

Civic Space Fact Sheet

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ As civic freedoms continue to [decline globally](#), civic space should be a bigger focus now than ever before for members of the [Open Government Partnership \(OGP\)](#).
- ✓ OGP member adoption of civic space commitments has sharply decreased in recent years, and few members are currently implementing commitments in this area.
- ✓ OGP members must work to co-create more ambitious commitments that can transform and strengthen civic space.

WHY CIVIC SPACE?

The freedoms of expression, association, and assembly are critical to the achievement of open government by allowing citizens to actively engage with the government and hold decision-makers accountable. Countries and local jurisdictions that commit to protecting these freedoms reap the benefits of higher levels of citizen engagement and stronger civil society organizations. In addition to pre-existing challenges to an open civic space, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has further [increased restrictions](#) on civic space in many OGP countries.

STATUS QUO

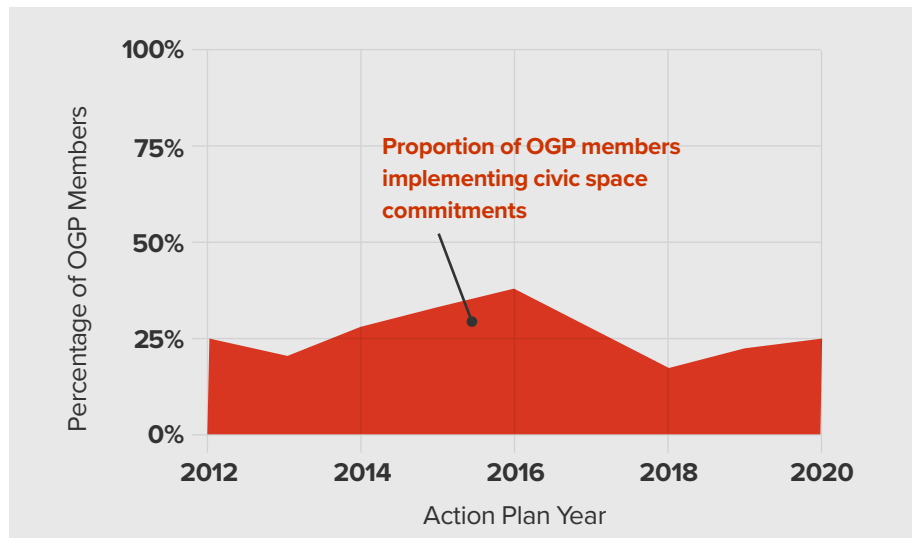
- **Media constraints:** Over two-thirds of OGP countries face severe to moderate constraints to a free and independent media, according to [Freedom House](#).
- **Low focus on freedom of assembly:** Despite many notable issues with freedom of assembly, such as excessive use of police during public protests, few OGP countries have undertaken commitments in this area.
- **Freedom of association challenges:** Nearly 40 percent of OGP countries experience challenges to freedom of association, including limited access to funding, difficult registration processes, and burdensome operational and reporting requirements for civil society organizations.
- **Civic space commitment breakdown:** Of all civic space commitments made by OGP members, one-quarter relate to freedom of expression and/or the press and nearly one-third relate to freedom of association. Only five percent of civic space commitments involve freedom of assembly.

Commitment data analyzes all commitments through the 2020 action plan cycle. As of 2020, OGP consisted of 98 national and local members.

Open
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Partnership

COMMITMENT PROGRESS

Civic space commitments have seen a significant decrease among OGP members since 2016 (see figure below). Altogether, just under half of OGP members have made 111 total civic space commitments since OGP was established in 2011. However, only 11 OGP members are currently implementing civic space commitments from their 2019 or 2020 action plans.



WHAT ARE OGP MEMBERS DOING?

- Protecting fundamental rights and liberties through the justice system
- Simplifying legal requirements and reducing restrictive measures for CSOs
- Facilitating CSO access to sustainable funds
- Increasing police oversight during assemblies
- Creating protections for activists and media

WHERE TO NEXT

The following recommendations summarize key actions for OGP members to implement:

Defending Activists and Journalists/Freedom of Expression

- Protect activists and journalists from attacks through access to justice initiatives, including police investigations, access to legal counsel, guaranteed due process, and witness protection.
- Establish rules and protections for press freedom, and involve civil society and media outlets in the development of laws around media ownership.
- Remove statute of limitations to investigate crimes against the freedom of expression, and provide sanctions against countries where there are cases of impunity for attacks.

Freedom of Assembly

- Prevent restrictions on peaceful assembly.
- Establish open, clear, and ethical protocols addressing police conduct prior to, during, and following protests.
- Train police officers in appropriate responses at assemblies, and ensure protections for independent monitors to provide oversight of both police and protestors.

Freedom of Association

- Limit legal restrictions on practices of civil society organizations, particularly for those working on sensitive issues.
- Ensure civil society organizations face low barriers to entry by making registration processes accessible, fair, and transparent.
- Promote mechanisms for organizations to access funding and resources to ensure better long-term planning and sustainability.
- Allow civil society organizations to self-regulate using accepted and sector-endorsed reporting and accountability mechanisms.



NOTABLE COMMITMENTS

Commitments to Watch



Nigeria - Protecting the Freedoms of Association, Assembly, and Expression (2019)

In June 2019, the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) suspended media licenses for allegedly airing inflammatory and inciting programs against the government. Following this, the Department of State Security Services announced a crackdown on “unpatriotic” social media users. Need for civic space reform in Nigeria has only escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) has recently downgraded Nigeria’s civic space rating from “obstructed” to “repressed”. From its second OGP action plan, Nigeria is currently working on a commitment to protect the rights to free assembly, association, and expression. Milestones of the commitment include registering and creating a federal budget line for civil society organizations (CSOs), creating safeguards to protect CSOs against undue supervision, and developing guidelines for peaceful protests with the Nigerian police force.



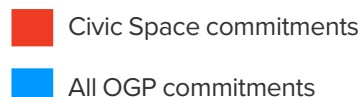
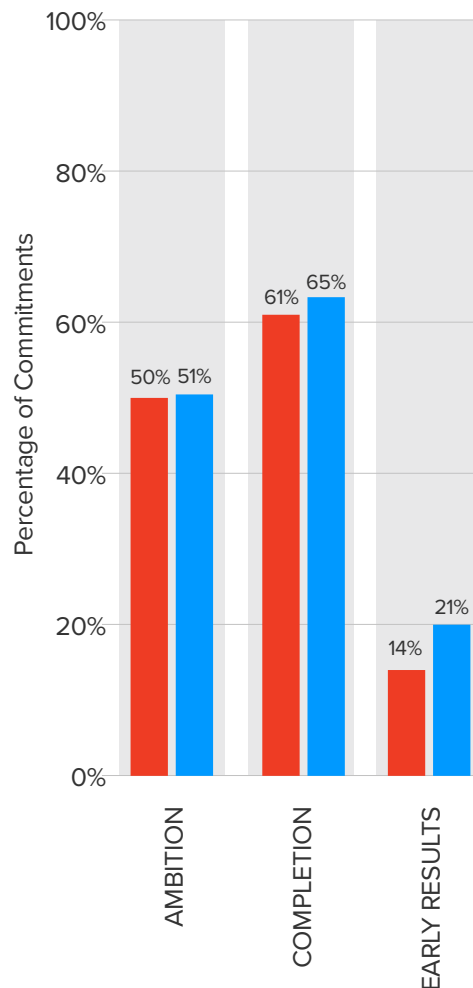
Spain - Establishing Whistleblower Protections (2020)

As part of their 2020-2024 action plan, Spain committed to draft and approve a law that guarantees protection of those who report legal violations within either public or private sector organizations. This includes creating protected channels for reporting and prohibiting retribution against whistleblowers. Establishing legal whistleblower protections is an important step to support the freedom of expression in Spain.

IRM QUICK STATS

According to OGP’s Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM), civic space commitments tend to show weaker early results than other OGP commitments.

Commitment Performance



Ambition - Ambitious commitments are those that the IRM finds would make transformative changes if fully implemented.

Early Results - Strong early results indicate the commitment made significant improvements to government openness.

