

GLOBAL VOICES FOR PEACE

Defending Peace, Democracy, and
Human Rights



**American
Friends
Service
Committee**

Introduction

The world is experiencing rapid, dangerous and interconnected paradigm shifts that are fundamentally reshaping global relations and governance. The shifts pose serious challenges to global and migration governance and are accelerating the erosion of democracy and human rights. Democratic norms are increasingly giving way to authoritarian practices and policies, thereby undermining accountability, civic freedoms and the rule of law.



Migrants and people forced to flee in search of safety and international protection face escalating threats, including mass deportations to third countries lacking robust asylum procedures, arbitrary detention and additional inhuman and degrading treatment. Multilateral institutions are losing credibility and influence, weakening global commitment to collective responsibility and eroding international humanitarian and human rights norms and principles and the blatant break of international law. Violent conflicts are alarmingly high and continue to intensify and escalate across the globe¹, often brought by Western powers. The 2025 Global Peace Index shows that global peacefulness has been deteriorating every year since 2014, with 100 countries showing deterioration over the last decade, with 59 active state-based conflicts, the most since WW1.

¹ The Great Fragmentation 'Driving Conflict: Word Peace Plummet: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Global-Peace-Index-2025-Press-Release.pdf>

Further studies by Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) "Conflict Trends: A Overview Report"² confirm this. Africa remained the most affected region in 2024 with over 28 state-based conflicts, double the number from a decade earlier, followed by Asia and the Middle East.

World military expenditure rose to \$271.8 billion in 2024, meaning that spending has increased every year for a full decade, going up by 37 per cent between 2015 and 2024. The 9.4 per cent increase in 2024 was the steepest year-on-year rise since at least 1988. Average military expenditure as a share of government expenditure rose to 7.1 per cent in 2024 and world military spending per person was the highest since 1990, at \$334. Military expenditure increased in all five of the world's geographical regions, reflecting heightened geopolitical tensions across the globe³.

The increase in military spending has come to the expense of development and humanitarian support. Funding cuts for international cooperation in the US and the rapid dismantling of USAID, a funding model that has sustained global humanitarian and development financing and operations for decades, has devastated global Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The United States has dominated the humanitarian and development sector, with U.S.⁴ foreign aid contributions constituted 41.8% of the total global humanitarian funding in 2024. With the sudden suspension of an estimated \$60 billion in planned Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the dismantling of USAID, humanitarian and development organizations across the world are facing the collapse of decades-long partnerships and programming.

This has been further aggravated by funding cuts from European donors and a shift in many countries towards increasing military spending over investments in Official Development Assistance (ODA). EU development funding is facing significant cuts, with a projected 35% average annual reduction in aid to least-developed countries for 2025–2027 compared to 2021–2024. Major donors like France, the Netherlands, and Finland are reducing budgets. As development funds traditionally supported marginalized communities and democratic development.

² Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) New data shows conflict at historic high as US retreats from world stage: <https://www.prio.org/news/3616>
³ Xiao Liang, Dr Nan Tian, Dr Diego Lopes da Silva, Lorenzo Scarazzato, Zubaida A. Karim and Jade Guiberteau Ricard, April 2025, Stockholm, SIPRI, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2024>
⁴ International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), Lives on the Line: The Impact of the USAID Freeze on Civil Society, March 2025, 7, <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2025/03/Lives-on-the-Line-Final-Report.pdf>

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine and domestic political pressures have led several EU governments (including France and Germany) to redirect funds and announce further cuts in foreign aid. Least developed countries (LDCs) and countries in sub-Saharan Africa are disproportionately affected by these cuts. Many civil society leaders and organizations are deeply concerned that these destabilizing tendencies are harming communities, especially historically marginalized or excluded groups such as women, migrants, people with disabilities, and youth, accelerating the collapse of a system of global solidarity and a sense of shared security. CSOs are concerned about their ability to push back on authoritarian tendencies and effectively respond to the needs and challenges of people while facing eroding public trust. The urgency to change course and build new and better systems has never been more urgent.

The deterioration of democratic institutions and the rise of authoritarian tendencies is a global phenomenon. Even established democracies can erode over time due to factors such as corruption, populism, weakening of institutions, and declining civic participation. Empirical datasets such as Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) are showing a dramatic decrease in both the quantity and quality of democracies. The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen today is down to Cold War's levels. The Washington Post is documenting the corrosion of democracy even in the country that first codified democratic institutions - the United States - in a series of articles which started a few years ago. The situation has only worsened since.

Among the indicators of authoritarian drift in the U.S are: the use of state power against civilians, scapegoating of political opponents and extreme polarization of politics, undermining of the rule of law and clearly breaking international law, militarily attacking sovereign countries, de facto restricting voting rights and aggressively gerrymandering, and the rapid adoption of regressive immigration policies and practices.

AFSC Global Voices for Peace 2025 Series

Hope for future democracy lies in amplifying people's voices, confronting authoritarianism and engaging countervailing institutions such as through civil society collective action, leadership and rebuilding trust with communities. Launched in June 2025, the Voices for Peace Dialogue Series (GVP 2025) was designed to bring together global CSO leaders, human rights defenders, insightful thinkers and activists to collectively analyze the shifting policies and its subsequent negative implications for global peace and democracy. The Dialogue Series included conversations about reimagining the role of civil society leaders, reflections on a rapidly changing global context and an exploration of new ways to organize, convene and strengthen solidarity across countries, regions and movements.

Through the GVP series, AFSC convened a broad and diverse group of global civil society leaders and networks, those with lived experience, insightful thinkers and activists who examined the shifting US and global policy landscape and its far-reaching implications for global peace and development agenda. The series created space to listen, share, learn and strategize collectively for more coordinated and transformative response. Key messages for governments, multilateral institutions, donors, and global stakeholders were developed.

The global dialogue convenings aimed to address three interconnected questions:

1. How are the policy decisions and policy shifts in the United States and in Europe impacting the rest of the world?
2. In the context of rapid rise in global authoritarianism, increasing militarization and a troubling decline in development and humanitarian financing, what can be achieved through collective action?
3. Who do we build our collective strength with and take decisive action together?

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Social movements and local peace builders must remain strong to rebuild the infrastructure needed to resist and respond to the current chaos and attacks on global peace and migration justice.



Global paradigm shifts: Reflective Virtual Dialogue From Global Humanitarian And Human Rights Leaders

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There is an urgent need for policies that protect and expand civic space, in the face of increasing restrictions.

The online webinar convened four global human rights leaders, activists and AFSC senior leadership to reflect on the shifting global policies and set the context and agenda for a broader series of interrelated global dialogues. The discussions and speakers⁵, focused on the rapid emergence of authoritarian tendencies in the US and globally, underscoring the weaponization of state institutions, dehumanized narratives, and the normalization of human rights abuses. Speakers further noted the erosion of the rule of law through deliberate undermining of independent institutions such as the judiciary, the growing influence of the military industrial complex, and the increasing suppression of civic space and civic actors.

They noted that the dismantling of organizational systems-particularly through the freezing of global humanitarian, development, peace and human rights financing- has far reaching ripple impacts on global peace and democracy. These actions are happening without a clear pathway for rebuilding institutions and partnerships that have been developed over decades by emphasizing trust, accountability, and solidarity.

The leaders underscored some urgent imperatives: They emphasized the need to reject fear, apathy and defeatism, calling on key actors and communities to reclaim ownership of their democracies. They stressed the importance of not losing hope despite the challenges; noting that sustained efforts to educate and mobilize broad segments of society are critical during this period. Without meaningful coordinated change, they warned, the US risks becoming less safe, and less respected globally, outcomes that would undermine international peace and security.

Drawing lessons from the Quaker Faith and tradition, the speakers reaffirmed the need to be grounded on Peace through dialogue, mutual respect and negotiation, rather than political violence, or military escalation. They reiterated that diplomacy remains the only viable and solid foundation for global peace and security: noting that it is during dark moments when adherence to values and principles matters most. Finally, they urged global leaders to center people's needs and dignity in the policies in line with international Law and human rights standards.

⁵ Joyce Aljouny, General Secretary, AFSC, Uzra Zeya, President and CEO, Human Rights First; Prof. Jeffrey Sachs: University Professor and Director of the Center for Sustainable Development, Columbia University; Dr. Bama Athreya: former Deputy Assistant Administrator, USAID; Board member, Faith in Democracy; Laura Davis: CEO, Arianne Thread Consulting and author of EU Foreign Policy, Transitional Justice and Mediation: Principle, Policy and Practice



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We need safe spaces for sharing personal stories to foster understanding and solidarity and to highlight the transformative power of personal healing in supporting community resilience.

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I also felt a strong sense of global solidarity during the convening. The conversations reminded me that we are not working alone, we are part of a wider global community committed to peace and human rights.

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Let's be clear: organizations doing vital work, all across the world, are now facing an existential threat.

The Impact of the US Administration's Global Development Aid Freeze and Shift in Immigration

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What can be the way forward after this devastation—
and what can we imagine together?”

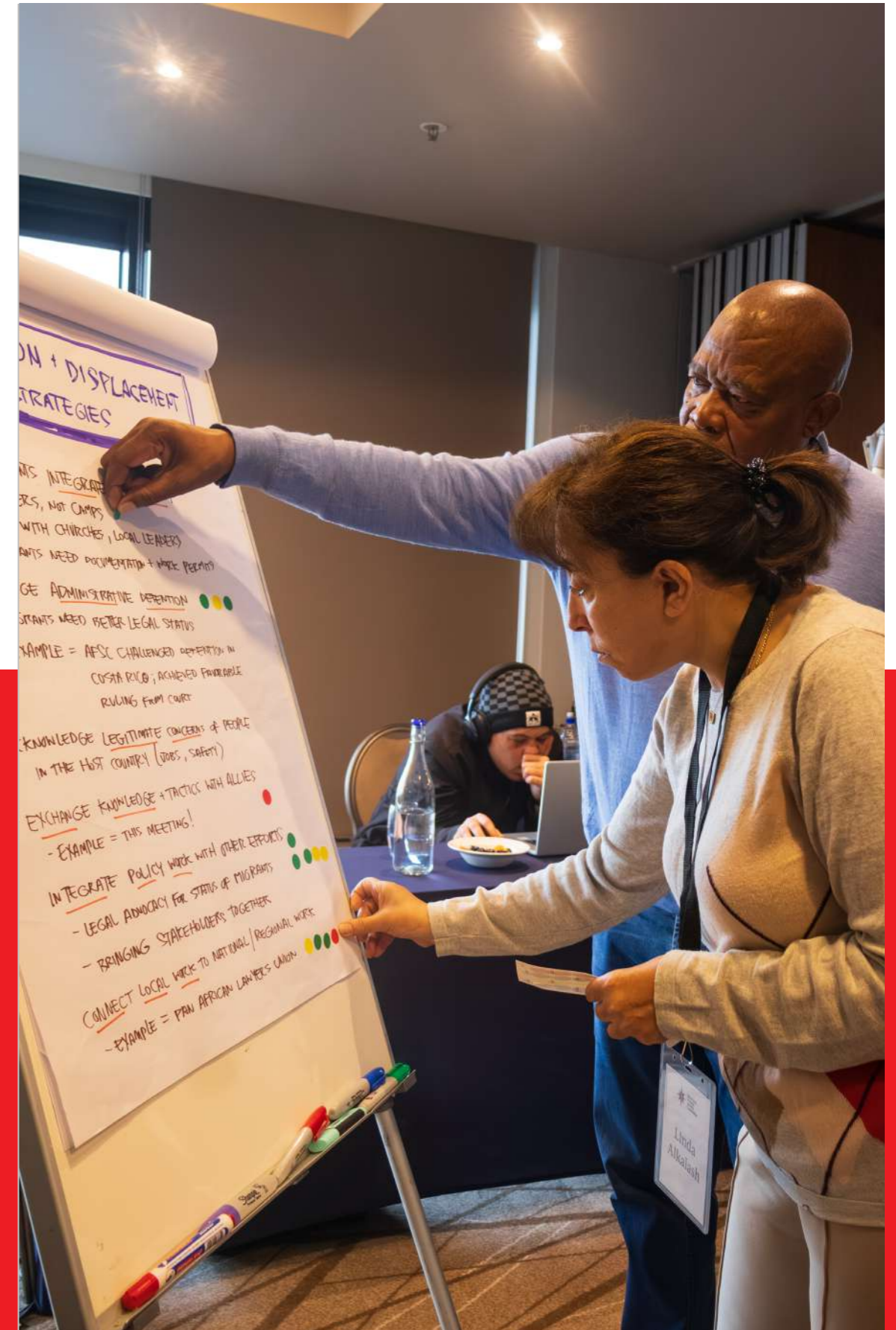
LESSONS FROM CSO LEADERS

This global dialogue and exchange program held in Cape Town South Africa from 22nd – 24th July 2025, convened 41 global CSO leaders, refugees and migrants, community leaders, key speakers and senior AFSC staff to examine the global impacts of the U.S Administration's freeze on USAID funding and restrictive migration policies, particularly in Asia, Latin America, Middle East and Africa. Participants highlighted the sudden and severe disruption to the global humanitarian and development system, including the scaling back or closure of CSO operations, staff layoffs, interruptions to life saving services, and growing uncertainty for directly affected communities.

The forum emphasized the synergistic power of CSOs and called for more intentional spaces to connect, collaborate and build solidarity, with a particular focus on “South”-

to “South” solidarity. Participants affirmed the importance of developing collective strategies to resist authoritarianism, protect migrants and communities. They further underscored the growing urgency to reinforce collective resistance, develop new coping models and protect communities from harm.

Framed around finding solutions, key lessons from the convening were later shared with peace builders at Peace Connect, a global forum on locally led and people-centered peacebuilding organized by Peace Direct in Nairobi, in October 2025. Beyond fostering learning, building solidarity across regions and the globe, civil society leaders collectively articulated strong, unified demands for global leaders, for urgent, principled and dignity centered action.



Global Gathering of Local Peacebuilders and Their Allies

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Global policymakers should actively engage civil society organizations to foster inclusive dialogue on strengthening democracy, promoting peace, and diffusing potential conflicts.

Additionally, the gathering addressed the growing exhaustion from funding cuts, shrinking civic spaces, and a profound erosion of trust in institutions intended to protect CSO's and their work globally. The stories, strategies, and solutions that emerged from the convening- together with insights from AFSC's panel "USAID Funding Freeze and regressive shifts in Immigration policy: Strengthening solidarity and mobilization for Local peacebuilders"-informed the development of a global report. Through this report, CSOs and peace builders called upon global stakeholders to drive a shift in direction, to rebuild shattered systems in new ways, and create the possibility of a real shift in power. The consolidated report from the dialogue series was shared with EU policy makers, in particular members of the European Parliament and of the European Economic and Social Committee, on the occasion of the AFSC Salama Hub and All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) advocacy convening in December 2025.

STRENGTHENING CSO SOLIDARITY AND MOBILIZATION

The gathering sought to strengthen community, transnational solidarity, and a shared ecosystem identity among CSOs and peace builders. Held in Nairobi Kenya from the 13th-17th October 2025, it sought to elevate the visibility of the peacebuilding sector, acknowledging that locally led peace building efforts remain largely unrecognized by the international community and that traditional power dynamics are slow to change. The convening also focused on enhancing opportunities for collective analysis and action among peace builders from the Global South, supporting shared learning and forging alliances across networks.

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Local peacebuilders are not remaining passive victims of geopolitical shifts, they are uniting to assert agency and demand for more equitable support.



Salama Hub EU Advocacy Week

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Transforming power dynamics in funding, agenda-setting, and narrative framing is essential to achieving genuine and lasting peace.

The AFSC and AACC (All Africa Conference of Churches) held an advocacy week in Brussels with 19 CSOs and religious leaders from the Horn of Africa to deepen the European Union (EU)-Horn of Africa engagement and collaboration. Held in Brussels from the 8th to the 12th of December, 2025, the discussions focused on coordinated responses to the overlapping threats and challenges towards a just and peaceful region where people can thrive in dignity and rights: noting that peace is not merely a political objective but also a moral commitment requiring collective action. The advocacy week included roundtables at the Economic and Social Committee and the European Parliament, bringing together experts, EU policy makers, CSO delegates and religious leaders. After listening to lived accounts from those on the frontline in Sudan and elsewhere in the region, they called for a renewed focus on peace, underscoring the urgent need for conflict resolution and inclusive peace building. Other priorities that emerged from the discussions included shared human security, biodiversity and rights, transitional justice and a response to the protracted refugee situation, addressing hate speech and the overlapping and compounding impacts of climate change and conflict.

Noting that women and girls in Sudan are exposed to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), while many young people have been killed, disappeared or were forced to flee, the CSOs and Faith leaders urged that preventing and responding to GBV is incorporated as a key outcome goal for humanitarian and financing partnership in Sudan. According to the World Health Organization, after nearly three years of conflict, severe access constraints, and reduced funding in Sudan, have created the worst humanitarian situation globally, with an estimated 33.7 million people projected to require humanitarian assistance in 2026.

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We should consider a global framework that prohibits sudden funding cuts and allow for soft landing. Aid should serve communities, not geopolitical agendas.

The leaders called for:

- Immediate ceasefire in Sudan. They stressed that global leaders can no longer remain silent while lives are being lost;
- Urged EU leadership to end arms sales to the region, noting that weapons move faster than humanitarian aid;
- Immediate opening of humanitarian corridors in Sudan;
- Flexible and sustained financing to address the overlapping threats facing the people of Sudan, with resources directed at saving lives and protecting the work of frontline responders, including CSOs, women, and youth-led groups and faith-based organizations.
- Address the needs of displaced refugees and internally displaced populations, including expanded protection pathways and humanitarian assistance. They recognized that youth who form a significant proportion of forcibly displaced populations are facing heightened vulnerabilities and risks to smuggling and trafficking and hence require legal pathways, including migration options to survive.

Finally, the leaders called for meaningful and deliberate inclusion of women and youth in mediation processes, survivor and human rights centered humanitarian system, and support for community led trauma healing processes and policies.

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It was inspiring to learn how my peers are mobilizing domestic resources, mutual aid networks, and joint advocacy to fill gaps left by international donors – truly a decolonial approach to sustaining movements.



Conclusion

Civil Society Call to Action

At this moment of profound global volatility, civil society stands at historic crossroads. The accelerating erosion of democratic norms, the rise of authoritarianism, the dismantling of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding systems without new processes for global cooperation in place, and the normalization of violence and exclusion of CSO actors, peacebuilders, activists, and human rights defenders demand an urgent, coordinated, and principled response. Silence, fragmentation, and retreat into individual survival mode are not sustainable options.

Drawing from the collective reflections, experiences, and strategies shared through the Global Voices for Peace Series, the participating civil society organizations and leaders called for a decisive shift in direction—towards one rooted in solidarity, accountability, and people-centered power, especially South-South power and support.



Towards this end, the participating civil society leaders call on governments, multilateral institutions, donors, and global stakeholders:

- To defend democracy and human rights without compromise through speaking truth to power, rejecting authoritarian practices, weaponization of institutions and the growing normalization of human rights abuses; uphold international human rights and human mobility protection principles and the rule of law as non-negotiable foundations of global peace.
- To protect and expand Civil Society spaces: there is urgent need to end criminalization, silencing and repression of CSO actors, peacebuilders, activists, human rights defenders, journalists and others contributing to a safer and more just world; ensure their safety, legitimacy and leadership in shaping global policies that affect communities. This repression must be condemned in clear and direct language and must leverage their own power to prevent attacks on CSO leaders and groups, to do their work safely and effectively.
- To promote gender responsive migration governance: Address policies and practices such as patriarchy and discrimination that reinforce women migrants and other excluded groups as mere victims, centering their knowledge, experience and rights in shifting narratives.
- To shift power and rebuild trust, using a people centered approach: Move beyond elite-driven policy making. Support locally driven and led movements, grassroots (re)organizing and cross border solidarity that reinforce the knowledge, power and resilience of communities that are served.

- Reimagine a new global humanitarian and peacebuilding system: reverse funding freezes and regressive aid policies that have dismantled decades of community trust, infrastructure and community led solutions. Prioritize most urgent and essential work. As a new global framework emerges, commit to predictable, flexible models that protect accountable institutions, strengthen CSOs and frontline communities.
- The funding system must stop reproducing the harms peacebuilders are trying to address—donor practices should stop reinforcing insecurity, instability, dependency, and burnout. Peacebuilders cannot build and sustain peace when the funding system itself produces power imbalances, chaos, and insecurity. CSO leaders called for long-term, flexible financing aligned with community realities, and funding models that recognize peace as long-term, system-level work.
- To strengthen Solidarity and Local Autonomy: Aid conditionalities undermine local autonomy and partnership building. As a new paradigm is established, it should be rooted in inclusive, transparent, fair partnerships and financing models that build real power and that encourage collective action rather than competition.
- To support and address the needs of forcibly displaced populations, including expanded protection pathways.

This moment demands courage, imagination, and collective action. Future democracy rests on our ability to stand together, resist authoritarianism, and build systems rooted in care, equity, dignity, and shared humanity. Civil society leaders are ready to defend important principles, and lead in the building of new, more accountable and equitable systems going forward.



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