

POLICY BRIEF



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

RESILIENCE IN ACTION

CIVIL SOCIETY'S
ROLE IN PREVENTING
AND COMBATING
ORGANIZED CRIME



**RESILIENCE
FUND**

Supporting community
responses to organized crime

MAY 2025

A GI-TOC contribution to the 15th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice

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SUMMARY

This policy brief draws on the five-year experience of the Resilience Fund from 2019 to 2024 to make a compelling case for recognizing and empowering civil society as a critical front-line actor in the fight against organized crime. At a time when transnational organized crime is growing in complexity and reach, and when civic space is shrinking globally, this brief reflects on the tangible impact of community-based responses and outlines a forward-looking agenda for policy, funding and institutional reform.

This brief will be presented at the upcoming 34th session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) in Vienna, which provides a unique and vital platform to reaffirm the importance of international cooperation against organized crime. Published one year ahead of the 15th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (henceforth the Crime Congress) in Abu Dhabi (April 2026), it aligns with the Congress theme: 'Accelerating crime prevention, criminal justice and the rule of law: protecting people and planet and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the digital age'.

We outline concrete ways in which civil society is central to crime prevention and response, demonstrating why the people carrying out this important work need to be supported and protected in their fight against organized crime.

Key points

- Civil society plays a vital role as a first line of defence against organized crime, particularly in contexts where state presence is weak or compromised.
- The Resilience Fund has supported over 360 projects in 67 countries, demonstrating the global demand for community-driven approaches to crime prevention.
- Civil society contributes through direct action, education, monitoring, international cooperation and policy advocacy.
- Targeted support and international solidarity can empower local actors, turning victims of organized crime into agents of change.
- As organized crime expands, exploiting digital tools and governance gaps, civil society must be equally supported to adapt and respond effectively.

- Shrinking civic space threatens the sustainability and effectiveness of community-based responses to organized crime. Strengthening civil society networks and creating counter-narratives to criminal governance are essential, while making impact visible through strategic communication and advocacy.
- Policymakers should recognize civil society actors as strategic partners in combating organized crime and include them in national and international strategies against organized crime with proper protection and sustained resources.
- Long-term, flexible funding is crucial for sustaining resilience-based strategies globally.
- Governments, international organizations and the private sector all have roles to play in supporting community-based crime-fighting initiatives.



INTRODUCTION

On 15 May 2017, Griselda Triana, a journalist based in Mexico, received the call she had long feared: her husband, Javier Valdez — also a journalist and co-founder of *Ríodoce*, a newspaper in Culiacán, Sinaloa — had been murdered by the Sinaloa Cartel. Javier was one of Mexico's most respected journalists covering organized crime, and his assassination shocked both the journalism and human rights communities. Following his death, Griselda and her children were forced to flee their home, their grief intensified by fear and danger.

In Mexico, where journalism is one of the deadliest professions,¹ reporting on organized crime can amount to a death sentence — not only for journalists, but also their families.² According to the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, 72 journalists have been killed in Mexico in the past decade.³ In addition to the threat of assassination, journalists are routinely subjected to cyberattacks, surveillance, intimidation and spurious legal action. These acts of repression often come from criminal groups as well as corrupt public officials who aim to suppress independent reporting and silence dissent.

In the face of ongoing threats and a culture of impunity, Griselda found strength in solidarity. Supported by a network of civil society actors and colleagues, she stood up to demand justice for her husband and all those silenced for exposing the truth. As one of the first Resilience Fund partners, she documented the stories of families of murdered journalists across Mexico. Her work culminated in a powerful report that she delivered to senior government officials, giving voice to victims long ignored. Today, Griselda leads *Tejidos Solidarios*, a national network advocating for the rights and protection of families of murdered and disappeared journalists. Her journey is a powerful testament to how targeted support, rooted in networking and solidarity, can empower individuals to build change from the ground up.

Griselda's story is one of many. Since its launch in 2019, the Resilience Fund has supported more than 360 projects from 285 individuals and organizations in 67 countries working to protect their communities from organized crime. The Fund was created with a bold vision: to place trust in local actors, recognize civil society as a front-line defender against organized crime, and shift the global narrative from one of vulnerability to one of strength and agency.

This policy brief takes stock of the Fund's impact, reflects on lessons learned and charts the path forward. Its objectives are threefold:



Indigenous women from the Rarámuri community in Chihuahua, Mexico, supported by the Resilience Fund.

Photo: Awe Tibuame

- **Reflect on the Resilience Fund's impact.** Look back on the Fund's achievements over the past five years, showcasing how targeted support has empowered grassroots actors and strengthened community resilience to organized crime, while also revealing common strategic responses that have enabled the development of broader guidelines for communities facing similar challenges.
- **Reframe the narrative.** Shift the focus from civil society actors as passive victims to active agents of change, emphasizing their crucial role in responding to and mitigating the harms of organized crime.
- **Advocate for sustained and increased support.** Make a compelling case for long-term investment in resilience-based strategies, highlighting how community-led responses have challenged criminal economies.

With organized crime changing and expanding at an alarming pace, this reflection comes at a critical time. While crime is traditionally framed as a problem confined to the so-called Global South, recent data reveals that Europe saw the highest overall rise in criminality in 2023.⁴ In Nordic countries, for example, criminal groups are increasingly targeting young people for recruitment – showing how fragile social environments, even in highly developed societies, can become fertile ground for organized crime.⁵ These dynamics are part of a broader transformation: criminal networks are not only expanding their reach, but also adapting their tactics by leveraging digital tools, exploiting governance gaps and, in some cases, aligning with hybrid threat actors.

Transnational organized crime has far-reaching consequences. It undermines governance, erodes trust in institutions, weakens the rule of law and impedes progress towards each of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It also distorts markets and discourages legitimate business investment by introducing unpredictability and violence. This affects not only vulnerable communities, but the broader economic and political stability that states and private actors rely on. Given these challenges, there is a shared interest among civil society, states and businesses in tackling organized crime. Cooperation, when rooted in mutual respect and informed by evidence, can be a powerful force for resilience.

Against this backdrop, the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) provides a unique and vital platform to reaffirm the importance of international cooperation. As the primary policymaking body of the United Nations in this field, the CCPCJ plays a central role in shaping global responses to organized crime. It is therefore the ideal forum to highlight the experiences of civil society actors on the ground, advocate for community-centred approaches and promote resilient, rules-based systems that serve the public good. The CCPCJ is also the preparatory body for the Crime Congress, the next iteration of which takes place in Abu Dhabi in April 2026. The Congress sets the political agenda for the coming years at the United Nations and therefore needs to take heed of civil society's latest experiences.

This brief serves as both a reflection of the transformative potential of civil society and a call to action. Organized crime is an increasingly perilous global challenge, but equally concerning is the lack of capability among civil society actors for resistance, innovation and solidarity. By learning from those most affected and supporting those on the front lines, we can help build a more resilient, just and secure future for all.



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESILIENCE FUND

When the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) was founded in 2013, it was clear that tackling organized crime meant more than mapping illicit networks – it also required understanding how communities resist and respond. The notion that those affected by organized crime are simply passive victims is misleading. Even in the most violent and fragmented environments, civil society actors work with courage and creativity to protect their communities, hold authorities accountable and challenge the power of criminal groups.

In 2014, the GI-TOC launched a pilot initiative in Sinaloa, Mexico, documenting how communities organized themselves in response to violence. The findings were striking. Local journalists formed alliances with civil society groups to expose corruption and criminal collusion. Women led persistent efforts to protect youth from gang recruitment. Artists used cultural expression to promote healing and rebuild the social fabric after the killings of community leaders.

Inspired by this, the GI-TOC expanded the pilot to Guatemala, the Philippines and South Africa. While the contexts varied in terms of criminal economies, governance structures and levels of corruption, a common pattern emerged: resilience to organized crime was not just possible, it was already happening.

This insight became the foundation for the Resilience Dialogues, a series of gatherings where civil society actors shared strategies, built networks and reflected on their work. In spaces where rights defenders, activists and journalists operate under constant threat, these dialogues offered rare opportunities for connection, learning and innovation. From them emerged promising approaches to counter criminal influence – approaches that required support to flourish.

To meet this need, the GI-TOC launched the Resilience Fund on the sidelines of the 28th CCPCJ in May 2019, with support from the Norwegian government. Shaped through a stakeholder consultation in Vienna – with input from civil society, academia, media and diplomacy – the Fund was envisioned as an innovative, non-duplicative mechanism to support front-line actors working in complex, high-risk environments.

Resilience is a term used across many disciplines to describe the ability of systems – whether individuals, ecosystems or communities – to absorb shocks, adapt to change and recover from adversity. In the context of organized crime and criminal governance, resilience is not just about survival. It is about creativity, reinvention and the capacity of people to act collectively in the face of systemic



Community members at a resilience dialogue in Nebaj, Guatemala, in 2019. Photo: Resilience Fund, GI-TOC/
Josue Decavele

violence and institutional neglect while maintaining their core functions, identity and social bonds. Resilience allows communities to resist and recover, to build alternatives to violence and to imagine different futures.

The Resilience Fund provides flexible financial and operational support to civil society actors fighting on the front lines against organized crime. It works as a grant-making mechanism that builds on the GI-TOC's global network and ongoing efforts to incubate resilience in communities affected by criminal governance. The Fund helps to identify and strengthen critical local actors, enhance their capacity to respond and integrate them into broader networks to amplify their impact. The Fund's model emphasizes trust-based support, prioritizing local leadership and community-driven strategies. Many initiatives that the Fund supports have since been scaled or replicated in other contexts, demonstrating that the potential for resilience is not just real, but contagious.

Since the Resilience Fund's inception, the world has greatly changed. Civil society space is shrinking in many regions, constrained by diminishing funding, rising authoritarianism, armed conflict and a deepening global climate of distrust. In some places, civil society organizations (CSOs) are wrongly cast as adversaries of the state, an idea rooted in fear and misinformation. But these organizations are not enemies – they are essential partners for states in building safe, just and accountable societies. They bring local knowledge, credibility, the legitimacy that comes from deep community roots and an unwavering commitment to the communities they serve. And they can, and do, work constructively with governments and international actors to address transnational threats.

'To me, resilience means the ability to withstand adversity, adapt to change and recover from hardship. In my work, it takes the form of empowering women in Ghana's Upper East region to move away from dependence on illegal mining and toward sustainable livelihoods – while also providing legal aid and mental health support.'

Agnes Atanga, Resilience Fund partner

The Resilience Fund was created to challenge traditional, top-down approaches to crime prevention by placing trust in local leadership. What began as a flexible and responsive grant-making mechanism has evolved into much more. Through regional retreats, in-person gatherings and virtual meetings, the Fund has nurtured an ecosystem of solidarity and empathy – one where individuals working in isolation find community, shared purpose and mutual support across borders. These connections have strengthened both personal resilience and collective action in the face of enormous risk.

Today, the Resilience Fund is a vehicle for direct support as well as a platform that amplifies front line voices, enables innovation and helps communities pioneer, co-create and continuously improve responses to organized crime from the ground up. It demonstrates, above all, that those most affected by organized crime are not just passive victims, but vital agents of change.

Over the past five years, several key lessons have shaped the evolution of the Resilience Fund and deepened its impact:

- **Equitable partnerships are essential and must be intentionally cultivated.** The Resilience Fund is increasingly integrating the principles of locally led development into its grant-making model. This means centring local leadership, particularly of those most affected by organized crime, and reinforcing their ownership and decision-making power. It also means reducing structural barriers to funding by simplifying access, building trust-based relationships and promoting community actors' self-reliance across diverse fields – including education and youth development, generating employment opportunities, cultural resilience and digital inclusion. We recognize that local organizations often bring a deeper contextual understanding, operate with greater agility and hold critical, independent perspectives that are vital for systemic change. Throughout this document, we refer to our grantees as 'local partners' or 'partners' to reflect this commitment. We believe that equitable partnerships are rooted in mutual respect, shared leadership and the recognition that those directly affected by organized crime are not simply recipients of aid, but essential actors in shaping solutions and driving systemic change.
- **Support must be holistic, not just financial.** While flexible funding that allows local partners to use resources based on shifting priorities and emerging risks remains essential, it is equally important to offer additional tools and resources based on their needs. This could include access to mentorship, mental health support, training workshops, secure digital tools and opportunities for collaboration. Investing in these areas strengthens individual projects and the broader ecosystem of resilience.
- **Centring affected communities transforms narratives and strategies.** Challenging the perception of affected communities as submissive actors or passive victims is critical. By amplifying stories of resistance, particularly from women, youth and indigenous actors, we highlight lived experiences,

'Resilience for me is the ability to transform an absurd, meaningless or adverse reality. It's about stopping and reflecting, gathering all the tools and strengths you may not have realized you had, and finding a way to look elsewhere in that reality. Transformation goes hand in hand with resistance, but it's not resistance for the sake of resisting. It's about transforming the reality that doesn't hold you back or feel like a sacrifice. Unlike resistance, which often feels like carrying a burden, resilience is about finding the tools that allow you to continue living with peace and happiness, despite adversity or hopelessness. It's about looking for hope in everything around you, in yourself and in others.'

Patricia Mayorga, Resilience Fund partner

confront stigma and illustrate how those facing systemic violence are already part of the solution. The civil society actors we work with not only expose the roots of vulnerability, but also demonstrate how communities confront systemic challenges such as youth recruitment, gender-based violence, land dispossession and environmental crime. This approach humanizes the issue while calling attention to the structural forces – such as political elites, private interests and complicit institutions – that perpetuate harm and benefit from impunity.

- **Solidarity fosters resilience.** Through regional convenings and virtual platforms, the Fund has helped build transnational networks of trust and shared purpose. These connections are not accessory – they are central to sustaining both personal resilience and collective action in high-risk environments. Solidarity, particularly in contexts where isolation can deepen vulnerability, becomes a lifeline enabling actors to share strategies, amplify each other's voices and stand stronger, together.

Learning as we grow: embracing responsibility

Building a global network to support and unite civil society actors has been difficult. While we are proud of the work we have done and are continually inspired by the incredible courage and tenacity of the individuals and organizations we support, the Resilience Fund has also faced challenges that demand honest reflection and a commitment to doing better.

One major challenge has been balancing the need for flexibility with the need for long-term, sustainable support. Our partners often operate in rapidly changing, high-risk environments, yet our ability to respond swiftly has sometimes been constrained by bureaucratic processes. In certain instances, this has led to delays in funding disbursements and, at times, inadequate support when time was critical. We are learning that for flexibility to be truly effective, it must be matched by systems that are streamlined, anticipatory and responsive.

Measuring resilience and impact has also proven difficult. While we have made strides in tracking progress, resilience is complex and not easily captured through traditional metrics. Our monitoring and evaluation tools demand continuous refinements. In the coming years, we are committed to developing more effective, community-driven frameworks for measuring what matters: long-term safety, agency and local capacity to respond to organized crime.

Security remains a constant and pressing challenge. Many of our partners have faced prosecution, harassment, incarceration and even armed attacks. Since 2019, we have recorded 25 security incidents directly linked to retaliation against activities to confront organized crime that were implemented through Resilience Fund grants.

'For me, resilience means restoring the motivation and support that communities in north-east India need to fight wildlife and nature crimes. These communities were already trying to make a difference, but they lacked the backing to do it effectively. The Resilience Fund helped bring that support to the ground.'

Jimmy Borah, Resilience Fund partner

Calling out illicit activities

In Laos, environmental activist and Resilience Fund partner Ouch Leng was arrested while investigating illegal logging inside a national park, forcing him and his family to flee the country.⁶ Leng's survival has depended on international partners and flexible donors who understand the urgency of life-threatening situations, as well as journalists who refuse to remain silent.

Similarly, in Venezuela, the newspaper where Clavel Rangel worked investigating disappearances connected to organized crime was raided and ransacked. Rangel, an inaugural Resilience Fund fellow, fled the country after receiving threats related to her reporting. Supported by the Fund, she rebuilt her work in exile and later co-founded the Venezuelan Amazon Journalists Network, an initiative dedicated to fostering training, knowledge exchange and collaboration among journalists. ■

These stories are powerful reminders of both the importance of our mission and the limits of our current approach. They highlight the resilience of our partners, but also the vulnerabilities in our systems of support. We know we can, and must, do more to anticipate risk, accelerate crisis response and offer sustainable pathways forward. The past five years have been a period of intense learning, experimentation and growth. We have built a global network, tested a bold model and gathered invaluable insights. As we move into the next phase, we do so with humility and renewed purpose, determined to refine our tools, improve our systems and become the kind of partner that civil society actors need and deserve in their fight for justice and safety.



IMPACT OF COMMUNITY-BASED RESPONSES

As the United Nations has consistently recognized, including in the outcome documents of the Crime Congresses (see the extract below), transnational organized crime poses a significant challenge to societies worldwide, as it undermines the rule of law, erodes public trust in institutions and perpetuates cycles of violence and corruption. In this context, civil society plays a vital role and includes a variety of organizations – such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community groups and grassroots movements, which operate independently of the government to promote social change, accountability and justice. The role of civil society in combating organized crime is multifaceted, focusing on advocacy, monitoring, direct action, education and international cooperation.

Opening paragraphs of the 2021 UN Crime Congress ‘Kyoto Declaration’

1. We express deep concern about the negative impact of crime on the rule of law, human rights, socio-economic development, public health and security, the environment and cultural heritage;
2. We also express deep concern that crime is becoming increasingly transnational, organized and complex and that criminals are increasingly exploiting new and emerging technologies, including the Internet, to carry out their illicit activities, thus creating unprecedented challenges in preventing and combating existing crimes, as well as new and emerging forms of crime; [...]
10. We undertake to enhance multidisciplinary efforts to prevent and combat crime through cooperation and coordination between law enforcement and other criminal justice institutions, and other governmental sectors, as well as to support their work, by engaging in and fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships with the private sector, civil society, academia and the scientific community, and with other relevant stakeholders as appropriate [...].⁷ ■

Direct action and community engagement

At the community level, civil society helps combat organized crime through direct action and grassroots initiatives; these efforts often target the root causes of crime by focusing on prevention and support. This is especially pertinent for this year's 34th CCPCJ, which will consider a resolution on crime prevention, tabled by Finland – the first time that prevention has been a focus of the CCPCJ for many years. Community-based programmes that focus on youth engagement, education and employment offer alternatives to criminal activities by tackling the socio-economic factors that drive individuals toward organized crime. By addressing these root causes, CSOs help build more resilient and empowered communities.

In addition to prevention, CSOs often provide essential services to victims of crime, including legal assistance, counselling and access to rehabilitation programmes. These services support victims in their recovery and empower them to seek justice and speak out against crime.

Research supports the impact of such community-based interventions, demonstrating that fostering local engagement and cooperation among residents can significantly reduce crime rates.⁸ These grassroots strategies not only enhance immediate safety, but also build social cohesion – a pillar for sustainable crime reduction.

Grassroots action against forced disappearances in Mexico

In Mexico's Sinaloa state, where the war on drugs has led to widespread disappearances, Colectivo de Búsqueda Sabuesos Guerreras is a women-led collective dedicated to finding their disappeared relatives after being abandoned by the state. The group was founded by Maria Isabel, whose son Yosimar Reyes went missing in 2017. When authorities failed to help, she took matters into her own hands, soon realizing that many other women were experiencing the same anguish.

The Sabuesos Guerreras specialize in forensics, investigation techniques and identifying clandestine graves. They also utilize digital tools to organize and share case files while providing support to victims' families. A key strength of the collective lies in the emotional solidarity it offers: by coming together, these women have created a space of mutual care, resilience, and healing where shared grief becomes a source of strength rather than isolation.

In partnership with other civil society groups, the Sabuesos Guerreras challenge corruption and impunity, advocating for justice and systemic change. Their work showcases how grassroots efforts can empower communities to resist organized crime and seek accountability in the face of state failure. ■

'Our project, supported by the Resilience Fund, focuses on documenting the history of forced displacement and criminal violence in the Barrancas del Cobre region of the Sierra Tarahumara in Mexico, with a special focus on how these issues have impacted women. Working with the communities, we combined ecosystem loss mapping, podcasts and timelines to help them document their struggles and reclaim their voice. These tools allowed the communities, especially women, to strengthen their defence of their land and dignity. The resilience dialogue we organized in Chihuahua helped build even more momentum. Today, the community feels stronger, more determined to share their story, demand justice and continue their fight to return to their ancestral territory.'

Patricia Mayorga, Resilience Fund partner

Education and awareness-raising

Education and awareness-raising make up another cornerstone of civil society's efforts. CSOs often engage in public education campaigns to inform citizens about the dangers posed by organized crime and the importance of reporting suspicious activities – for example, raising awareness among consumers about the effects of counterfeiting.⁹ By educating the public about the consequences of their purchasing decisions, civil society can help reduce demand for counterfeit goods, thereby undermining a financial pillar of criminal organizations. These initiatives empower communities to take an active role in resisting criminal influence, fostering a culture of vigilance and resilience.

CSOs also help promote civic engagement, encouraging citizens to participate in anti-crime initiatives. By organizing community forums, workshops and training sessions, they can equip individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to counter organized crime effectively. For instance, programmes aimed at educating young people about the risks and consequences associated with organized crime can serve as powerful tools for prevention, reducing vulnerability to criminal recruitment.

Building belonging through education in South Africa

In communities where gangs offer one of the few visible paths to belonging, education becomes a powerful tool for resistance. In the Cape Flats of South Africa, an area shaped by systemic inequality, violence and gang governance, MathMoms is using education and awareness-raising to disrupt cycles of trauma and criminal recruitment.

Founded in 2016 by Sonja Cilliers, MathMoms trains unemployed women, many of them mothers, to become emotional mentors and academic tutors for at-risk children. In partnership with local schools, women complete a three-month training programme focused on trauma awareness, emotional intelligence and community leadership. This equips them not only to support children's learning, but also address trauma in their own lives, breaking intergenerational cycles of violence and neglect. ■



Photo: MathMoms

At the heart of MathMoms' work is relationship-building. By fostering safe, nurturing connections with children, the programme helps challenge the appeal of gang life. In this way, MathMoms raises awareness among young people about non-violent responses to adversity and offers a meaningful alternative to criminal structures of support and identity.

The initiative's impact extends beyond the classroom. Women who complete the programme often go on to pursue further education and enjoy stable employment and roles of influence in their communities. One participant, previously a drug user since age 16, has now been sober for two years, crediting the sense of belonging and purpose she found through MathMoms.

MathMoms is an example of how education, mentorship and community support can counteract the influence of organized crime. By investing in women and nurturing intergenerational networks of care, the initiative fosters resilience, empowers civic engagement and redefines community safety from the ground up. ■

Monitoring and accountability

In addition to advocacy, civil society monitors state actions and holds authorities accountable, particularly in contexts where state institutions are perceived as corrupt or ineffective. Organized crime often thrives in environments where corruption and collusion are prevalent between law enforcement and criminal organizations, making the watchdog function of CSOs indispensable.¹⁰ By scrutinizing state institutions, CSOs promote transparency, ensuring adherence to the rule of law and exposing misconduct. This creates a less conducive environment for officials to tolerate or collude with organized crime, thereby fostering a culture of accountability.¹¹ Furthermore, by advocating for systemic reforms, CSOs strengthen governance, reduce vulnerabilities and close the gaps that criminal organizations exploit.

Monitoring should focus not only on states but also criminal groups themselves. Global networks such as the GI-TOC and the Resilience Fund demonstrate how CSOs can be instrumental in providing more targeted, effective responses by offering localized insights into criminal operations. In doing so, CSOs can reinforce the rule of law and ensure a comprehensive approach to accountability that includes both state and nonstate actors.

Investigative journalism as a tool for accountability in North Macedonia

In a region where organized crime and corruption often operate behind a veil of political protection, Scoop Macedonia stands out as a critical watchdog. This investigative journalism NGO monitors the behaviour of public officials, tracing their accumulation of wealth, mapping their ties to business elites and uncovering potential links to criminal networks. By exposing how political power can be used to shield or even enable organized crime, Scoop contributes directly to increased transparency and accountability.

Scoop's investigations, often shared through documentaries and cross-border collaborations, go beyond individual scandals. They reveal systemic patterns of abuse and impunity, highlighting the structural vulnerabilities that organized crime exploits. The organization also partners with international media networks and civil society groups to follow financial flows and expose corruption that transcends national borders.

Through persistent scrutiny and public reporting, Scoop Macedonia plays an essential role in strengthening democratic institutions and reinforcing the rule of law. Its work empowers citizens with information, pressures authorities to respond and challenges the culture of silence that allows corruption and organized crime to flourish. ■

International cooperation and networking

The complexities of organized crime require a coordinated response that goes beyond national borders. It demands proactive and strategically focused efforts among policymakers, law enforcement agencies and international organizations.¹² CSOs can facilitate this cooperation by sharing information, best practices and resources, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of anti-organized crime initiatives. International CSO networks can also play a crucial role in addressing transnational organized crime. For example, organizations focused on arms and human trafficking, and drug smuggling, often collaborate across borders to share intelligence, coordinate actions and advocate for policy changes.

'Before receiving the Resilience Fund grant, my work focused mainly on providing vocational training to women in illegal mining communities, but I hadn't had the opportunity to truly assess their needs. The grant changed that. It enabled us to take a holistic approach, combining economic empowerment, mental health support, legal aid and policy advocacy. We expanded from one to three communities, and I was able to engage directly with policymakers, including members of parliament, to advocate for mining law reform. The flexibility of the Fund, both in how the funding was disbursed and how reporting was handled, allowed me to focus on the work itself, rather than being tied up in bureaucracy.'

Agnes Atanga, Resilience Fund partner

Cross-border collaboration to disrupt illegal wildlife trade between Nepal and China

Greenhood Nepal, through its efforts to disrupt international wildlife trafficking routes, is expanding community awareness and front-line enforcement capacity in critical border regions. Situated near the Nepalese border with China, Langtang National Park and the Gaurishankar Conservation Area are critical zones for illegal wildlife trade. Through sustained engagement with local communities and authorities, Greenhood Nepal fosters cross-border cooperation and strengthens grassroots resilience to organized environmental crime.

By building trust with community-based anti-poaching units and enforcement agencies along trade routes and border check posts, Greenhood Nepal has enhanced local intelligence gathering and early detection of trafficking activity. In 2024, the organization developed and piloted an illegal wildlife trade detection and wildlife parts identification guide, incorporating feedback from local communities to ensure relevance and usability. This collaborative approach has already yielded results: intelligence provided by community members contributed to the seizure of two shipments of pangolin scales, an important success in breaking trafficking chains.

Greenhood Nepal's efforts highlight how civil society organizations can bridge enforcement gaps in transnational crime by empowering communities, facilitating information sharing and strengthening ties between local actors and state agencies. ■

Advocacy for policy reform

One of civil society's primary functions is advocating for policy reform. CSOs engage in lobbying efforts to influence legislation and public policies aimed at addressing the root causes of organized crime. These efforts can include pushing for stronger anti-corruption measures, enhanced law enforcement capabilities and the safeguarding of human rights. Through advocacy, CSOs can also spur the development of innovative techniques and tools to counter organized crime.¹³ By raising awareness, they mobilize public opinion and urge policymakers to prioritize anti-crime initiatives.

Civil society also amplifies the voices of marginalized communities that are often disproportionately affected by organized crime.¹⁴ For instance, studies have shown that families with low educational attainment or those experiencing migration-induced dislocation are at a higher risk of becoming involved in organized crime, particularly among youth.¹⁵ By advocating for their rights and addressing systemic biases, CSOs contribute to a more equitable and comprehensive approach to combating crime.

Heightened activity and coordination are also evident at the multilateral level, where civil society has become more organized in advocating for reform and sharing their perspectives on transnational organized crime. The 12th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC COP12) saw the largest-ever contingent of civil society participation, with more than 200 NGOs registered to attend (the GI-TOC alone registered a delegation of 37 participants).¹⁶ While the increased attention and activity is to be celebrated, civil society faces restrictions at multiple levels, including within the United Nations, and at national and local levels.



Community members organize to help protect Nepal's wildlife from criminal networks. Photo: Greenhood Nepal

Amplifying women community leaders' voices at the UNTOC COP12

In October 2024, seven women community leaders from Africa, Asia and the Americas – supported by the GI-TOC's ECO-SOLVE project and the Resilience Fund – travelled to Vienna to participate in UNTOC COP12. These local actors are at the forefront of building resilience to environmental crimes in their communities, working on issues including illegal logging and mining, and the trafficking of wildlife and natural resources.

Their attendance at COP12 was an important step towards making international discussions on organized crime more inclusive and grounded in community realities. For many of them, it was the first opportunity to engage directly with representatives from member states and UN officials, and explain how environmental crimes are affecting their communities and ecosystems. Their presence brought essential, real-world insights into policy debates, reinforcing the need for responses that are shaped by those most affected.

Their participation also shone a spotlight on the importance of gender perspectives in the fight against organized crime. Women are not only victims of environmental degradation and criminal exploitation but also powerful agents of change. By investing in women leaders and amplifying their advocacy at international platforms such as the UNTOC COP, we move closer to implementing policies that are equitable, representative and responsive to the harms caused by organized crime worldwide.

These civil society actors' contributions at COP12 were a reminder that meaningful policy reform begins by listening – to those who live the consequences as well as those who are actively developing solutions. ■

'I've been working to combat wildlife and nature crimes for over a decade, but communities often lacked the motivation and support to act. The Resilience Fund helped change that. With its support, we were able to form and equip community surveillance and monitoring teams that strengthened the flow of information between local communities and enforcement agencies. That collaboration not only led to a reduction in wildlife crime and greater community awareness but also earned recognition from the government. The Fund's flexible funding allowed us to invest in the right equipment and training, which made our fieldwork far more effective. But there's still a big gap – few donors prioritize wildlife crime, especially the intelligence work that's critical to tackling it. While our current work is ongoing, the future remains uncertain without sustained support.'

Jimmy Borah, Resilience Fund partner

The challenge for civil society

Despite its critical role in combating organized crime, civil society faces several challenges that hinder its effectiveness. One significant obstacle is the threat to the safety of activists and organizations working in this space. As is well documented, activists who challenge powerful criminal networks are often subjected to intimidation, violence or even assassination.¹⁷ It is therefore essential that states recognize and protect civil society, ensuring activists can operate without fear of reprisal.

Another challenge is the limited resources available to many CSOs. Most rely on donations, grants and volunteer support to carry out their work, which constrains their ability to engage in comprehensive anti-organized crime efforts. Moreover, the legal and regulatory frameworks governing civil society activities can either enable or restrict their involvement in such efforts.¹⁸ A supportive legal environment that safeguards the rights of CSOs and fosters their participation in governance is crucial to creating an ecosystem where crime prevention can thrive.

Additionally, while there is substantial anecdotal evidence of the effects that activists and NGOs have in specific areas such as organ trafficking, there is a significant gap in the form of systematic empirical data that assesses their effectiveness in influencing policy and outcomes.¹⁹ This gap highlights the need for further research to quantify the contributions of civil society in the broader fight against organized crime. A deeper understanding of how CSOs shape policy and outcomes could lead to more informed strategies and strengthen the essential role of civil society in crime prevention.

The policy space addressing transnational organized crime also faces unique restrictions on the ability of civil society organizations to participate in policymaking processes, which has been documented widely by the GI-TOC.²⁰

Tapping the potential of civil society

Beyond promoting accountability, advocating for policy reforms and engaging communities in resistance efforts, civil society has the potential to disrupt and reshape the dynamics of organized crime. When citizens actively resist criminal organizations, they create societal pressures that can influence the behaviour and operations of these groups. By mobilizing communities and fostering networks of

resistance, CSOs help dismantle the socio-economic conditions that allow organized crime to flourish. This collective action strengthens resilience, reduces vulnerabilities and contributes to long-term stability, making civil society an indispensable force.²¹

Moreover, CSOs contribute significantly to the development of effective strategies to combat organized crime. However, the success of these efforts is contingent upon a supportive legal and political environment that recognizes the importance of civil society in promoting justice and security. As organized crime evolves, the role of civil society remains essential in ensuring that communities can effectively resist and combat these constant threats.

'Civil society organizations are the bridge between policy and reality. We're the ones translating policies into action on the ground because we live and understand the challenges our communities face. That's why it's so important to include CSOs in policymaking, especially voices of women in vulnerable communities who are often left out. Platforms like the one the GI-TOC provided at the 12th UNTOC Conference of Parties are invaluable for visibility, but we also need more support in areas like storytelling, proposal writing and fundraising to sustain our work. Networking and coalition-building can amplify our impact, but none of this is possible without funding. If policymakers are serious about tackling organized crime, they need to ensure consistent, dedicated support for grassroots initiatives that are already making a difference.'

Agnes Atanga, Resilience Fund partner



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This is an urgent call to action, especially for the delegates who will represent their countries at the 15th Crime Congress in the UAE in 2026. It is a call to recognize that civil society is not a peripheral actor in the fight against organized crime – it is essential. Around the world, community leaders, journalists, youth organizers and grassroots movements are filling governance gaps, countering the narratives of criminal groups and providing safety and solidarity where institutions have faltered. The Kyoto Declaration fell short of recognizing the role of civil society in its outcome declaration; there is therefore an opportunity for the Abu Dhabi declaration to demonstrate a more supportive position on civil society engagement.²²

If we want to build a world where organized crime does not operate with impunity, we must commit to better organizing, protecting and supporting civil society. This requires a new approach rooted in resilience, solidarity and shared responsibility. The future of the global response to organized crime depends on more than military or law enforcement interventions – it hinges on strengthening the social fabric from the ground up.²³

Transnational organized crime is not only a security threat. It undermines development, tears the fabrics of societies, corrodes trust in institutions and flourishes in contexts of inequality and conflict. Addressing it requires a whole-of-society response anchored in community resilience and systemic reform. The Resilience Fund offers a proven model for this approach, as it is flexible, trust-based and globally connected. Its lessons should guide future policy development.

Our vision is of a world in which civil society is not an afterthought, but a central actor and partner in efforts to counter transnational organized crime, and where local resilience is recognized as an essential component of global security.

Policy recommendations

For member states: enable and invest in civil society as a strategic security and development priority

- Position civil society as a front-line actor in national security strategies related to organized crime. Recognize its role in early warning, community protection, reintegration and prevention.
- Institutionalize funding streams for grassroots initiatives, especially in regions where state legitimacy is contested. This includes dedicated budget lines in national crime prevention or public safety programmes.

- Protect civic space and human rights defenders. Governments that undermine civil society erode their own stability and long-term governance capacity. Legislative frameworks must safeguard freedom of association and expression, particularly in fragile contexts.
- Adopt a whole-of-government approach that integrates civil society into the design and delivery of crime prevention strategies, justice reform and social reintegration policies.

For donors and international development actors: prioritize resilience-based, community-led interventions

- Shift from short-term, project-based funding to long-term, flexible support that allows civil society to build institutional resilience and adapt to evolving threats.
- Fund transversal work that connects organized crime to broader development agendas – including gender equality, environmental protection, youth empowerment and urban resilience.
- Encourage South–South cooperation and horizontal learning by investing in platforms for peer exchange and coalition-building among civil society actors.
- Embed civil society engagement in multilateral frameworks, including the UNTOC implementation reviews, SDG reporting mechanisms and regional security platforms.

For the private sector: recognize your stake and align with peacebuilding and anti-crime goals

- Support inclusive local economies and formal livelihoods as well as capacity building that offer viable alternatives to criminal recruitment, especially in marginalized or post-conflict areas.
- Develop responsible investment practices that include due diligence on organized crime risks in supply chains, infrastructure projects and technological platforms.
- Engage with civil society and local actors to enhance context-specific risk analysis, particularly in regions affected by criminal governance or state capture.
- Leverage technology ethically, ensuring tools like fintech, artificial intelligence and surveillance are not co-opted by criminal actors and are aligned with human rights protections.

For multilateral and international organizations: reinforce civil society's role in global governance against transnational organized crime

- Ensure civil society has institutionalized access to policymaking processes in the CCPCJ, UNTOC COP, United Nations Convention against Corruption and regional bodies. Civil society must be guaranteed a space and a voice (not merely invited), and their interests reflected in political statements and declarations.
- Support the creation of protective mechanisms for civil society actors working in high-risk environments, in line with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.
- Use your convening power to connect civil society across regions, facilitating dialogue between the so-called Global North and South to promote mutual learning and strategy alignment.
- Integrate organized crime concerns into peacebuilding, humanitarian and climate resilience programmes, recognizing the intersectional impacts of criminal governance on displacement, resource extraction and ecological degradation.

For civil society actors: stand firm and build together

- Continue to leverage your networks for protection, amplification and collective advocacy. The strength of civil society lies in its connectivity and courage.
- Articulate a shared narrative that counters the normalization of criminal governance and asserts alternatives rooted in dignity, justice and solidarity.
- Document and communicate your impact – from community safety initiatives to advocacy successes – so that the value of your work is visible and undeniable to policymakers and donors.



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