

Navigating policy spaces:

Civil society and policy influence
in Indonesia and the Philippines



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Executive Summary

This paper examines the dynamics of what we call ‘policy spaces’ in the Philippines and Indonesia, shedding light **on how the two countries’ civil society organisations (CSOs) interact with their governments to influence policymaking processes and outcomes**. We explored these dynamics through original research surveys and focus groups in these two countries, combined with case studies, to inform development partners of a set of critical factors to prioritise when designing and supporting civil society engagement in, and influence over, public policy.

We use ‘policy spaces’ here to refer to arenas where civil society engages with government to influence public policy. **Policy spaces comprise formal, legally mandated structures and informal, flexible, relationship-based mechanisms that coexist and often – but not always – complement each other**. In that sense, the formal and informal dimensions of policy influence do not exist in a binary relationship but often overlap. They also vary significantly in quality and accessibility, and often in composition.

Indonesia and the Philippines are excellent case studies for examining these dynamics. Both have strong, vibrant, and diverse civic spaces, and civil society plays an important role in democracy and development. Both countries also have traditions of participatory governance in which civil society frequently interacts with government during the policymaking process.

Our research shows that CSOs often do not achieve their ambitions to influence policy and decision-making for a combination of reasons at the point of interaction between civil society and government. Even well-established formal policy spaces for civil society, such as participatory local governance planning forums and public consultations, often fail to deliver meaningful change because of these dynamics and because local elites and top-down priorities dominate, overshadowing contributions from CSOs, particularly at a local level. CSOs often work around this by pursuing informal avenues that sometimes prove more effective for CSOs to set agendas productively and to influence policy formulation and implementation.

The political economy of these dynamics is complex, and the pathways to meaningful policy influence are often a combination of both formal and informal routes. **Development partners can play a role in catalysing and guiding the systemic changes needed** to bolster civil society engagement with governments when those dynamics are understood.

Effective action requires understanding the political economy of civil society engagement in governance in each local context, such as those presented in this report for the Philippines and Indonesia. It also requires avoiding the assumption that participatory processes and policy dialogue are unalloyed goods.

Based on that understanding, development partners could direct their efforts toward:

- **Strengthening civil society’s ability to substantively contribute to formal and informal policy spaces:** Where it can be ascertained that a government is interested in taking participatory processes seriously, and not tokenistically, development partners should encourage governments to enhance the inclusivity and accountability of formal policy spaces. Within formal and informal policy spaces, development partners should aim to ensure that the dialogue that takes place within them is meaningful, while supporting CSOs to engage effectively.
- **Supporting civil society to think and work politically:** Support could involve strengthening CSO skills in political economy analysis, negotiation, facilitation, policy influence, and partnership brokering to navigate formal and informal spaces more effectively. This might involve supporting CSOs in building strategic relationships with reform-minded government actors to influence policy agendas and foster long-term systemic change.
- **Promoting and facilitating critical collaboration across a range of actors:** Actions should foster alliances between CSOs, governments, and the private sector to build coalitions that address shared goals, including on more controversial issues. This should take place in a way that preserves civil society’s independence and critical voice, which is crucial in contexts experiencing democratic stagnation or decline.

With declining funding for international development cooperation, it is more important than ever for development partners to use their funds most effectively to stem that tide. There continues to be significant potential to enhance civil society engagement and effectiveness through participatory governance in the Philippines and Indonesia. Doing so requires astute support that is vital for advancing democratic resilience, achieving sustainable development in Southeast Asia, and addressing the complex challenges of development in difficult times.

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Introduction

Civil society engagement in policymaking is essential to democratic governance because it strengthens legitimacy, accountability, responsiveness, and inclusivity. Civil society organizations (CSOs) provide voice to diverse constituencies, especially those often underrepresented in formal political processes – such as women, youth, minorities, Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, and people living in poverty. Participation in policymaking enables CSOs to ensure that policies reflect a broader spectrum of public interests, not just elite or partisan views. CSOs can act as watchdogs, monitoring the behaviour of public institutions and holding governments accountable for decisions and outcomes, while, through tools like budget tracking, policy audits, and citizen report cards, CSOs scrutinize public actions and reduce corruption or abuse of power. Their presence in policymaking spaces creates horizontal accountability beyond elections, helping close the gap between elections and everyday governance, and their engagement can enhance the legitimacy of decisions, making policies based on them more acceptable and durable.

That is the theory. While that theory is rooted in ideals of democratic governance, the practice reveals a much more complex, often politicized and uneven reality – in all democratic contexts. In many settings, spaces for engagement are designed and controlled by the state. Consultations are often tokenistic or selectively inclusive, privileging NGOs aligned with government views. Marginal voices (grassroots, informal movements, radical critics) tend to be excluded in favour of more ‘professionalized’ NGOs – civil society is rarely a level playing field. At the same time, civil society itself is not immune to elite capture, patronage networks, or partisan affiliation: some CSOs serve narrow political, ethnic, or commercial interests, while gender, class, caste, and racial inequalities are reproduced within civil society, limiting who speaks and who is heard. Community-based or rural organizations may lack the capacity, language, or access to engage effectively with policymakers or on technical topics.

Acknowledging those issues does not mean civil society’s role in policymaking should be dismissed – quite the opposite. It is the first step towards a more realistic and political theory of civil society engagement. It recognises that policy engagement is shaped by power, negotiation, and contestation, not just norms of deliberation, and that civil society – anywhere – is plural, uneven, and political – not a monolithic force for good.

We take the view, therefore, that spaces for engagement must be understood not only in terms of their presence or existence but in terms of the power dynamics that manifest within them, their openness, inclusiveness, and influence. As such – with an understanding of the political economy of policy spaces – they can be better supported by external development partners.

Policy spaces in Indonesia and the Philippines

Despite being two of Southeast Asia’s strongest democracies, the Philippines and Indonesia have faced significant challenges to their democratic development over the past several years. Authoritarian tendencies at the national level have undermined democratic institutions and set the tone for how elected and non-elected officials at all levels of government make policy. This in turn affects how citizens and civil society organisations respond to policy issues, how evidence is used in policymaking, which policies are prioritised and resourced, and how governments engage with non-government actors – both civil society and the private sector – in decision-making processes.

Numerous factors affect the quality of those processes, from formal rules that govern participatory governance across national and subnational levels, to informal norms and practices that structure ‘how things are actually done’ as government agencies and their non-government counterparts interact. This paper examines the complexity of these participatory policymaking practices and sheds light on how and where civil society constructively engages with government to influence policy.

To understand the situation in the Philippines and Indonesia, it is necessary to recall significant events of the past two decades in each country. From 2016 to 2022, the Philippines, under President Rodrigo Duterte, experienced the rise of authoritarian populism, the weakening of democratic institutions, challenges to civil liberties, and the erosion of democratic norms. The election of ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr to the presidency in 2022 brought some positive changes. Despite his similarities to Duterte – a populist approach and reliance on political dynasty – Marcos Jr adopted a more diplomatic and measured tone regarding critics and international bodies.¹

1 Richard Javad Heydarian, “Marcos’ Appointments Risk Ructions with the Dutertes,” *Asia Times*, July 13, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/07/marcos-appointments-risk-ructions-with-the-dutertes/>; Joshua Kurlantzick, “Marcos Jr. Tries to Escape Duterte’s Legacy—Can He Be Trusted?” *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Blog*, October 10, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/marcos-jr-tries-escape-dutertes-legacy-can-he-be-trusted>

He does not target the press in the same way Duterte did. His stance on law and order is less aggressive, and he has stepped back from the overt use of state violence. While his administration initially lagged in actively pursuing accountability for his predecessor's abuses of power, in early 2025, Marcos Jr complied with an International Criminal Court warrant against Duterte and sent him to the Hague for trial.² In this way and others, Marcos Jr has made efforts to re-engage with international organisations and to rebuild the Philippines' standing in the global democratic community.³

Indonesia's democracy has taken several steps in the opposite direction since 2014. One of the more concerning trends was the consolidation of executive power under President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) from 2014 to 2024. Criticisms arose that his administration weakened checks and balances, particularly regarding the judiciary and parliament.⁴ For this reason, Indonesia's development over the past five years can be seen as a difficult balance between stability and growing authoritarian tendencies. There has been a notable shrinking of civic spaces, a weakening of anticorruption mechanisms, and the growing influence of conservative Islamic groups. However, Indonesia's 82 percent voter turnout for the 2024 election of President Prabowo Subianto highlighted the important role of the country's youth in shaping future political direction and the nation's commitment to electoral processes and democratic participation.⁵

2 Presidential Communications Office, "PBBM: Duterte's arrest PH commitment to Interpol." March 11, 2025, https://pco.gov.ph/news_releases/pbbm-dutertes-arrest-ph-commitment-to-interpol/

3 Lucio Blanco Pitlo III, "Marcos Jr. Is Steering the Philippines Toward a Foreign Policy Reset," *The Diplomat*, June 28, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/marcos-jr-is-steering-the-philippines-towards-a-foreign-policy-reset/>

4 Zachary Abuza, "The Impact of a Fractured Jokowi-Prabowo Coalition," *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/the-impact-of-a-fractured-jokowi-prabowo-coalition/>; Anwar Ibrahim, "Power Consolidation and Reorganisation a la Jokowi," *Asia News Network*, October 5, 2024, <https://asianews.network/power-consolidation-and-reorganisation-a-la-jokowi/>; Anwar Ibrahim, "Indonesia: Power Consolidation a la Jokowi," *The Star*, September 1, 2024, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/focus/2024/09/01/indonesia-power-consolidation--la-jokowi>

5 Tanya Hollstein, "Five things you need to know about Indonesia's 2024 elections", WFD blog, April 23, 2024, <https://www.wfd.org/commentary/five-things-you-need-know-about-indonesias-2024-elections>

What are policy spaces?

We define ‘policy spaces’ as the areas where non-government actors – civil society organizations and private sector businesses – directly engage with government officials to influence the substance and quality of public policies and their implementation. We see policy spaces as a subset of the broader civic space in which they are situated.⁶ In policy spaces, CSOs serve as an intermediary between citizens and the state. They legitimate the policymaking process, enable participation and inclusivity, promote responsiveness and social cohesion, and foster innovation and adaptability.⁷ Sometimes they also provide a counterbalance to the influence of private sector interests.

This paper outlines the findings of a mixed-methods study on ‘policy spaces’ that TAF conducted in the Philippines and Indonesia in 2023 and 2024.⁸ A survey captured CSO perspectives on their ability to engage and collaborate with governments and influence local and national policymaking. Research partners in the Philippines and Indonesia used the survey findings to investigate issues and, in the case of Indonesia, to develop case studies. The research findings provide insights for development partners to understand the dynamics of policy spaces to support more inclusive and participatory governance. Such support can strengthen CSO effectiveness within policy spaces, sharpening one tool among several through which greater democratic resilience can be pursued and achieved.⁹

6 The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines civic space as the “set of legal, policy, institutional and practical conditions necessary for people and groups to access information, express themselves, associate, organise and participate” in the political, social, and cultural life of their societies.

7 In this paper, civil society refers to a broad range of non-government actors, including CSOs, non-government organisations, independent media, community- and faith-based groups, think tanks, academia, professional associations, among others.

8 This research was carried out under the DFAT-TAF Strategic Partnership workstream on Democratic Resilience. Building on its research on civic spaces in South and Southeast Asia since 2019, The Asia Foundation (TAF) in 2023 developed a mix-methods research approach to understand the dynamics of policy spaces. The present research is based on a survey of 258 CSOs (140 in the Philippines and 118 in Indonesia), key informant interviews, focus groups, and the development of case studies.

9 In its simplest terms, democratic resilience can be understood as the ability of democratic systems to reproduce themselves by withstanding, adapting to, and recovering from challenges and threats while maintaining their core principles and institutions. See: Nancy Bermeo, *On Democratic Backsliding*, *Journal of Democracy*, 2016.

Policy spaces are shaped by varying levels of civic engagement and participatory governance across and within countries, constantly evolving in response to changing political landscapes. Some countries have well-established governance systems with strong rule of law, accountability mechanisms, and transparent processes, while others struggle with widespread corruption, lack of transparency, and weak institutions, and many fall somewhere in between.

In the Philippines and Indonesia, as elsewhere, civil society actors aim to make their voices and those of their constituents heard in local and national governance processes. CSOs deploy tactics such as mobilizing collective action to address specific issues, getting petitions signed, enrolling constituents in political parties, raising public awareness and interest, using legal instruments such as public interest litigation, building social movements and protests, and volunteering time. They seek to influence policy, from agenda setting to implementation and evaluation. Their actual impact appears to rest on several factors, including:

- The overarching relationship between civil society and government as set through formal legislative frameworks for association and expression and the levels of trust between the two.
- The existing formal mechanisms for participatory policymaking and the extent to which those provide space for meaningful dialogue.
- The various informal norms and practices around how different types of CSOs engage with different government agencies.
- The strength of civic space ecosystems, that is, the connections between CSOs, levels of trust and collaboration between organizations, and abilities to build effective coalitions and collective actions.
- The ability of government agencies and CSOs to engage in policymaking and implementation processes.

Formal and informal policy spaces

Policy spaces have formal and informal entry points for civil society to influence policy.¹⁰ Most organizations we surveyed said they work directly with government on policymaking in either formal or informal spaces (Figure 1), and most also felt the level of engagement has continued to grow, year on year.

Formal entry points for influence are institutionalised and legally mandated processes that provide official channels through which citizens or CSOs, non-government organisations (NGOs), and others can participate in different aspects of policymaking. They often follow defined procedures with clear timelines, guidelines, and outcomes. Because they are mandated, they happen at set intervals and take forms such as public hearings for legislative processes, annual budget consultations, or periodic development planning meetings. They might include permanent or semi-permanent advisory bodies, such as local development councils in the Philippines, or other regulatory bodies or councils set up to advise on such topics as health, education, or environmental management.

Figure 1: Proportion of CSOs who engage directly with government to influence policy.



¹⁰ We are not discussing compulsory CSO engagement with state agencies, such as to register and have their work or activities approved.

Formal policy spaces may provide a structure for inclusive participation and are often well-documented, strengthening the legitimacy of the decisions and ensuring accountability. Yet, they do not guarantee effective and meaningful CSO engagement. Sometimes they are designed to create the appearance of participation without allowing real influence on outcomes, which reduces CSO impact. Their quality varies significantly across different parts of a country and at different levels of government.

In contrast, informal policy space entry points typically have no legal basis and are often unofficial, flexible avenues for CSO or NGO engagement. Structured and mediated by social and cultural norms, they occur through ad hoc, relationship-based, or network-driven mechanisms, such as personal contacts, advocacy networks, or opportunistic engagement in response to specific events or issues. Their degree of local legitimacy and patronage varies, not least because they sometimes serve as a revolving door between civil society and government actors. Engagement tends toward direct lobbying, behind-the-scenes negotiations, closed-door decision-making, or informal consultations. Notably, informal policy spaces do not follow strict rules or timelines and vary widely based on context and relationships. This makes them less predictable but sometimes more flexible than formal policy spaces.

Importantly, *CSOs can initiate their own involvement in policymaking* through informal policy space entry points, which sometimes means that civil society can influence policy agendas. That said, national and local informal policy spaces often favour well-connected or influential CSOs and individuals who enjoy strong relationships with key government officials and have better access to power structures. This leads to concerns about the exclusion of less powerful groups and individuals, especially since informal policy spaces sometimes lack transparency, reducing their potential for accountability.

Both formal and informal policy spaces have value. The effective use of either by CSOs depends on the context, capacity of civil society, nature of the political environment, and the government's willingness to genuinely engage with CSOs. Ideally, a combination of formal and informal policy spaces provides multiple avenues for CSOs to influence policy.

Maintaining a critical distance

Regarding civil society engagement with government, development partners sometimes assume that building productive relationships between CSOs and the state to achieve policy reforms will always lead to better outcomes for constituents. Thus, encouraging civil society to engage in policy dialogue to influence reform has become increasingly popular over the past decade. Greater collaboration between sometimes opposing actors tends to be seen as an unalloyed good, in which the benefits of working towards shared goals are promoted in contrast to more adversarial methods like criticism, protests, or civil disobedience.

Although this kind of constructive engagement sounds good and can lead to substantive results under favourable conditions – such as when there is support from senior policymakers – policy dialogue can have limitations. By its nature, it tends to work best on less controversial issues that broadly align with government interests and proves less effective on more contentious issues that challenge the system. Furthermore, the assumption that dialogue should be constructive within policy spaces sends an implicit message with its either/or framing that more adversarial approaches are necessarily counter-productive.

In practice, activists often combine collaborative with adversarial approaches because they recognize that some government actors may support collaboration for change, while others do not. Depending on the issue or ask, CSOs in the Philippines and Indonesia often find it useful – yet challenging – to walk this fine line: to collaborate with inside reformers while maintaining a certain autonomy and questioning other policy settings of the same government.¹¹

¹¹ Jonathan Fox, *Accountability Keywords*, Working Paper No. 11 (Accountability Research Center, January 2022), <https://accountabilityresearch.org/accountability-keywords/>

Policy Spaces in the Philippines

Civic spaces in the Philippines are often described as among the ‘most vibrant and advanced in the world’.¹² The country has the largest number of NGOs per capita in Asia and was home to 378,500 CSOs as of 2021.¹³ Civil society has played a vital role in the country’s democratisation and development,¹⁴ frequently combining traditional advocacy with basic service provision, filling gaps where government capacity is limited and under-resourced.

A large per capita number of CSOs and NGOs does not necessarily translate into significant influence on policy. While the Philippines promotes and protects the rights of its citizens through various laws and policies created to ensure participatory governance, our research found that actual CSO participation and influence is constrained at every level of government by a weak or obstructive legal environment, tokenistic participation, the need to constantly rebuild relationships with officials, and various capability gaps within CSOs.

Formal policy space entry points

The Philippines’ legal framework for participatory policymaking was originally designed to be conducive for Filipinos to participate in governance individually or collectively through CSOs. The 1987 Constitution established a representative democracy and an obligation to foster the non-government sector.

Thus, **at the national, regional, and local levels**, legislation such as the Republic Act (RA) 7160 requires all government agencies and offices to conduct periodic consultations with relevant local government units and CSOs before project or program implementation. In addition, various central government agencies have mandated CSO representation in their decision-making bodies, such as the

¹² Foundation for Media Alternatives. “Philippines.” *Global Information Society Watch*. Accessed September 16, 2025. <https://www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/civil-society-participation/philippines>

¹³ Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO). “2021 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: The Philippines (Annex A).” *CODE-NGO*. Accessed September 16, 2025. https://code-ngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Annex-A-_CSOSI-2021-The-Philippines.pdf

¹⁴ Asian Development Bank. *Civil Society Brief: The Philippines*, Manila: Asian Development Bank, [2023], <https://dx.doi.org/10.22617/BRF230343>

Department of Social Welfare and Development's National Advisory Committee. Under the General Appropriations Act, CSOs can propose projects for funding in the national budget, and the Government Procurement Reform Act (RA 9184) allows CSOs to monitor government bidding and procurement processes. The Regional Development Council and local councils also include CSOs in coordinating development planning and policymaking.

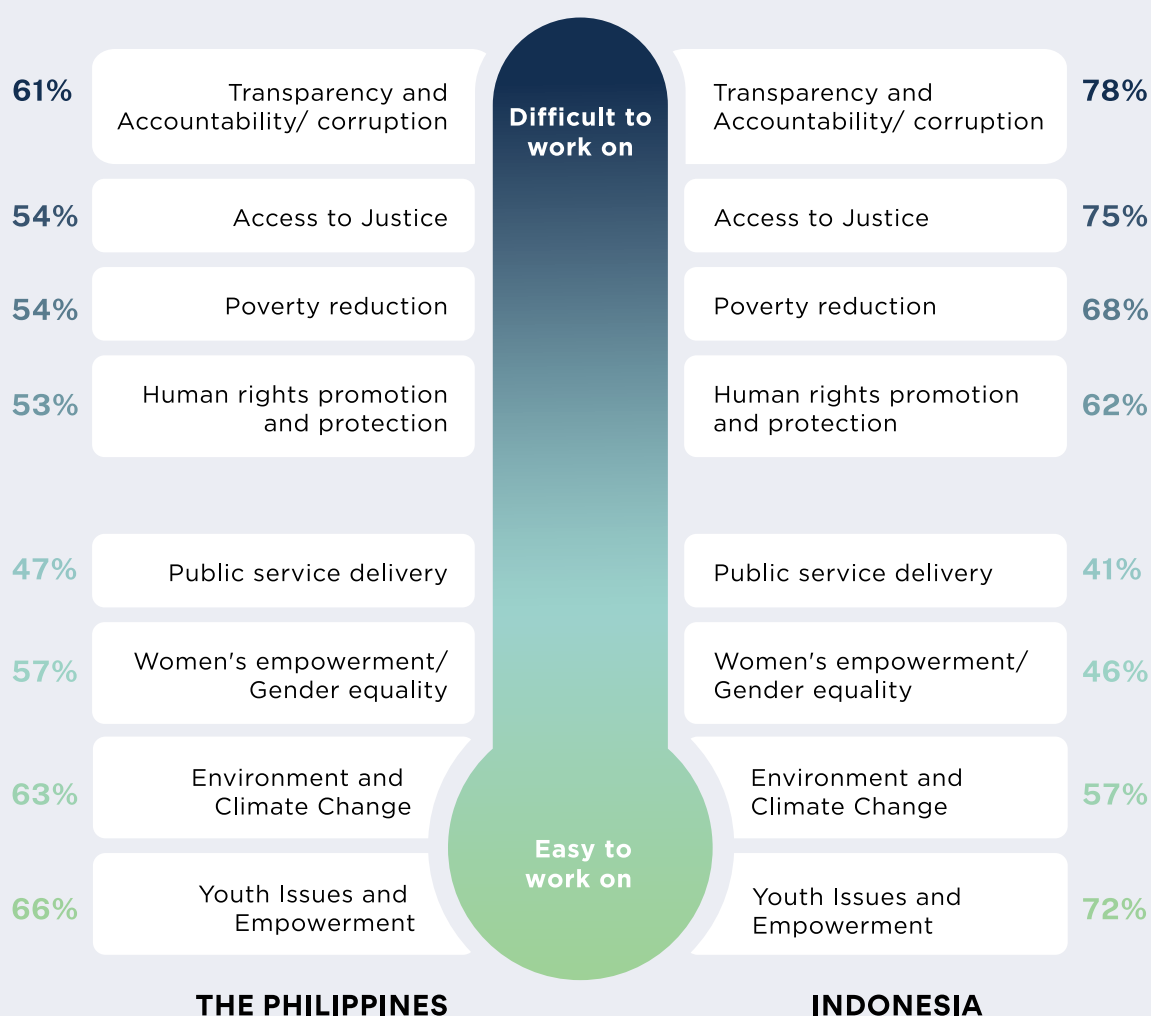
That said, however open these formal policy spaces appear, only registered and officially accredited CSOs can legally deal with government agencies and local government units or access government funding, even though no law requires that CSOs follow such formalities. Thus, to participate in Filipino participatory processes at all levels, CSOs must obtain accreditation from the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), a process rife with stringent and costly requirements. In addition, officialised CSOs may participate as members of local special bodies and legislative standing committees, where they possess voting rights on topics such as development planning, health, education, and public safety, as outlined by the Local Government Code and circulars from the Department of the Interior and Local Government. Non-selected CSOs can only attend meetings as observers without voting rights.

Quality of formal policy spaces

In focus groups and interviews, Filipino CSOs identified several constraints that limited their involvement and influence in formal policy spaces and participatory processes in the Philippines. **At the national level**, they suggested that participation is often tokenistic: CSOs are invited merely for compliance reasons, monitoring processes tend to allow only insignificant CSO involvement, and frequent turnover of elected officials often results in a loss of key advocacy relationships. **At the regional level**, CSOs expressed a greater sense of distrust towards participatory processes than at the national level, causing many to refrain from participation at all. Other barriers to participation included insufficient personnel, competing priorities between service delivery obligations and governance participation, and committee overload when the same CSO is elected to multiple committees simultaneously. **At the local government level**, CSOs said that a lack of experience, technical and other expertise, and inability to attend in-person meetings limited their ability to interact with local legislators meaningfully and substantively contribute to policymaking processes. They also found registration processes daunting, and the preferences of local officials appear to have a greater impact at the local level, with reform- and open-minded officials encouraging CSO participation, while others used their power to stifle engagement.

Importantly, Filipino (and Indonesian) CSOs highlighted the fact that engagement at all levels is usually much easier when the issue pursued aligns with the government’s agenda or is not politically sensitive: 81 percent of survey respondents agreed that it has become easier over the past few years to work on issues such as youth engagement and empowerment, environment and climate change, women’s empowerment, gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, and public service delivery comprising basic health and education, while issues like transparency and corruption are increasingly more difficult to engage with (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Dimensions of ‘closing civic spaces’ ‘Over the past few years, what issues have become easier to work on and what issues have become more difficult?’



Quality of informal policy spaces

When asked to consider how much impact they see themselves having on policymaking in informal policy spaces, Filipino CSOs said they have limited impact at all government levels. At the national and regional levels, CSOs that have been blacklisted or red-tagged, that is, labelled as communists, subversives, or terrorists regardless of their actual political beliefs or affiliations, often find it difficult to access government policy spaces of any type, informal or formal, without recourse. At the regional level, they noted that sometimes political party alliances create barriers and lead to biased treatment by government officials.¹⁵ CSOs working at the local government level tend to have funding challenges so significant that they find it difficult to participate in any policy spaces, informal or formal.

Implications of government funding

In the Philippines, a government agency may allocate financial resources to a CSO if the CSO's operational objectives and community benefits align. According to our survey, 51 percent of respondents engage with some level of government to secure funding (rather than to influence policy). Governments fund CSOs for two purposes: (1) to act as implementing partners for a particular government program or project, and (2) to pay for the delivery of specific government-aligned services that CSOs provide, such as public health, education, social justice, or environmental protection.

Dependence on government funds can constrain CSO involvement and limit more critical collaboration. Smaller CSOs, in particular, tend to engage the government for funding, which compels them to align their missions with governmental priorities, potentially compromising their independence. Reliance on government funding can also narrow CSOs' operational focus, leading them to prioritise government-favoured policies over more contentious agendas and diminishing their appetite to pursue independent advocacy and critical engagement. Essential advocacy activities, like research and public outreach, may also be underfunded or neglected, restricting a CSO's ability to analyse policies or mobilize citizens.

¹⁵ The focus group participants who belong to a political party different from that of government officials indicated that several officials were unfriendly to them because of their political affiliations. Moreover, some government officials form their own CSOs or are biased toward certain organisations, especially those from the private sector.

Competing with the private sector

Formal policy spaces in the Philippines do not distinguish between CSOs and private sector companies or organisations: both are considered non-government actors. This has a significant impact on CSOs' level of access to accreditation, which varies at different levels of government. For instance, the NEDA accreditation requirements are more favourable to the business sector; thus, more business organisations than CSOs register. Similarly, CSOs, the private sector, experts, and other non-government groups are lumped together as Private Sector Organisations by the Regional Development Council.

Our research suggests that the lumping together of the CSOs and more numerous or well-connected businesses as voting civil society sector representatives in the regional, provincial, and local development councils, which serve as the clearing houses for big-ticket projects and investments, has led to business interests crowding out CSOs as industry representation in decision-making bodies overshadows CSO inputs. In informal policy spaces, CSOs said it was frequently a challenge to compete with well-funded industry lobbyists.¹⁶

Figure 3: Competition for Policy Space: Civil Society (CSOs) and Private Sector



¹⁶ Noted as an example during and FGD that when CSOs advocate for the ban on non-biodegradable packaging, they must often push against big plastic manufacturers.

Policy spaces in Indonesia

Civil society in Indonesia has been a pivotal force in the nation's political and social evolution, particularly since the fall of President Suharto in 1998.¹⁷ The post-Suharto 'Reformasi' era witnessed a surge in CSOs advocating for women's rights, freedom of information, interfaith dialogue, and anticorruption efforts. Their presence in local communities has been instrumental in promoting sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction while also serving as an important check on attempts by the executive to increase its power through unconstitutional means.¹⁸ However, in recent years, civil society has faced important challenges. For example, the 2017 Law on Mass Organisations introduced bureaucratic hurdles restricting CSO activities. Additionally, political dynamics and resource constraints have hindered CSO effectiveness and independence.¹⁹ While these challenges continue under the current Prabowo administration, CSO collaboration with all levels of government remains possible on issues where both civil society and the government share mutual interests.

Formal entry points

Formal policy spaces are well-established at all levels of government in Indonesia. They are grounded in laws and regulations like the Presidential Regulation on Public Participation in Governance, which institutionalizes CSO and citizens' input and participation in democratic governance, transparent policy formulation and development planning, particularly through 'Musrenbang' or Development Planning Forums.²⁰ The National Human Rights Commission provides a platform for CSOs to engage on human rights issues by submitting complaints, advocating for reforms,

17 Van Tuijl, Peter. "Indonesian Civil Society: Struggling to Survive." *Peace Policy*, March 20, 2019. <https://peacepolicy.nd.edu/2019/03/20/indonesian-civil-society-struggling-to-survive/>.

18 Yohanes Sulaiman, "Jokowi's Complex Legacy and the Future of Democracy in Indonesia," *Global Asia*, December 2023, https://www.globalasia.org/v18no4/feature/jokowis-complex-legacy-and-the-future-of-democracy-in-indonesia_yohanes-sulaiman

19 Miichi, Ken. "Democratization and the Changing Role of Civil Society in Indonesia." *Middle East Institute*, October 13, 2015. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/democratization-and-changing-role-civil-society-indonesia>.

20 We distinguish here between those engagements that are compulsory. For instance, when CSOs must engage with state agencies in compliance with regulations related to registration and operations. These are beyond the bounds of what we consider here to be 'policy spaces.'

and providing input into policy discussions. The 2014 Village Law (No. 6) requires village governments to involve citizens, including CSOs and marginalised groups, in decision-making processes through the Village Consultative Body. Furthermore, in recognition of the specific challenges women and marginalised groups face in registering their perspective in policymaking processes, several formal mechanisms specifically promote their inclusion.

Quality of formal spaces

Although Indonesia's formal policy spaces appear strong on paper, in practice, their final decisions often reflect top-down priorities, with grassroots contributions having minimal impact.²¹ Public involvement in *Musrenbang* can be symbolic or tokenistic, serving procedural requirements rather than fostering genuine consultation.²² Local elites sometimes dominate the *Musrenbang* process, marginalising vulnerable groups and skewing development priorities.²³ Community members and CSOs often lack the technical knowledge or resources to engage meaningfully in *Musrenbang*, particularly in rural and underserved areas.²⁴

Quality of informal spaces

Informal policy spaces in Indonesia often provide CSOs with a better environment in which to influence policy than formal spaces. CSOs tend to use informal mechanisms to influence national policies successfully. Approaches to policy influence stretch from external critique and advocacy to direct participation in decision-making and policymaking processes and combinations of both (critical collaboration). To directly impact policymaking, CSOs usually build working relations – when they do so – over many years and more often with

21 “Musrenbang as a Key Driver in Effective Participatory Budgeting.” *Good Governance Brief*, Volume 1, June 2007. United States Agency for International Development. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADQ129.pdf

22 Kim, Youngmi. “Deliberative Democracy in Action: The Case of Musrenbang in Bandung, Indonesia.” *Asian International Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2022): 113–135. https://brill.com/view/journals/aisr/23/1/article-p113_5.xml

23 Ahmad Rifai, Nina Asterina, and Rizqa Hidayani, *Improving the Transparency, Inclusivity and Impact of Participatory Budgeting in Indonesian Cities* (Making All Voices Count, 2016), <https://www.makingallvoicescount.org/publication/making-voices-count-improving-transparency-inclusivity-impact-participatory-budgeting-indonesian-cities/>

24 Ezi Hendri, Ninuk Purnaningsih, and Amiruddin Saleh, “Analisis Efektivitas Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan (Musrenbang) dalam Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah,” *Jurnal Komunikasi Pembangunan* 12 (July 2014), <https://media.neliti.com/media/publications/245630-analisis-efektivitas-musyawah-perencan-664e23af.pdf>

lower levels of government or less frequently solicited national institutions. For example, environmental groups like Walhi and Greenpeace Indonesia have worked for many years to pressure the government to address deforestation, presenting scientific data and analysis, working with reform-minded officials, and conducting local and international advocacy and public campaigns to highlight the environmental and economic consequences of forest loss in the country.²⁵ These efforts and CSO collaboration with international donors and the private sector helped secure a government commitment that ultimately led to a Forest Moratorium in 2011, a policy made permanent in 2019.²⁶

While not all sustained CSO efforts are successful, the following two case studies outline how Indonesian CSOs and coalitions can be effective in informing and shaping local policy by building long-term relationships and collaboration with government institutions, notably the Supreme Court judiciary and the Aceh Provincial Government, even while the CSOs maintained their critical distance.

Figure 4: Positive policy influence: Proportion of respondents answering yes to the question: In the past few years has your work led to a favorable decision or action of the government?



²⁵ Hans Nicholas Jong, “Indonesia Forest-Clearing Ban Is Made Permanent, but Labeled ‘Propaganda,’” *Mongabay*, August 8, 2019, <https://news.mongabay.com/2019/08/indonesia-forest-clearing-ban-is-made-permanent-but-labeled-propaganda/>

²⁶ World Resources Institute, “Indonesia’s Ambitious Forest Moratorium,” *World Resources Institute*, April 30, 2012, <https://www.wri.org/outcomes/indonesias-ambitious-forest-moratorium>; Greenpeace Southeast Asia, “Six Years of Moratorium: How Much of Indonesia’s Forests Are Protected?” *Greenpeace*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.greenpeace.org/southeastasia/press/684/six-years-of-moratorium-how-much-of-indonesias-forests-protected/>

Case study 1:

Institutionalizing environmental expertise in the Supreme Court

Over the past two decades, the Indonesian Center for Environmental Law (ICEL) has worked closely with Indonesia's Supreme Court to improve environmental legal protections. Founded in 1993, ICEL's mission is to address Indonesia's growing environmental challenges by promoting environmental justice, strengthening environmental laws, and raising public awareness and participation. In 2002, ICEL's first engagement supported drafting the Supreme Court regulations on mediation and class action lawsuits. From 2010, ICEL worked with the chief justice to convene working groups, such as the Environmental Judge Capacity Building Working Group, to develop a cadre of judges specializing in environmental issues in partnership with the Indonesian Ministry of the Environment. The head of the Supreme Court's Justice Education and Training Centre noted that through the ICEL collaboration, 'judges have been trained to think differently, not always fixated on one particular pattern'.²⁷ While the first two waves of training were funded by donors and the Ministry of Environment, the Supreme Court self-funded subsequent waves, and the training was expanded to other courts to certify 1,498 judges in environmental law.

As concerns over environmental issues have taken root in the court, it has become more proactive in supporting citizens and civil society who seek to prevent the destruction of the natural environment. In addition, the government has formalised an anti-Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) regulation to provide greater legal protections for those 'who defend the right to a clean and healthy environment'.²⁸

ICEL's engagement with the Supreme Court over the past 12 years has been successful because ICEL started small and incrementally co-created activities with the court, adding value through its technical expertise and building mutual trust. Through its senior staff, ICEL also brought in 'insider-outsider' knowledge and relationships, thus enabling it to navigate the political economy of the judiciary and administration successfully.

²⁷ Interview with the Center for Technical Training and Education of the Supreme Court.

²⁸ *Peraturan Menteri Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan Republik Indonesia Nomor 10 Tahun 2024* (Regulation of the Minister of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia No. 10 of 2024), <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Details/300669/permen-lhk-no-10-tahun-2024>

Case Study 2:

A subnational partnership on land reform

Aceh Province has enjoyed special autonomy status since 2006, one that is unique in Indonesia, resulting from the peace agreement between the Government of Indonesia and the armed pro-independence group (GAM/*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*) in August 2005.²⁹ The Aceh Governance Law (No.11/2006) granted the subnational provincial government authority over its land, other natural resources, and all sectors except foreign relations, defence, national security, monetary and fiscal policy, religion, and justice.³⁰ This opened the subnational policy space in Aceh and led to extensive engagement between local lawmakers and civil society.

Land reform is complicated, not least because poorly protected forests take up 3.5 million hectares of Aceh Province's 5.8 million hectares, leaving 2.3 million hectares, of which about 1.13 million are subject to mining and plantations, which in turn leaves just more than 1 million hectares for other public purposes, leading to a land availability crisis.³¹ Aceh CSOs have been working to guarantee land tenure for local communities and strengthen environmental safeguards for more than a decade through a coalition of three leading environmental and land rights organisations: HAKA, LBH Aceh, and Walhi Aceh.

The provincial policy space for CSO engagement in Aceh differs significantly from the national level because the special autonomy arrangements allows the formation of local political parties, creating an exception to national legislation that requires all political parties to have a national outlook;³² first time lawmakers often lack the skills to interpret the Aceh Special Autonomy Law and draft laws and by-laws; many lawmakers have a historical relationship with CSOs, which provided legal support during the conflict period and the peace negotiations;

²⁹ Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 11 Tahun 2006 Tentang Pemerintahan Aceh (Law No. 11, 2006 of the Republic of Indonesia on Aceh Government) (Republic of Indonesia), art. 6, <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Home/Details/47363/uu-no-11-tahun-2006>, Christopher Paul, *The Role of Information in Violent Conflict* (United States Institute of Peace, 2009), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr184.pdf>

³⁰ Jacques Bertrand, *Indonesia: "Special Autonomy" for Aceh and Papua*, Number 31, Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 11 Tahun 2006 Tentang Pemerintahan Aceh (Law No. 11, 2006 of the Republic of Indonesia on Aceh Government) (Republic of Indonesia), art. 6, <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Home/Details/47363/uu-no-11-tahun-2006>

³¹ Group discussion with four LBH Aceh directors from different period in Banda Aceh, June 2024 and Sinar Pidie, "Aceh Didera Krisis Ketersediaan dan Pemanfaatan Tanah [Aceh Suffers from Land Availability and Utilization Crisis]," September 27, 2021, <https://sinarpidie.co/news/aceh-didera-krisis-ketersediaan-dan-pemanfaatan-lahan/index.html>

³² Jacques Bertrand, *Indonesia: "Special Autonomy" for Aceh and Papua*, Number 31

and Aceh lawmakers tend to distrust the national government's ongoing efforts to recentralize and actively collaborate with Aceh CSOs to navigate and resist these attempts. This amounts to a uniquely productive working relationship between civil society and government in the province.

In February 2015, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) ushered in a significant shift in Aceh's land management policy through the Presidential Decree No. 23/2015, which established the Aceh Land Agency. It began documenting several land dispute cases between local communities and corporations and bringing these cases to the Land Agency. In support, LBH Aceh, along with the land reform coalition, began organising public seminars and workshops with members of the newly formed Land Agency, which invited LBH and other CSOs to participate in government meetings, discussions on land reform issues,³³ and assist in drafting a new law,³⁴ addressing any gaps from an environmental perspective.³⁵

The Law on Land was approved by lawmakers in 2021 and followed by the Law on Aceh Environmental Protection and Management Plan, 2022–2052, a road map for Aceh authorities to protect the natural environment, respect the land rights of the local indigenous people, and involve CSOs in monitoring environmental issues.³⁶

Despite broader trends to close civic space across Indonesia, LBH has been able to pursue the tactic of critical collaboration in Aceh, serving as a watchdog for local communities and a check on state apparatus, while simultaneously acting as an active – and at times official – partner of the government in pursuing legal reform.

33 Interview with the staff from the Aceh Land Agency (Badan Pertanahan Aceh), Banda Aceh, June 2024.

34 Interview with former and current LBH Aceh director, Banda Aceh, June 2024.

35 Interview with former and current LBH Aceh Director and interview with HAKA staff, Banda Aceh, June 2024.

36 Articles 17 and 29 of *Qanun No. 1/2023 on Aceh Environmental Protection and Management Plan (Rencana Perlindungan dan Pengelolaan Lingkungan Hidup Aceh) 2022-2052*, <https://jdih.acehprov.go.id/dih/detail/0600888c-2282-4bea-9dc2-58254eaaef05>. The lead Aceh CSO in the process was Walhi Aceh.

Looking forward

All CSOs we spoke to agreed that efforts to influence policymaking have become more difficult overall, especially for controversial topics such as government transparency, justice, and human rights.

Where CSOs have seen some improvements in the enabling environment around freedom of association and expression and fewer attacks by state actors, they tend to feel that CSO-government collaboration generally results in good outcomes. They remain cautiously optimistic that governments will allow citizen participation in policymaking and that more collaboration between organisations in civic ecosystems would have a greater impact on policy issues.

However, the trust deficit is significant. Filipino CSOs see significant challenges ahead with the Marcos administration, which, they argue, prioritizes elite business interests over citizen and civil society engagement in governance. Indonesian survey respondents were split roughly in half over whether ongoing collaboration with government is something they should pursue (Figure 5).

Debates over CSO and government engagement tactics and topics are only likely to intensify if either country experiences further democratic decline rather than consolidation or progress, and as the impact of declining international development assistance is felt.

Figure 5: Agree or disagree? In 2024, 43.6% of Indonesian CSOs agreed that ongoing collaboration with the government is important; 56.4% disagreed.



Key takeaways

This comparative analysis of policy spaces illustrates a complex landscape of opportunities and challenges in fostering participatory governance and civil society engagement in the Philippines and Indonesia. Both countries have established formal policy spaces that theoretically enable civil society to influence policymaking. However, CSO effectiveness is often undermined by institutional limitations, tokenistic practices, inequitable power relations, and political dynamics. Informal policy spaces, while offering flexibility and adaptive engagement, are similarly constrained by transparency, equity, and access issues.

In the Philippines, the vibrant and extensive civil society sector has shown significant resilience and adaptability, leveraging both formal and informal policy spaces to influence policies, particularly in areas aligned with government priorities. Yet, challenges persist, including the politicization of government funding, bureaucratic hurdles, and competition with private sector actors. In Indonesia, formal frameworks are robust on paper, but their implementation often reflects top-down priorities, marginalising grassroots contributions. Informal collaborations, such as those exemplified by ICEL's partnership with the judiciary and the land reform coalition in Aceh, highlight the potential for long-term, trust-based engagement to drive systemic change.

Development partners could do more to catalyse and guide the systemic changes needed in civil society-government collaboration. Their first step is to genuinely **understand the political economy of civil society engagement in governance** in each local context – the formal and informal policy spaces and enabling legal frameworks, how civil society are already using policy spaces, and where CSOs see weaknesses and a need for more support. In short, development partners need to understand what is working, what is not, and why.

Achieving genuine understanding may require analysing and avoiding common assumptions that currently hold in the development community, such as:

- The idea that formal policy spaces and mechanisms are set up to foster, not stymie, real change.
- Policy dialogue is the only appropriate approach for controversial topics.
- Civil society is equipped with the technical expertise, resources, and funding to engage.

- Civil society can be constrained from engaging in change-making activities in sensitive areas due to a lack of project funding, as in the Philippines case.
- Civil society engagement in policy is inherently a public good.

While this last assumption seems self-evidently true, sometimes policy engagement can make civil society more docile and less likely to challenge government. Development partners need to be fully cognizant of when they are playing into that dynamic and inadvertently supporting stasis rather than reform.

Based on that understanding, development partners should adopt a more politically informed, strategic approach to supporting civil society engagement, focusing on the following areas:

- **Deepen civil society's capacity to influence policy through meaningful engagement in formal and informal spaces**

Where governments demonstrate genuine political will for participatory governance – beyond box-ticking or token consultation – development partners should invest in strengthening both the inclusiveness and the integrity of formal policy engagement mechanisms. This means:

- Supporting institutional reforms that expand access to decision-making processes, especially for underrepresented groups.
- Investing in the convening power and analytical capacity of CSOs, enabling them to contribute evidence-based perspectives and articulate policy alternatives.
- Embedding safeguards to ensure that civil society participation in informal and invited spaces translates into tangible influence, not mere visibility

The goal should be to shift policy spaces from being performative to deliberative and consequential.

- **Equip civil society to think and work politically in complex governance environments**

Development partners should go beyond technical and organizational capacity-building and instead support civil society to navigate the real politics of policymaking. This requires:

- Building skills in political economy analysis, strategic communication, coalition-building, and adaptive leadership.
- Supporting CSOs to forge alliances with reform-minded actors inside government, parliaments, and oversight bodies to advance shared reform agendas.
- Encouraging adaptive programming that allows CSOs to respond to shifting political incentives, windows of opportunity, and risks, including in constrained or hybrid contexts.

This kind of support positions civil society not just as policy commentators, but as strategic political actors capable of shaping agendas and institutions over time.

- **Foster broad-based, issue-driven coalitions that preserve civil society's autonomy**

Development partners should prioritize efforts to facilitate cross-sectoral alliances – linking civil society with actors in government, academia, media, and the private sector – around shared policy goals, including those that may be politically contested. This involves:

- Supporting platforms and mechanisms that enable collective problem-solving and agenda-setting, especially in polarized or fragmented civic spaces.
- Being alert to the risks of instrumentalizing civil society for service delivery or non-contentious policy engagement, which can blunt its democratic role.
- Protecting and nurturing the critical, independent voice of civil society, particularly in contexts where civic space is shrinking or democratic norms are deteriorating.

In such settings, development partners should support pluralism and dissent, not just promote technocratic consensus.

Despite the challenges outlined, substantial potential remains to revitalize civil society's role in participatory governance in Southeast Asia – particularly in countries like the Philippines and Indonesia. Seizing this opportunity requires development actors to shift from projectized, depoliticized approaches to more context-aware, politically grounded engagement strategies. Doing so is essential not only for achieving sustainable development outcomes but for safeguarding democratic resilience and civic agency in increasingly difficult political and developmental times.



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