EMPOWERING COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIRST YEAR OF IMPLEMENTING THE BUILDING RESPONSES TOGETHER NETWORK

In an era of growing threats and attacks on civil society and human rights defenders, collaboration within the civic space support eco-system is crucial.

To contribute to this, Global Focus has since 2022 coordinated the Building Responses Together (BRT) Network. The aim is to enhance collaboration among rapid response mechanisms working to support human rights defenders globally. Drawing on experiences from the first year of implementing the BRT Network, this learning report explores the challenges faced by global civil society networks and collaborations. Based on interviews and an online survey, this report presents lessons learned relating to building trust, relations, and community as well as the fundamental infrastructure around coordination. The report concludes by presenting recommendations for future civil society collaborations.

Recommendations:

- Create member ownership by expanding co-designing strategies and exploring new collaborative approaches.

- Hold space for the complexities of participation by applying an accessible, participatory coordination model.

- Strike the right balance between security and engagement by providing clear and user-friendly security guidelines and accessible resources and training.

CONTENT

GLOBAL
FOCUS

INTRODUCTION

As civil society and human rights defenders face growing threats, crises, and uncertainty globally, there is an urgent imperative to enhance collaboration among actors within the civic space support ecosystem. In response to this critical need, Global Focus has since 2022 coordinated the Building Responses Together (BRT) Network to enhance coordination and collaboration among rapid response mechanisms working to support human rights defenders globally[1]. This learning report explores the barriers and challenges encountered in our work and by global civil society networks when trying to build deeper and closer connections across organizations to strengthen the collective impact of their work. Drawing insights from interviews conducted with BRT members and an online survey, this learning report offers perspectives gained from Global Focus' first year of implementing the pilot phase of the BRT Network.

With funding, structure, platform, and members set up, the BRT Network finds itself at a critical juncture. Can we continue to build on the community and enhance the collaboration around ensuring the distribution of resources and advocacy support- or are we risking becoming irrelevant? The learning report will conclude with a set of lessons learned important not only for leveraging future work within the network but also for similar civil society initiatives. Furthermore, the learning report presents recommendations for civil society collaborations in the future.

METHOD

This learning report is based on 8 in-depth interviews conducted with BRT members by Global Focus, along with an online survey, which reached 22 individual respondents across the BRT Network. The interviews and the online survey were carried out in February 2022, providing valuable insights and identifying key barriers and learnings presented in the report.

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1) CIVICUS (2022) – Global Findings: https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings/

BACKGROUND

Civic space, democracy, and human rights continue to be under pressure all over the globe. The number of people living in countries with significant restrictions on civic space, including freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, amounted to almost 89% of the population in 2022[2].

Civil society activists and human rights defenders facing restrictive laws and censorship are subjected to intimidation and harassment, violence, detention, and persecution, and are ultimately at risk of being killed for promoting and defending human rights and democracy. This trend has been exacerbated due to the Covid-19 crisis, which has further restricted fundamental freedoms and repression of marginalized voices as governments have used the pandemic as an excuse to curtail civic rights[3].

Meanwhile, digital technologies have proven to offer tremendous opportunities, not least during the pandemic, for civic engagement, participation, and mobilization. However, new restrictions, harassment, and clampdowns on civil society have also accelerated in the digital age, often with direct and harmful impacts on civic space offline[4]. A recent example is the feminist uprising

WHAT IS CIVIC SPACE?

Civic space is the environment that enables civil society to play a role in our societies' political, economic, and social life. Civic space allows individuals and groups to contribute to policy-making that affects their lives, including by accessing information and engaging in dialogue, expressing dissent or disagreement, and joining together to express their views. By that, civic space is associated with three core freedoms: Freedom of speech, of assembly, and of association.

in Iran following the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, who was arrested and killed by the socalled morality police in September 2022. Digital technologies, in this case, have provided possibilities for fostering national protest coordination and transnational solidarity. At the same time, technologies also posed a severe threat through surveillance, internet and social media blockages, and detention of journalists reporting on the protests.

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2) CIVICUS (March 16th, 2023) - Tracking conditions for citizen action: https://monitor.civicus.org/facts/
3) CIVICUS (2021) - Civic space restrictions: Covid-19 or business as usual?: https://findings2021.monitor.civicus.org/covid-19-and-civic-space.html
4) United Nations Human Rights Council (2019) - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peace-ful assembly and of association: https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/A_HRC_41_41_E.pdf

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As civil society and human rights defenders face growing threats, crises, and uncertainty, there is an increasing need to enhance collaboration among actors in the civic space support ecosystem. One such group of actors, namely rapid response mechanisms, plays a critical role in ensuring that resources and advocacy support are distributed quickly to a large array of civil society actors facing unexpected restrictions or opportunities.

The Building Responses Together Network (hereafter the BRT) was established in 2022 by Global Focus as a part of the creation of the rapid response mechanism, Claim Your Space, which we manage with financial support from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aim of the BRT Network is to enhance collaboration among rapid response mechanisms working globally to counter the issues of rapid response mechanisms not being properly connected around referrals and verification of appli-cants. In the following section, we present the civic space support ecosystem of which the BRT Network is part, followed by a deeper introduction to the network.

WHAT IS A RAPID RESPONSE MECHANISM?

Rapid response mechanisms are defined in the BRT Network as financial and non-financial support (including shelters, legal aid, psycho-social interventions, and more) that is provided to individuals or civil society groups to address a threat or opportunity. The interventions and resources are normally dispersed more rapidly than traditional forms of resourcing. Oftentimes, the resources are not used for core activities, day-to-day operations, or projects, but rather designed to respond to emergent threats and/or opportunities not covered by existing core/project funding.

ACTORS IN THE CIVIC SPACE SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM AT THE GLOBAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL

Multiple actors pursue the goal of reclaiming, defending, and expanding civic space and countering governments' attempts to close space. Actors in the support ecosystem offer assistance by and to civil society actors on the ground through approaches spanning from advocacy to financial support as well as legal and technical assistance.

The following curated overview of actors in the civic space support ecosystem is an attempt to highlight the most important actors. If you are interested to know more, we invite you to explore the resources in the footnote[5].

Figure 1:
Curated overview of actors in the civic space support ecosystem

FUNDER/ENABLER NETWORKS:

- Collaboratives (e.g., FICS, Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN))
- Pooled funds (e.g., Environmental Defender Collaborativ)

CIVIL SOCIETY:

- Global research and advocacy organizations
- Expert groups on the enabling environment for civil society & civic space
- Protection and security mechanisms (e.g., Global Focus' Claim Your Space Fund)
- Umbrella organizations

FUNDER/ENABLER NETWORKS:

- Institutional donors (e.g., USAID, Danida)
- Place-based & thematic grassroots/intermediary funds (e.g., UAF sister Funds, Frida The Young Feminist Fund))
- Multilateral bodies (e.g., OECD DAC)
- Endowed foundations (e.g., Open Society Foundation, Ford Foundation)

GRANT-MAKERS CONSORTIA:

- E.g., CSO Lifeline

5) An Overview of Global Initiatives on Countering Closing Space for Civil Society: CSIS (September 13th, 2017) - https://www.csis.org/analysis/overview-global-initiatives-countering-closing-space-civil-society & The human rights funding landscape and a list of top funders for human rights defenders: HRFN (October 2022) - https://www.hrfn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Advancing-Human-Rights-HRD-Briefing-Document.pdf

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As apparent from Figure 1, actors in the ecosystem span across various types of groups, organizations, and institutions. Each actor in this ecosystem contributes with expertise, resources, and strategies to safeguard and promote civic space, and their interplay and collaboration are essential for strengthening civil society's resilience and impact.

However, critical voices stress that little funding in the current support landscape reaches civil society groups in the Global South. For example, of the billions of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), less than 1% is given to CSOs based in the Global South, according to CIVICUS[6]. The majority is instead distributed via multilateral organizations such as United Nations and the World Bank, via specific countries, programs, and regions as bilateral aid, or through large international NGOs. Consequently, small, informal organizations based in the Global South often cannot ensure the resources that they need to sustain their work. As a result of this and other factors, human rights defenders in the Global South remain a significantly underresourced community.

Yet, there are progressive grant-makers using more intentional and thoughtful modalities designed to be accessible and offer relevant resources. As an example of this, FRIDA

the Young Feminist Fund provides resources directly to feminist organizers through a participatory grant-making process. This offers an alternative to contemporary support architecture, which, according to FRIDA, leaves local leadership undervalued, unrecognized, and untrusted, and leaves them with less access to funding and positions of influence.

The BRT Network was created to address another challenge in the contemporary landscape, namely the siloed approach among protection and security mechanisms, more specifically, between rapid response mechanisms. Rapid response mechanisms constitute a central actor in the civic space support ecosystem and are listed under "Protection and security mechanisms" in the civil society category of Figure 1. As civil society and human rights defenders face growing threats, crises, and uncertainty, there is a pressing need to connect rapid response mechanisms to enhance the collaboration around ensuring that resources and advocacy support are distributed quickly to civil society actors facing threats.

The next session summarizes the history of the BRT Network and describes the prototype for piloting the referrals and coordination system of rapid response mechanisms.

6) CIVICUS (2019) – Understanding the Resourcing Landscape for Small and Informal Civil Society Groups in the Global South:
https://www.civicus.org/documents/understanding-the-resources-landscape_july2019.pdf

THE BUILDING RESPONSES TOGETHER NETWORK

The formation of the BRT Network was the result of ongoing conversations among a wide range of rapid response mechanisms, donors, and civil society groups from around the world that started during the CIVICUS Civil Society Week in Belgrade 2019. The conversations were convened by CIVICUS and were initiated due to issues faced by rapid response mechanisms globally of not being properly connected around referrals and verifications of applicants. The meeting in Belgrade constituted a space to explore common challenges and unpack critical areas for enhanced coordination, collaboration, and complementarity of rapid response mechanisms.

> **BRT MEMBERS**
> The BRT Network is, at the time of writing, comprised of 19 organizations that provide rapid response support (financial or non-financial) to civil society actors at risk and operate internationally, nationally, or regionally.

The BRT Network as concept and prototype was co-created in a meeting in the Hague in 2020 where rapid response mechanisms once again came together to decide what the collaboration should entail. At this meeting, it was decided that the global network should facilitate safe and trust-based information sharing amongst its members with the view to enhance both short-term responses as well as grantees' resilience and sustainability in the medium- and longer-terms. More specifically, the identified core purposes included **facilitating secure partner verification** and **referring partners** to an appropriate mechanism. Further, core purposes included supporting partners with **match-funding** for work that requires additional resources, **avoiding duplications and double-funding**, and **identifying and building joint initiatives** to respond to emergency situations in a cohesive way, without duplicating efforts. The mentioned core purposes reveal a tension: While facilitating verifications, referrals, and avoiding double-funding require a certain level of homogeneity, providing match-funding and building joint initiatives require a level of heterogeneity and complementarity of rapid response mechanisms. This will be unfolded in the next session.

In 2021, the network received funding from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as part of Global Focus' Claim Your Space project, to fund the development of the online platform and enable increased collaboration moving forward. The first year of the network's existence was dedicated to establishing its structure, appointing a steering committee, ensuring digital security, setting up the online platform for coordination, and onboarding members. Due to the nature of the network, security and confidentiality are of great importance, primarily for the protection of its constituency, but also to ensure honest cooperation. Therefore, the BRT is a vetted community in which members must adopt certain security practices, e.g., completing a security-focused onboarding procedure and going through verification procedures related to accessing the online coordination platform.

In 2022, the implementation phase was initiated, and coordination started to take place on the online platform. In December 2022, the BRT Network had its first in-person meeting held in Amsterdam to enable community building amongst its members and to identify the next steps for collaboration in the community in 2023 and beyond, as well as to evaluate the current efforts around verification, referrals, match-funding, and avoiding double-funding.

With the necessary funding, structure, platform, and members in place, the BRT Network finds itself at a critical juncture. Can we continue to build on the community and enhance the collaboration around ensuring the distribution of resources and advocacy support – or are we risking becoming irrelevant?

The next section contributes to the understanding of the barriers that keep the network from reaching its full potential. The findings will inform the continued commitment to and development of facilitating safe and trust-based information sharing amongst BRT members.
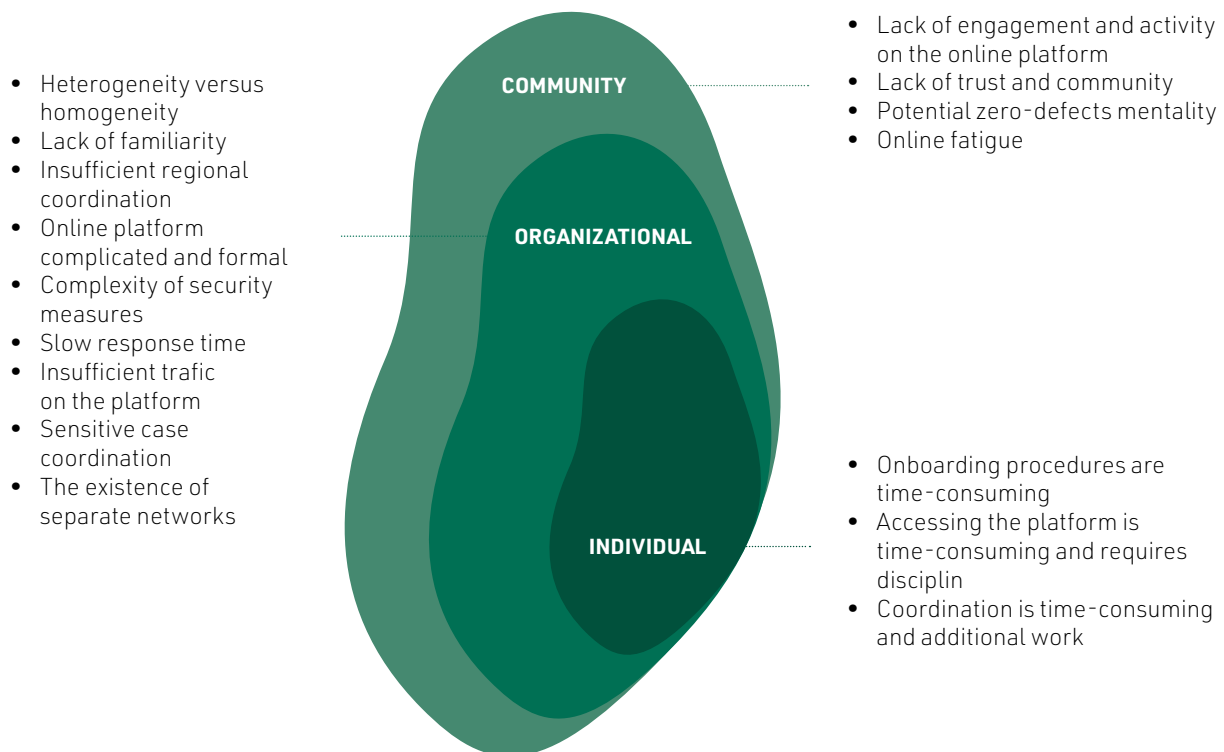
BARRIERS TO ESTABLISHING A GLOBAL NETWORK

Civil society has an essential role in connecting people, organizations, and activists. However, the general infrastructure is challenged by fragmentation and lack of resources, and, according to a report published by Civil Society Futures, there are too few connective networks to join up civil society[7]. The task set for this learning report is to consider the barriers and challenges that global civil society networks face when trying to build deeper and closer connections across organizations.

To this end, the BRT Network is an appropriate case. The network was established to counter the siloed approach and instead offer an ecosystem approach with increased global and regional co-ordination. As apparent from the previous section, it is a network comprised of professional civil society staff that operate globally in a sensitive security context.

The following is the result of in-depth interviews conducted with 8 BRT members and an online survey that reached 22 individual BRT members, both in February 2023. Emerging themes, including barriers to reaching the BRT network's full potential, from both the qualitative interviews and the online survey, were identified and grouped into a multilevel framework ranging from the individual to the community level. The following sections report findings by separate levels.

Figure 2:
Findings mapped into a multilevel framework model

COMMUNITY

ORGANIZATIONAL

INDIVIDUAL

- Heterogeneity versus homogeneity
- Lack of familiarity
- Insufficient regional coordination
- Online platform complicated and formal
- Complexity of security measures
- Slow response time
- Insufficient trafic on the platform
- Sensitive case coordination
- The existence of separate networks

- Lack of engagement and activity on the online platform
- Lack of trust and community
- Potential zero-defects mentality
- Online fatigue

- Onboarding procedures are time-consuming
- Accessing the platform is time-consuming and requires disciplin
- Coordination is time-consuming and additional work

7) Civil Society Futures – The Independent Inquiry, full report (November 2018): https://civilsocietyfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/11/Civil-Society-Futures__Civil-Society-in-England__small-1.pdf, p. 75.

INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS

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On the individual level, emerging barriers are centered around issues of time, resources, and priorities. Staff members providing rapid responses – whether financial or non-financial– to civil society actors and human rights defenders at risk are exposed to a wide variety of stressors. In general, this type of work is characterized by challenging working conditions, overwork, and direct and indirect exposure to trauma by communicating with rightsholders and assessing their applications, descriptions, and documentation[8].

Adding extra tasks, e.g., onboarding to the BRT Network, accessing the platform regularly, and coordinating continuously on the platform, may further increase their workload. Though not a uniform objection, a number of interviewees described the BRT onboarding procedure as time-consuming, while others emphasized the security procedure to access the platform. According to one BRT

BRT COORDINATION INFRASTRUCTURE
The BRT Network utilizes two platforms, an online platform and a messaging app, for communication and collaboration purposes. The online platform is mainly used for day-to-day non-sensitive discussions and coordination and provides a user-friendly interface with a wide range of features, including regional channels and direct messaging. The messaging app is used for secure messaging in the case of sensitive case coordination. Offering end-to-end encryption, the messaging app's robust encryption protocols and heightened security measures provide a trusted environment for confidential exchanges.

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8) Satterthwaite, M. et al. (2019). From a 'Culture of Unwellness' to Sustainable Advocacy: Organizational Responses to Mental Health Risks in the Human Rights Field (May 24, 2019). Review of Law and Social Justice, Vol 28, 2019, NYU School of Law, Public Law Research Paper No. 19-12.

member: *"Onboarding is time-consuming; our daily security work is time-consuming. It is additional work on top of the work that we already do. And our top priority is the actual challenges and moving resources to the communities and people under threat"*. Other members simply brought attention to the challenge of remembering to log onto the online platform: *"Sometimes I just forget it. It is not difficult or anything - it just requires some level of discipline"*. This is consistent with the finding from the online survey presented in Figure 3, in which the most frequent response to the question *"What is keeping you from using the BRT more?"* is *"I tend to forget to log into the online platform"* (9 out of 22 respondents). Conversely, a group of BRT members did not express any difficulties with the platform. One member voiced: *"No, it's not at all a hassle to enter the platform and engage there. It is like sending an email. In my organization we don't use the online platform otherwise; it is the first time and I find it easy. [...]. It is super user friendly"*. Apart from getting onboarded and accessing the platform, a number of members in the network point to the time consumption related to coordinating continuously: *"Sometimes it feels like it is more work to log on to the platform to coordinate with fellow members, rather than for me to just quickly process it by myself"*. This highlights the extra workload that case coordination and general collaboration constitute among the BRT members, which constitute an important barrier to participation in the network.

Figure 3: Self-reported barriers to using the BRT Network more [online survey]

What is keeping you from using the BRT more?
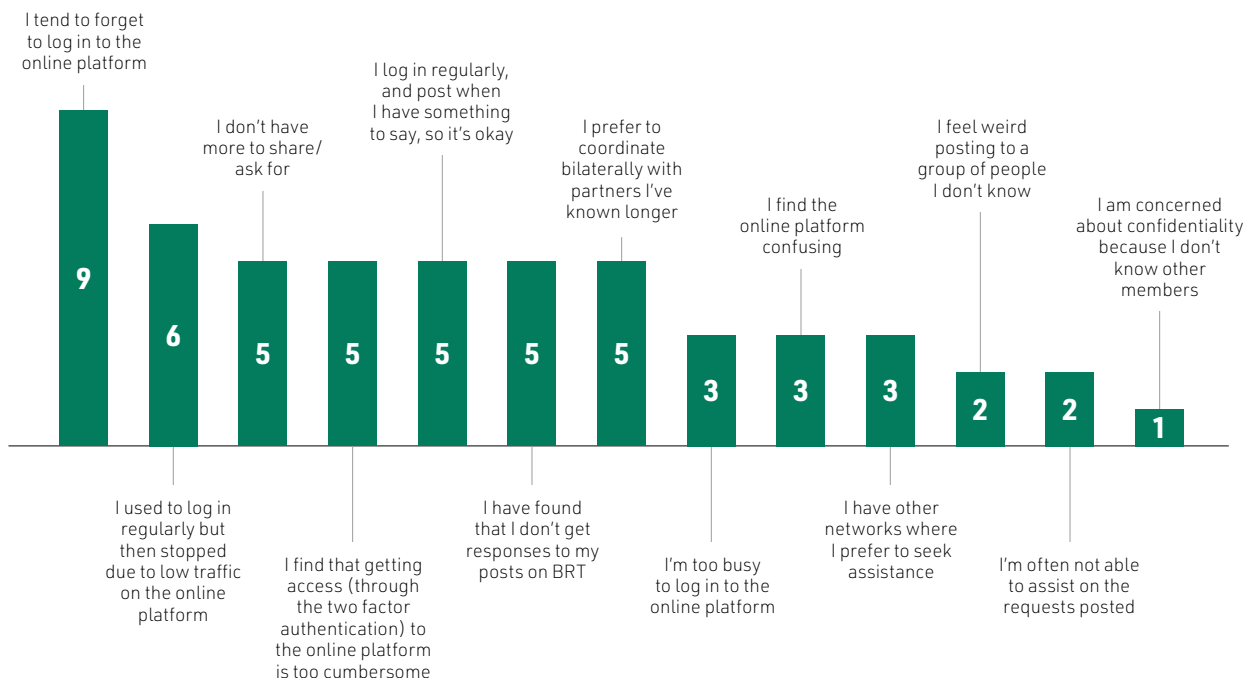
WHAT IS KEEPING YOU FROM USING THE BRT MORE?

ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

On the organizational level, emerging barriers from our interviews and online survey fall into four categories: 1) The composition of the BRT Network and knowledge thereof, 2) The online coordination platform, 3) Security issues, and 4) The existence of other networks.

Firstly, the BRT is, at the time of writing, compromised by 19 member organizations. As already mentioned, the core objectives of the network implicate tension: While verification, referrals, and avoidance of double-funding require a certain level of similarity, match-funding and building joint initiatives require a level of complementarity of rapid response mechanisms.

The interviews revealed contrasting views of the current composition of BRT members. Some members emphasized the issue of having (too) different rapid response mechanisms which complicates referring cases to each other. This is not an issue for more homogenous networks, such as Journalists in Distress[9], in which all network members support the same kind of beneficiary. Other members pointed toward the need for even more diversity and deeper representation to provide more voices, perspectives, knowledge, and complementarity to the network. To this point, one member shared an important observation related to the definition of human rights activists: *"You don't have to engage directly in activist work. Activists are not in the frontline alone; they are in the frontline with their communities and the communities receive the same amount of threat and insecurity"*. Elaborating on this, the member continued: *"What happens to these communities? Who speaks for and with them? As the BRT grows, I would love to see it expanding its understanding of the frontlines and human rights activists"*. This comment touches upon who gets to decide what the collaboration should entail – and how to include

> **"** *Activists are not in the frontline alone; they are in the frontline with their communities and the communities receive the same amount of threat and insecurity. [...] As the BRT grows, I would love to see it expanding its understanding of the frontlines and human rights activists.*
>
> **Anonymous participant**

more voices in these decisions. Reflecting on possible solutions to this problem, the members mentioned the necessity of having more and deeper representation to include more organizations working with a wider understanding of human rights activists.

> **"** *We have limitations on our capacity, so we are happy to be able to refer cases to BRT members with complementary competencies.*
>
> **Anonymous participant**

A third group of members stated that the current amount of diversity provided complementarity which made it possible to refer cases and provide verification to like-minded organizations while also enabling match-funding through the complementarity of rapid response mechanisms. Elaborating on this, one member said: *"We have limitations on our capacity, so we are happy to be able to refer cases to BRT members with complementary competencies"*. Another member added: *"I really value that the BRT is not only compromised by international organizations; it is also organizations much closer related to the beneficiaries. For example, if you have a case that nobody has ever heard about or has no partners that work with, the BRT Network can be very useful due to the diverse composition of member organizations"*.

However, all members emphasized the need for a deeper knowledge of other network members – for example through having a detailed members' directory and prioritizing networking at the annual in-person and monthly online meetings. A deeper knowledge of member organizations will enable better coordination and collaboration on the identified core purposes of the BRT Network. Most importantly, several members pointed towards the need for more regional interaction, coordination, and familiarity on the online platform to meet the needs of specific contexts and regional developments. As one member addressed it: *"Having monthly regional calls would help with cooperation, but also provide concrete updates and knowledge sharing on what is happening in the regions, including information on real-time challenges and actual mobilization in the region. We all have the same issues, and therefore it would be great with regional calls"*.

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9) Journalists in Distress (JiD) Network - https://www.journalistsindistress.org/

Second, a barrier that the interviewees as well as the online respondents experienced was related to the online coordination platform. Some BRT members emphasized that the online platform either is too cumbersome to access due to security procedures, has too complicated a setup due to too many threads and channels, or is too formalized which can lead to members feeling intimidated, self-conscious, and afraid of making mistakes, such as not conforming to the security guidelines. Others found the platform intuitive and easy to use. However, a uniform critique is the lack of engagement, traffic, and response time on the platform. Consistent with the general sentiment, one member expressed that *"... the number of responses to my requests is low. Luckily, relevant colleagues in the network do answer my verification or referral requests. However, I would love a little more dialogue – maybe other members could help shed additional light on the partner organization in question or similar things"*. On the other hand, the interviews revealed that a majority of the interviewed members do bilateral case coordination with BRT members outside of the online platform. While some of these bilateral connections existed prior to the BRT Network, the network has

played a significant role in creating additional connections among its members, further strengthening its role in fostering meaningful collaborations and information sharing. Therefore, the traffic on the online platform is not exhaustively indicative of the amount of coordination and collaboration in the network.

Third, though not a general concern judging from the online survey, the interviews did reveal a wariness regarding security. Two objections became clear: While some members expressed that the security measures within the BRT guidelines were too comprehensive and complex, other members emphasized a concern that the platform was too unsafe for sensitive case coordination. The rationale behind these divergent viewpoints can be attributed to the following considerations. The BRT Network has chosen a combination of overall case coordination on an online platform and sensitive and case-specific coordination on an end-to-end encrypted messaging app, to strike a balance between user friendliness and security. The implementation of an online platform allows for the creation of regional groups and specific threads, offering the necessary capacity to

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accommodate an increasing number of members. This ensures a user-friendly interface where members can easily engage and collaborate on cases. By utilizing the encrypted messaging app for more sensitive case discussions, the network places paramount importance on security and privacy. The messaging app's robust encryption protocols and heightened security measures provide a trusted environment for confidential exchanges. With this approach, the BRT Network aims towards optimizing both accessibility and protection, fostering a collaborative and secure environment for its members. However, the interviews point towards engaging in further dialogue on striking the right balance between considerations of security and participation.
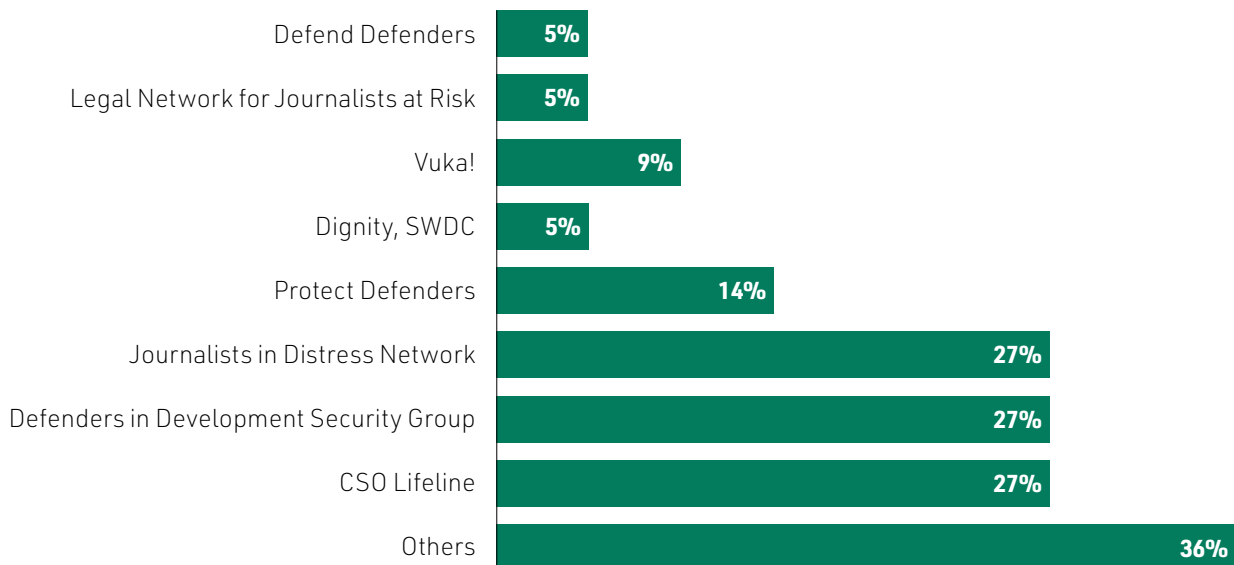
Fourth, both the qualitative interviews and the online survey revealed that the majority of the BRT members are members of one or multiple networks apart from the BRT Network. Further, the participants reported a high amount of bilateral coordination with organizations not (yet) members of the BRT Network. Though connections between individuals, groups, and organizations in the global civil society support ecosystem are positive in isolation, participation in multiple networks can create internal coordination challenges within the organizations. The online survey revealed that the BRT members are part of networks and consortiums such as CSO Lifeline,

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Defenders in Development Security Group, Journalists in Distress Network, and others (see Figure 4). One member expressed that *"it's just too much - we already have our own internal work and other networks, so it is just too much"*. On the other hand, other less connected BRT members expressed a great need for connecting with organizations to facilitate verification, referrals, match-funding, and checking for double-funding.

Figure 4: BRT members' participation in other networks [online survey]

Which other similar or related networks are you and/or your organization a member of?

Network	Percentage
Defend Defenders	5%
Legal Network for Journalists at Risk	5%
Vuka!	9%
Dignity, SWDC	5%
Protect Defenders	14%
Journalists in Distress Network	27%
Defenders in Development Security Group	27%
CSO Lifeline	27%
Others	36%

■ WHICH OTHER SIMILAR OR RELATED NETWORKS ARE YOU AND/OR YOUR ORGANIZATION A MEMBER OF? (CHOOSE AS MANY AS YOU PREFER)

COMMUNITY BARRIERS

Community barriers include explicit and implicit rules or standards of behaviors and attitudes. The interviews revealed community-related barriers related to lack of engagement, lack of trust, lack of community, and the potential existence of a zero-defects mentality. Some participants shared that the lack of engagement and activity on the online platform (due to individual and organizational factors already mentioned) constitutes a default practice – or norm - on the platform. One member reported an observation that *"people don't engage on the platform, but they are more than happy to assist me when reached by email"*. This is reflected in the online survey which revealed that 45% of the BRT members have not posted a question or request on the BRT platform, while 62% have never provided a response to a question or request.
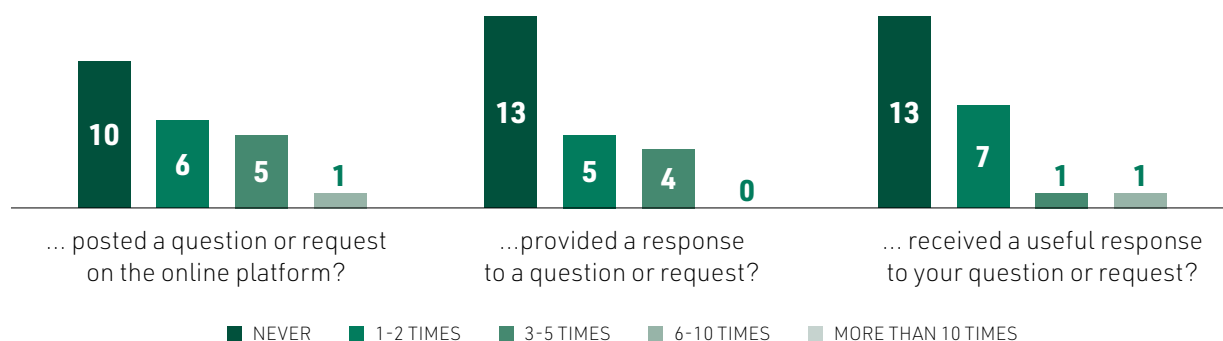
Others pointed to the fact that the network is still very new and still has not completely established a sentiment of trust and community among the members, which is pivotal when coordinating sensitive cases in the network. This is not a unique case: The Civil Society Futures report conducted in England in 2018 emphasized that because organizations compete for funding, relationships and trust within civil society have corroded over the decades[10]. Further, the report argues that strong social ties are unlikely to come from networking online[11]. This is especially challenging in the light of what one member expressed a general sense of "online fatigue" after the covid-19 pandemic forced many organizations to have online meetings and online cooperation. In the BRT Network, working online is a fundamental condition, as the members of the network are located around the globe. Therefore, online fatigue can constitute an essential barrier to enhancing the work of the network. Another member pointed to the existence of a norm around having a zero-defects mentality among members: *"People are intimated which keeps them from sharing and posting on the platform due to fear of not conforming to the security guidelines"*. However, this norm was not indicated by other members.

In the above, barriers on the individual, organizational, and community levels have been presented. On the individual levels, participants point towards issues of prioritizing onboarding, accessing the platform regularly, and coordinating on the platform continuously in light of the limited time and resources at their disposal. On the organizational level, participants emphasize 1) the balance between homogeneity and heterogeneity within the composition of the BRT members, 2) The online coordination platform, 3) Security issues, and 4) The existence of other networks. Lastly, on the community level, participants present barriers related to a lack of engagement, trust, and community within the network and on the online platform, and the potential existence of a zero-defects mentality as well as online fatigue. Considering these barriers, the following section proceeds to explore lessons learned from the first year of implementing the pilot phase of the BRT Network.

Figure 5: Traffic on the BRT online platform

Since you joined the BRT Network, how many times have you...?

	... posted a question or request on the online platform?	...provided a response to a question or request?	... received a useful response to your question or request?
NEVER	10	13	13
1-2 TIMES	6	5	7
3-5 TIMES	5	4	1
6-10 TIMES	1	0	1
MORE THAN 10 TIMES			

10) Civil Society Futures – The Independent Inquiry, summary report (November 2018):
https://civilsocietyfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/11/Civil-Society-Futures__The-Story-of-Our-Future.pdf, p. 22.
11) Civil Society Futues – The Independent Inquiry, full report (November 2018):
https://civilsocietyfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2018/11/Civil-Society-Futures__Civil-Society-in-England__small-1.pdf, p. 42

LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH IMPLEMENTING BUILDING RESPONSES TOGETHER

At the heart of this learning report lies a critical question: Can we sustain the growth of our community and foster enhanced collaboration to ensure the distribution of resources and advocacy support to human rights defenders or are we risking becoming irrelevant?

Answering this central question depends on our ability to learn from the barriers discussed above. Lessons learned from setting up the BRT Network are important not only for leveraging future work within the network but also for similar civil society initiatives. Therefore, this section aims to outline the lessons, presented as "facilitators" to overcome the barriers, derived from the initial year of implementing the pilot phase of the BRT Network.

Certain facilitators may seem redundant, for example, "build more trust and community" in response to the community barriers of "lack of trust and community." However, in times of crises, changes, and endless opportunities, it is important to devote time, commitment, and resources to aspects such as relationships. Having a stated priority to, for example, build trust and community with the people we work with can provide a reminder to include trust and community building in every process in the future.

Figure 6:
Barriers and facilitators

Barriers

COMMUNITY

- Lack of engagement and activity on the online platform
- Lack of trust and community
- Potential zero-defects mentality
- Online fatigue

ORGANIZATIONAL

- Heterogeneity versus homogeneity
- Lack of familiarity
- Insufficient regional coordination
- Online platform complicated and formal
- Complexity of security measures
- Slow response time
- Insufficient trafic on the platform
- Sensitive case coordination
- The existence of separate networks

INDIVIDUAL

- Onboarding procedures are time-consuming
- Accessing the platform is time-consuming and requires disciplin
- Coordination is time-consuming and additional work
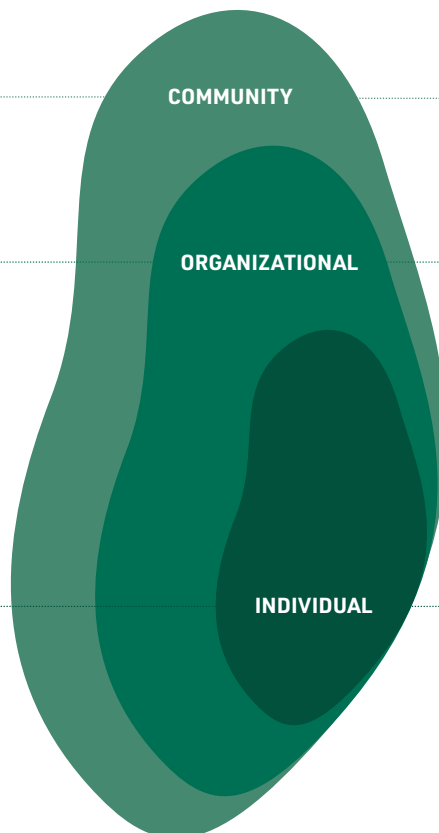
Facilitators

- Build more trust and community
- Create clear and simple guidelines on minimum levels of engagement and response time
- Create a culture of tolerance and learning

- Expand membership to create more and deeper representation
- Create a directory to provide familiarity and facilitate coordination
- Strengthen regional support infrastructure in order to overcome barriers and meet needs of specific contexts and developments
- Create a more accessible and simple platform and revisit guidelines in order provide clarity
- Simplify and clarify security guidelines – also on how to communicate when discussing sensitive information
- Consider merging with like-minded networks

- Create a less time-consuming onboarding proces
- Peer-learning on how to integrate accessing slack in work routine
- Prioritize social networking at monthly online meeting and annual in-person meeting
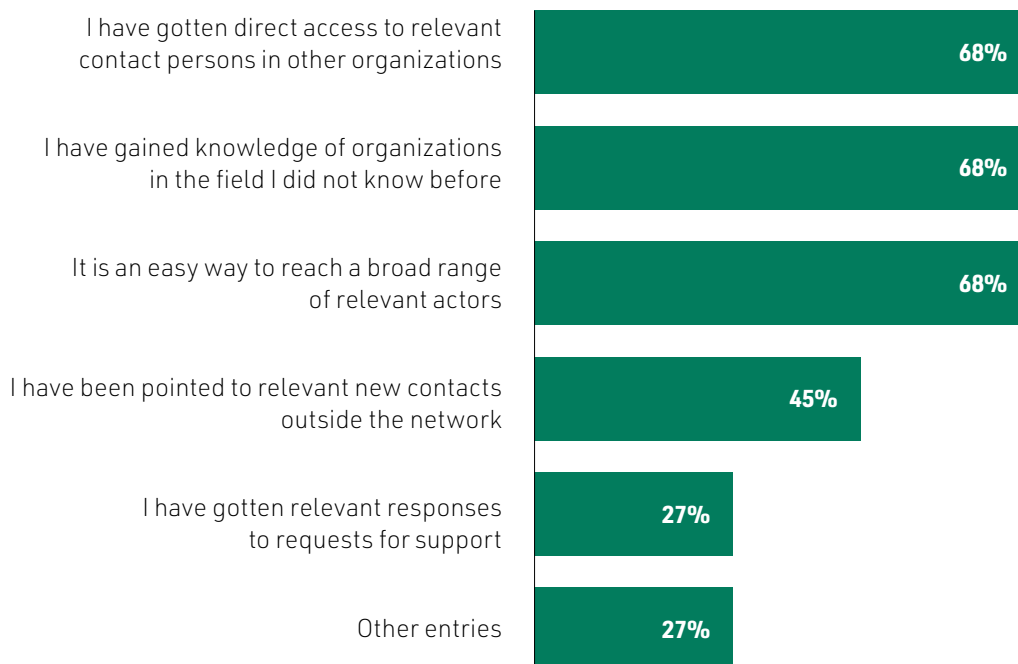
OVERCOMING COMMUNITY BARRIERS BY BUILDING RELATIONS, TRUST, AND COMMUNITY

An integral part of establishing a global network to join up rapid response mechanisms is building deeper and closer connections across organizations in the civic space support ecosystem to counter the challenge of fragmentation. In this regard, the interviews and the online survey did not only reveal barriers. When asked about the added value of being a member of the BRT Network, 2 out of 3 reported that they have gained knowledge of organizations in the field that they did not know before, have found the network an easy way to reach a broad range of actors, and have gotten direct access to relevant contact persons in other organizations. See more in Figure 7 below:

UNSPLASH/
MARKUS SPISKE

Figure 7:
Self-reported added value for BRT members [online survey]

What has been the added value for you of being in the BRT Network?

I have gotten direct access to relevant contact persons in other organizations	68%
I have gained knowledge of organizations in the field I did not know before	68%
It is an easy way to reach a broad range of relevant actors	68%
I have been pointed to relevant new contacts outside the network	45%
I have gotten relevant responses to requests for support	27%
Other entries	27%

■ WHAT HAS BEEN THE ADDED VALUE FOR YOU OF BEING IN THE BRT NETWORK?

Adding to this, several interviewed BRT members emphasized that the BRT in-person meeting in Amsterdam in 2022 was valuable, as it brought members closer together, leading to enhanced coordination. This underlines that the BRT Network has the potential to bring rapid response mechanisms together, leading to better support of human rights defenders with rapid response mechanisms, which can accommodate their specific circumstances and provide more holistic support.

Beyond bringing people together, an essential component that must be emphasized is the establishment of trust. Whether it is the trust between members of the BRT Network or the trust between member organizations and the human rights activists they seek to serve, trust is the core currency. While the first year of implementing the BRT Network was characterized by getting things done – setting up the structure and platform, finding and onboarding members – the BRT now needs to prioritize building trust. This is closely related to building community and building deeper and closer connections. An important first step is to create more familiarity among BRT members, for example by devoting time to get to know each other during the annual in-person meetings or during the monthly regional online meetings. However, it is also about creating a culture

of tolerance, learning, and reciprocity. One aspect of this is creating mutuality and reciprocity on the online platform, for example, that one can expect to be answered within an appropriate time limit when posting requests on the online platform. This can be secured by more explicitly expressing an expectation of minimum levels of engagement and response time in the community guidelines and onboarding process. By consciously taking small steps to foster a sense of connectedness, relations, trust, and reciprocity, the BRT can develop a culture of trust and community. This can have a significant impact on enhancing collaboration, encouraging open communication, and fostering a supportive environment within the network.

When asked about the added value of being a member of the BRT Network, 2 out of 3 reported that they have gained knowledge of organizations in the field that they did not know before, find it an easy way to reach a broad range of actors, and have gotten a direct access to relevant contact persons in other organizations.

GETTY IMAGES/HKUN LAT

OVERCOMING ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS BY SIMPLIFYING THE INFRASTRUCTURE AROUND COORDINATION

ISTOCK/MIHAJLO MARICIC

The barriers that emerged at the organizational level are centered around the basic infrastructure and coordination in the network, encompassing both external and internal dimensions. Externally, building and extending the community will remedy the issues around balancing heterogeneity and homogeneity in the network. Therefore, the BRT should connect with more and extend its membership circle in the future, and by that, create more and deeper diversity and represent more voices. This will accommodate the demand for more heterogeneity of rapid response mechanisms – also when it comes to being able to represent and accommodate the various definitions of what constitutes a human rights activist, as highlighted in the interviews. However, it will also accommodate the demand for more homogeneity by increasing the number of similar rapid response mechanisms.

Another aspect is the internal issue of creating more familiarity among the existing members. Our interviews revealed that members have too limited a knowledge of each other to reach out for bi-lateral coordination. Creating a member directory – along with devoting time to create deeper relations at the in-person meetings – is a basic step to take in the direction of creating familiarity within the network. In relation to this, an important aspect to consider is the regional structure of the online platform. Members uniformly mentioned the need for strengthening the regional support infrastructure to overcome coordination barriers and meet the needs of specific contexts and developments. To achieve this, a suggested approach is to establish monthly regional meetings. These meetings provide a dedicated space for members to collaborate on concrete cases, share updates on recent regional developments, and explore the potential for joint responses to regional challenges. At the time of writing, monthly regional meetings have already been implemented to enhance coordination efforts and effectively address the unique needs of each region.

Expounding on straightforward solutions, the issues around the online platform – that it is too complicated and formal – should be accommodated by simplifying the platform and making it more accessible. At the time of writing, this has already been done by reducing the number of channels and threads. Further, the security guidelines should be simplified so that they don't become a hindrance to member engagement on the platform.

Moving beyond straightforward solutions, we encounter the issue of the existence of and coordination in like-minded networks. Whether the BRT should merge with these must be based on strategic considerations involving the BRT members and is beyond the scope of this report. This decision should involve considerations of the burden of coordination as well as issues of trust, familiarity, and much more. Would merging independent networks reduce the amount of coordination in separate networks? Would it negatively or positively impact the levels of engagement, trust, and familiarity? It is crucial to carefully consider all these factors before strategically and collectively deciding on this matter.

OVERCOMING INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS

ISTOCK/ MELITAS

Overcoming community and organizational barriers is important but so is understanding the psychological processes and their effects that may become an obstacle to the success of the network. Barriers on the individual level identified in the interviews were all related to balancing members' primary work and the burden of onboarding to the network, accessing the online platform, and coordinating on the online platform. To reduce these burdens, three solutions were identified. First, the onboarding process needs to be lightened to consume less time and energy. This involves shortening the two-hour-long recording that introduces the online platform and provides security training. At the time of writing, this is being replaced by a 15-minute video recording covering the same issues more briefly. Second, peer learning on how to integrate accessing the online platform into members' work routines should be facilitated through optional online learning sessions for, with, and by BRT members. While some members found it easy and unproblematic to access and use the platform, others found it complicated. Implementing peer models of learning can provide support to individual members and foster increased engagement and traffic on the online platform. Third, though already mentioned as a solution to institutional barriers, it is crucial to prioritize devoting time

to social networking during the monthly online meetings and at the annual in-person meetings. By building community and engagement, the pull factors towards the network will be strengthened and can mitigate the push factors such as time-consumption barriers.

Concluding on the above, the lessons learned from the implementation of the BRT Network provide valuable insights for enhancing collaboration and overcoming barriers in this and similar global civil society networks. By addressing community, organizational, and individual barriers, we can cultivate a stronger network that remains relevant and impactful. The successful implementation of these lessons holds the potential for the BRT Network to thrive as a dynamic platform for collaboration, resource distribution, and advocacy support. With a shared commitment to learning and growth, we can pave the way for a stronger and more effective network that contributes to positive change on a global scale.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the first year of implementing the pilot phase of the BRT Network, the urgency of collaborating on referrals, verifications, match-funding, double-funding, and joint initiatives among rapid response mechanisms has only become more apparent. However, the challenges and barriers to coordinating globally on sensitive cases have also manifested themselves. Based on our experiences of facilitating the BRT Network, we will conclude this analysis by presenting three recommendations for civil society collaborations in the future, extending beyond the individual, institutional, and community levels presented above.

RECOMMENDATION 1: CREATE MEMBER OWNERSHIP

- Explore co-designing strategies and processes
- Expand and explore new collaborative approaches
- Nurture collective power and leadership

During the initial year of the BRT Network, the concrete configuration of the network had to be decided upon and established. Anchoring decisions in the Steering Committee enforced ownership and, by that, secured a democratic governance structure. However, striking the right balance between democratic governance with member ownership and efficient governance proved to be a challenging task. Based on the feedback emerging from the interviews and online survey, it became evident that some of the solutions implemented, such as onboarding procedures and security measures, may not fully align with the preferences and needs of the members. While numerous practical decisions and implementations were carried out in the first year, it is important for the governance structure to evolve towards an even more democratic form in the future, involving not only the Steering Committee but all members of the BRT Network. As such, the practice of shared and distributed models of decision-making and control shall be imperative in all future processes. Therefore, the BRT Network and similar civil society collaborations should explore co-designing strategies and processes, expanding and exploring new collaborative approaches, and nurturing collective power and leadership. By embracing these principles, networks can foster a sense of inclusivity and ownership, enable active participation from all members, and drive networks forward in a democratic and effective manner.

RECOMMENDATION 2: HOLD SPACE FOR THE COMPLEXITIES OF PARTICIPATION

- Apply an accessible, participatory coordination model
- Embrace diverse channels and avenues for coordination

A participatory model also involves a deeper understanding of the complexities of participation. Even though the BRT infrastructure was initially designed for coordination on the online platform, this does not mean coordination must happen there. The interviews revealed that a significant portion of the BRT coordination happens bilaterally outside of the online platform. This learning implies that the BRT Network is not limited to its formal and physical structures – it is a community of practice. Applying an accessible, participatory coordination model in civil society networks allows us to experience the power of interconnectedness as well as the inherent complexities that come with it. By embracing diverse channels and avenues for coordination, networks can create an inclusive environment that values different forms of engagement and knowledge sharing. This approach enhances collaboration, strengthens relationships, and fosters a sense of belonging within networks, ensuring that the networks' potentials are fully realized, benefiting members and the causes they champion.

RECOMMENDATION 3: STRIKE THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN SECURITY AND THE CONDITIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

- Reduce complexity through the implementation of clear and user-friendly security guidelines and provide accessible resources and training
- Protect members while maintaining an environment that encourages active participation and amplifies the collective impact of their work

Digital technologies have long posed a severe threat to human rights defenders through surveillance, criminalization of online activism, internet shutdowns, misinformation, and more. Due to the online nature of BRT coordination, digital security is a top priority to protect the rights of the people that we seek to serve. However, one needs to consider the potential trade-offs – are security measures blocking engagement on the coordination platform and by that reducing the collective impact of our work? Civil society networks working in sensitive contexts need to strike a balance and consider the trade-offs that stringent security measures may bring. To achieve this balance, networks should focus on reducing complexity through the implementation of clear and user-friendly security guidelines and providing accessible resources and training. By doing so, networks can effectively protect their members while maintaining an environment that encourages active participation and amplifies the collective impact of their work.

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