simply "giving everyone internet." The proposal focuses on finding appropriate technological solutions adapted to each territory, which implies a focus on the community's appropriation of technology. It is significant that at this point, a proposal is made to exclude private telephone operators as central actors, showing a distrust in market-based solutions and calling for the participation of the State and experts.

A New Conception of the Territories: Based on a comprehensive analysis of the documents and interviews, the digital civic space in Colombia can be depicted as a stratified ecosystem on fractured ground, surrounded by an atmosphere of risk and resilience. This view complicates the simple territorial map of zones with and without connectivity. It is not a flat and open network, but a vertical and unequal structure.

The base of this new cartography is an irregular terrain, full of deep cracks and hard-to-reach areas. Located on it, on one hand, are solid and connected zones corresponding to large urban centers like Bogotá D.C., Medellín, and Cali. Here the terrain is stable, with access to fiber optics and multiple devices, which facilitates a more robust digital participation.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE STRATEGY

With all the above, the commitment to building a strategy that strengthens the digital civic space in the country, and through it, the organizations and civil society actors in the territory, was the next step. This results in a call to translate the findings from the previous stage into actions that respond to the previously identified needs. The premise with which the consulting team approaches this point is to translate the landscape described by the organizations into strategic lines of action. For each finding, especially the "limiting aspects" and "threats," a strategic objective and concrete actions were formulated to allow Civil Society Actors to strengthen their capacities.

This exercise sought to address threats, capitalize on identified strengths, and enhance elements such as "Social Cohesion," "Community Knowledge," "Digital Activism," and the ability to "Communicate the Good within the Territory," thereby ensuring the strategy would reinforce these resilient characteristics.

The strategy also responds to the need to propose clear pathways for addressing aspects identified as "absent," such as the enforceability of "Digital Rights" and the promotion of "Digital Inclusion."

To achieve the above, a strategy was designed to transform each identified challenge into an opportunity for intervention and each strength into a lever for change. From there, objectives and strategic lines for its implementation were drawn up, which are presented below.

Country
Strategy

General Objective of the Strategy

To consolidate a Digital Civic Space in Colombia that is inclusive, safe, and resilient, where Civil Society Actors—especially those from historically marginalized communities—can fully exercise their rights, strengthen their capacities, and expand their influence.

Proposed Strategic Lines of Action

Strategies for Digital Participation

Capacity Building
To improve digital skills for broader participation.
Secure Digital Environments

Secure Digital Environments
To ensure security and resilience in digital spaces.

Inclusion and Narratives
To promote equitable participation and personal narratives.

Policy Advocacy
To advocate for policies that reduce structural gaps.

Made with Napkin

Strategic Line 1: Strengthening Digital Capacities and Knowledge with a Differential Approach

This line directly responds to the lack of education about the digital world, to disinformation, and to the need to articulate the communities' own knowledge with technological tools. It seeks to transform the perception of the Digital Civic Space from a space of risk to one of opportunity.

Specific Objective 1.1: To increase digital literacy and critical thinking among Civil Society Actors to navigate the Digital Civic Space safely and consciously, combating disinformation.

Actions:

- Design and implement a "Training of Trainers (ToT) Program" in digital communication, security, and rights, adapted to territorial contexts.
- Create and distribute practical guides and manuals (in low-data formats such as PDF and audio) on topics like: information verification (fact-checking), identifying false news, and understanding social media algorithms.
- Launch awareness campaigns about the risks of disinformation and its impact on social cohesion.

Specific Objective 1.2: To promote knowledge and appropriation of digital rights and self-protection mechanisms.

Actions:

- Develop workshops on the legal framework for digital rights in Colombia, online freedom of expression, and personal data protection.
- Create a "Digital Rights First-Aid Kit": an easily accessible resource with reporting channels and legal support contacts in case of violations.
- Foster intergenerational and intercultural dialogues that translate "community knowledge" into practices of care and protection in the digital environment.

Strategic Line 2: Creating Secure Digital Environments and Fostering Organizational Resilience

This line addresses direct threats such as violence, censorship, cyberattacks, and persecution. Its purpose is to equip Civil Society Actors with concrete tools to

prevent, mitigate, and respond to attacks, in line with the objective of strengthening their organizational capacity.

Specific Objective 2.1: To improve the digital security infrastructure of at-risk organizations and leaders.

Actions:

- Conduct digital vulnerability assessments for the partner organizations of the CDA project.
- Implement a technical support program for the installation of security software, the use of encrypted communications, and best practices for managing passwords and sensitive information.
- Create a rapid response fund for digital emergencies (e.g., to recover a hacked account or mitigate a denial-of-service attack).

Specific Objective 2.2: To strengthen support and solidarity networks for collective protection.

Actions:

- Establish a "Care and Early Warning Network" among Civil Society Actors to monitor threats and share information securely.
- Design and disseminate joint action protocols for responding to coordinated attacks, stigmatization campaigns, or censorship.
- Promote strategic alliances with national and international organizations specializing in the protection of defenders and press freedom.

Strategic Line 3: Fostering Inclusion, Equitable Participation, and Own Narratives

This line seeks to counteract territorial inequality, the centralization of debates, and cultural barriers. Its purpose is for the Digital Civic Space to reflect the country's

diversity and become a platform to amplify the voices that have been historically silenced.

Specific Objective 3.1: To amplify the voices and narratives of rural, ethnic, and sexually and gender-diverse communities in the Digital Civic Space.

Actions:

- Create a "Competitive Fund for Content Production with Identity" to finance communication projects (podcasts, short documentaries, blogs, etc.) that aim to "communicate the good within the territory."
- Develop alternative digital dialogue platforms or spaces (not dependent on commercial social media) that connect actors from different regions to debate topics of national interest from a local perspective.
- Promote the use of low-bandwidth technologies (such as online radio or WhatsApp newsletters) to overcome infrastructure barriers.
- Specific Objective 3.2: To promote the creation of multi-stakeholder coalitions for collective action and advocacy.

Key Actions:

- Facilitate in-person and virtual meetings between grassroots organizations, alternative media, academia, and second-level NGOs to build common advocacy agendas.
- Map and showcase existing community and popular communication initiatives to strengthen their coordination and sustainability.
- Build bridges between regional alternative media and media outlets with a national reach to increase the impact of their investigations and reports.

Strategic Line 4: Policy and Public Advocacy for the Reduction of Structural Gaps

Recognizing that many limitations (lack of infrastructure, regulation, impunity) require systemic changes, this cross-cutting line seeks to use the knowledge generated by the project to influence public policy and public opinion.

Specific Objective 4.1: To generate and position evidence on the state of the Digital Civic Space to inform public debate and decision-making.

Key Actions:

- Systematize the project's findings into thematic reports and briefs aimed at decision-makers, international cooperation agencies, and academia.
- Create an "Observatory of the Digital Civic Space" to monitor and periodically publish data on threats, the digital divide, and online violence.
- Organize public forums and debates to present the findings and promote a national dialogue on the need to guarantee a free, open, secure, and inclusive internet.

Specific Objective 4.2: To influence the legislative and regulatory agenda to ensure the protection of the Digital Civic Space.

Key Actions:

- Coordinate with members of Congress and State entities (such as the Ministry of ICT) to present proposals that seek to close the digital divide with a rights-based approach.
- Participate in public hearings and working groups on platform regulation, freedom of expression, and the fight against disinformation.
- Build a long-term advocacy agenda, in coalition with other civil society networks and platforms, to ensure the sustainability of these efforts.

PROFILES OF HIVOS'S PARTNERS IN COLOMBIA

NoísRadio[8]

Noís radio

We work with grassroots communities to disseminate and preserve collective memory. We foster the construction of networks and spaces for participation that contribute to social transformation and the recognition of cultural and territorial diversities.

We understand communication as the practices that allow for the building of the social fabric, which are mediated not only by technological devices and the discourses and logic of mass media, but by the social and cultural dynamics through which individuals act within their territory.

We have focused on designing, implementing, and supporting programs, research, and activities that promote free and sustainable community communication, especially through the practice of radio. Specifically, we work with grassroots communities that defend their own and community-based forms of communication, supported by sustainable networks that strengthen dissemination, memory, the defense of territories, and community life. As a result, the communities with which we have built relationships imagine and create free, open, and participatory communication spaces, both online and offline, to tell and preserve the memory, stories, and forms of progress unique to their territories.

For several years, we have been developing awareness projects on self-care and collective care with rural communities in southwestern Colombia, seeking to contribute information, tools, and resources for protection and security in digital, physical, and psychosocial spaces.

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[8] Profile shared by the representatives of NOÍS Radio during the coordination and co-creation

The invitation from Hivos to be part of the CDA project corresponds to a joining of wills and efforts from various institutions and organizations, which we believe is necessary to address the urgent need to strengthen the participation of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in the digital civic space in Colombia.

Also key for our organization is the possibility of strengthening and reinforcing our experience through the connection with organizations that are carrying out crucial work in Latin America, such as Hivos.

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FUNDACIÓN SIDOC[9]

Fundación Sidoc is an organization with 19 years of experience in designing and executing social projects in vulnerable territories and communities, promoting holistic development, the reconstruction of the social fabric, and peacebuilding. We work on the prevention and intervention of violence from a restorative and territorial approach, creating educational, productive, and citizen participation opportunities while also generating spaces for psychosocial stabilization. Our work focuses on creating and strengthening protective environments, guaranteeing human rights and social inclusion.

Fundación Sidoc is characterized by its comprehensive and long-term approach to transforming territories affected by exclusion and violence. Through programs and projects with a multidimensional methodology that includes educational, cultural, sports, employability, and community strengthening elements, the Foundation drives the creation of legal opportunities, the development of life and work skills, and the

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[9] Profile shared by the representatives of the SIDOC Foundation during the coordination and co-creation session.

construction of protective environments. All of this is carried out in coordination with public, private, and community actors, with a commitment to peace.

We share the commitment to defending civic space, strengthening the leadership of ethnic communities, and transforming realities based on the voices and capacities of the territories. This alliance allows us to enhance our actions in violence prevention, citizen participation, and peacebuilding by promoting restorative, inclusive, and sustainable processes that foster the leadership of historically excluded communities.

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Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/FundaSidoc

X (Twitter): https://x.com/sidocfundacion

CAMBIO SOSTENIBLE

"Cambio Sostenible emerged in 2018 from the will of a group of young professionals who intended to place their skills at the service of the Colombian civic space with activities that promote sustainable development for social equity in Colombia. In the early years of the group, various actions were developed with the support of local funds; on November 9, 2020, Corporación Cambio Sostenible was legally constituted as a non-profit entity.

Our vocation and social contribution have led to alliances with academia, public entities, civil society, and international cooperation. With their support, we have been able to impact more than 6,265 people and 50 social organizations throughout the national territory, through training projects, community spaces, and awareness campaigns that strengthen citizen participation in our areas of intervention, thereby generating civic networks capable of responding to common problems, all driven by youth from the community."[10]

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[10] Source: https://cambiosostenible.org/nuestra-historia/