



**DRC GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY  
ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY**

**BRIEF**



## DRC's mandate

DRC's mandate for working in partnership with civil society is rooted in our **rights-based approach** to programming. As stated in the statutes, DRC's "... *aim is to protect refugees and internally displaced people from persecution and promote durable solutions to refugee problems on the basis of humanitarian principles and human rights*". DRC encourages and supports rights-holders to claim and enjoy their rights. An important element in expressing these claims, is for rights-holders to get organised; and rights holders' associations, whether formally or informally organised, are an important part of what DRC defines as civil society. A key role of civil society is to represent the interests of various groups of rights-holders and thereby promote and channel their participation in decision-making and in holding duty-bearers accountable. Civil society organizations also play a crucial role providing services and support in emergencies, towards reaching durable solutions and to address roots causes to displacement. DRC's purpose in working with civil society is to support both aspects, in pursuit of the highest possible benefit to people affected by displacement.

## DRC's strategic ambitions

With the 2025 Strategy, DRC intensifies its fight against systemic inequality and structural discrimination of conflict and displacement-affected persons by redoubling our focus on two breakthroughs - **increased protection** and **enhanced inclusion**. Globally, forced displacement has grown due to increased violence, more conflicts, and conflicts that continue without resolution for a longer time. We face a complex nexus of failed conflict resolution, unequal economic development, challenging environmental and demographic trends, and non-inclusive policies. DRC recognizes that impactful contribution to the two breakthroughs requires working in partnership and that a localized response to displacement perseveres over time.

For the Global Civil Society Engagement Strategy, the inclusion of an **organizational principle** dedicated to "Go Local" in 2025 Strategy reinforces DRC's localization ambitions. While the localization agenda

reaches beyond local civil society engagement, working with local civil society is at the core of global discourse around localization. The Go Local principle recognises that first responders to humanitarian crises are almost invariably local actors who have in-depth knowledge of the situation. DRC acknowledges that sustainable development involves – by definition – building self-sustaining local capacities. When we think and act local, we accept that the relevance, sustainability, and impact of humanitarian, development and peace interventions are maximised by working with local actors and organisations. The principle of Go Local places emphasis on reinforcing rather than replacing or competing with existing local initiatives and capacities. This can in large part be met through ensuring that we invest in identifying relevant local civil society partners, acknowledge their role and capacities, and work better to understand their operating context when deciding on how best to engage in any given context.<sup>1</sup>

DRC's ambitions on engaging with local civil society in the 2025 Strategy align with **global discourse** that has played a pivotal role in influencing change within DRC. The international aid community recognizes local actors' indispensable role and has made a variety of commitments to change the current humanitarian system to promote, rather than replace, local and national humanitarian actors. DRC's commitments have been further solidified in 2021 when DRC became a signatory and advocate for the Grand Bargain 2.0 which places greater emphasis on localization as a critical element of the Grand Bargain Framework.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> DRC Strategy 2025, <https://pro.drc.ngo/about-us/strategic-framework/strategy/>

<sup>2</sup> ICVA briefing paper outlining the new phase of the Grand Bargain, <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resource/the-grand-bargain-2-0-explained-an-icva-briefing-paper-2022/>

## Definition of civil society

Agreeing on a common workable definition of civil society is challenging, as the concept of civil society has long been debated, there is no one agreed-upon global definition. DRC uses the common definition of civil society being **the realm between the state, the private sector and the family**. In civil society, people meet, debate, organise, and take collective action. This organization may be temporary, evolve, or formalize into a civil society organization such as a local or national non-governmental organization (L/NGO). Civil societies include a vibrant range of both formally and informally organized groups with diverse interests and roles. Charities, community groups, L/NGOs, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, social movements, coalitions, and advocacy groups are all examples of civil society actors. Civil society activities can include holding institutions to account and promoting transparency; raising awareness of societal issues; delivering services to meet education, health, food and security needs; implementing disaster management, preparedness and emergency response; bringing expert knowledge and experience to shape policy and strategy; giving power to the marginalized; and encouraging citizen

engagement. Within this variance, civil society can be local, national, transnational and formed in the diaspora. Given this variance, it is important to keep in mind that there is no *one* civil society view or representation. Civil society is not a single homogenous entity, rather, it reflects a multitude of societal issues and group interests, and thereby does not have a single view or unified representation.

There is no society without a civil society, but the term "civil society" and what it covers as well as the space it is allowed to occupy will look different in the diverse country contexts where DRC operates. The term "civil society" itself may be perceived as a Western construct in some contexts where we operate. Furthermore, it is pertinent to also acknowledge that civil society mobilization may not always be driven by interests and values to meet the collective good of society and thereby also might not align with DRC's values. It is important to understand the complex nuances in the contexts where we operate, as well as the wider civil society landscape, in order to apply a Do No Harm approach in how DRC engages with civil society. Decisions around who DRC partners with are based on relevant analysis, taking into account social dynamics and perceptions of legitimacy, and ensuring there is adequate diversity in representation, with a particular focus on ensuring the participation of marginalized groups.



## DRC's civil society engagement theory of change

DRC's engagement with civil society is guided by a theory that articulates a desired change we aim to contribute to, one **where civil society has increased agency, space and capacity to enable fulfillment of rights of people affected by conflict and displacement**. The logical pathway to contributing to this ambition is as follows:

IF DRC works increasingly in partnership with civil society in order to improve sustainability, effectiveness, and impact of programming;

AND IF this partnership is supported with joint advocacy efforts, capacity development support, and access to participation in decision making;

THEN civil society will have increased agency to claim and maintain space, power to influence change, and capacity to respond adequately to needs created by conflict and displacement.

Figure 1: Civil Society Engagement Theory of Change



The theory of change diagram above shows the full logical pathway for DRC to achieve its ambition for why we engage with civil society – to contribute to civil society having increased **agency, space and capacity to enable fulfillment of rights of people affected by conflict and displacement**.<sup>3</sup> DRC's impact statement articulated through the theory of change mirrors global discourse on civil society promoting change in the way the humanitarian system operates to enable greater role for local civil society in humanitarian response.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A theory of change needs to be specific to the varying contexts where DRC operates, based on a specific context and stakeholder analysis. While the above theory of change gives an overarching frame to DRC's ambition, it will need to be contextualized to make it fit for purpose to each context or country.

<sup>4</sup> For further reading on global discourse, refer to the Grand Bargain – Localization Workstream; The Charter For Change; Core Humanitarian Standards.

## Civil society partnering principles

The purpose of a partnership is to bring together relevant actors under a common umbrella in order to enhance the effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of planned actions to enable the fulfilment of rights of people affected by conflict and displacement.

Partnership is a broad term, spanning from informal to formal arrangements for the purposes of advancing mutual interests and meeting both short term and longer-term common goals. As with the term civil society, there is no one commonly agreed global definition of “partnership” in the context of partnering in the humanitarian aid and development sectors. For DRC, **a partnership is formed between two or more actors that agree to cooperate based on common objectives for the purpose of achieving a mutually agreed goal.** A partnership has clear roles and responsibilities that clarify expectations and is guided by fundamental principles that all parties to the partnership strive to adhere to. These principles are listed and elaborated on below. A partnership is understood to go beyond a solely contractual relationship at the output level, though the fulfilment of short-term deliverables can of course form part of a partnership, and a partnership can evolve out of a solely contractual relationship.

It is important to clarify that a partnership is not formed only where there is a formal sub-grant agreement in place between DRC and a civil society partner. A partnership can exist with or without a sub-grant agreement, and with or without the transfer and receiving of funds. For instances, a partnership may be established between DRC and a civil society organization with the purpose of collaborating on a common goal such as shared advocacy initiative or joint research and publication. When entering into a partnership, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) outlining collaboration, mutual interests, and ways of working between DRC and the partner may be used. The purpose of a MoU is to clarify the scope of a collaboration between DRC and a partner, the purpose of the partnership, and expectations for engagement, including expected progression. It should be drafted jointly between DRC and the partner, reflecting both DRC’s and the partner’s partnership principles.



In all partnerships with civil society organizations, DRC's partnering approach is guided by the following key **principles**. This means, the way that partnerships (both formal and informal partnerships) are developed and managed throughout the life cycle of the partnership are guided by the following values.<sup>5</sup>

## Equitability

Equitability requires mutual respect between members of the partnership irrespective of size and power. The participants must respect each other's mandates, obligations and independence and recognize each other's constraints and commitments. Mutual respect must not preclude organizations from engaging in constructive dissent. Today, the principle of equality has mostly been replaced by that of equitability, as INGOs and their local partners rarely have the same level of opportunities and resources which the term equality implies. Equitability implies that partners are treated in a fair, transparent, and respectful manner, and operate on a level playing field, irrespective of underlying disparities in opportunities and resources and thus power.

## Transparency

Transparency is achieved through dialogue (on equal footing), with an emphasis on early consultations and regular sharing of information. Communication and transparency, including financial transparency, increase the level of trust among organizations.

## Complementarity

The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other's contributions. Local capacity

is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, the humanitarian system should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.

## Results-Oriented Approach

Effective humanitarian action must be reality-based and action-oriented. This requires result-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities. This does not preclude working with organizations that might not yet have the capabilities and capacities needed to independently deliver effective humanitarian action. Supporting an increase of sustainable local humanitarian capacities through the support of capacity development of local responders is one relevant result to orient us towards.

## Responsibility

Humanitarian organizations have an ethical obligation to each other to accomplish their tasks responsibly, with integrity and in a relevant and appropriate way. They must make sure they commit to activities only when they have the means, competencies, skills, and capacity to deliver on their commitments. This includes the ability to deliver on commitments to support the capacity development of partners. Decisive and robust prevention of abuses committed by humanitarians must also be a constant effort.

DRC strives to monitor how we live up to these principles through the practice of conducting partnership reviews to gather feedback from the perspective of partners on DRC's performance, collect lessons learned on challenges and good practices, and develop an action plan to respond to that feedback.

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<sup>5</sup> These partnership principles have been endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007. All organizations participating in the Global Humanitarian Platform agree to base their partnerships on these principles. Equality is the original principle in the Global Humanitarian Platform, DRC has adapted it to "equitability".

## Approaches to working with civil society

While the above focuses on theory, definitions, and principles that guide DRC's overall engagement with civil society, much of the strategy looks at what this engagement might look like in reality. Guidance around what civil society engagement looks like in reality is structured against the 4 key intervention areas DRC has prioritized as the means to achieve our ambition for engaging with civil society – to contribute to increased agency, space and capacity. These key intervention areas are ones where DRC sees its value add in our partnerships with civil society.

### *Intervention Area 1: Partnering with civil society to improve sustainability, effectiveness, and impact of programming*

DRC engages in equitable partnerships with civil society organizations to design and reach joint DRC and partner response outputs (*project-based partnerships*), and with objectives reaching beyond joint response outputs towards longer-term strategic objectives and impacts (*strategic partnerships*). As part of DRC's implementation approach, we also enter contractual relationships with local civil society organizations for the purpose of meeting response outputs linked to DRC-owned projects. In itself, this transactional relationship, which resembles that of supplier and customer, is not considered a partnership as defined in this strategy, nor does it contribute to the objectives of DRC's civil society engagement and localization commitments.

In all contexts where we operate, DRC considers partnering opportunities with civil society organizations. Partnering considerations are guided by shared objectives that align with DRC's mandate and take into consideration complementarity in capacities between DRC and our partners. DRC commits to expanding our equitable and strategic partnerships across global operations while simultaneously working on adapting DRC systems to be able to put our ambitions into practice.

### *Intervention Area 2: Capacity development support to civil society for stronger program response and advocacy*

Capacity development support is a central aspect of the DRC's civil society engagement work. While the scope and type of capacity development support will vary depending on the partner, type of partnership, and context, DRC's capacity development principles guide our approach. These principles place emphasis on participatory decision making, quality support reflecting value add, ensuring capacity development is

properly resourced, and support going beyond administrative capacities to implement.

Underpinning these principles is acknowledging that civil society partners have existing capacities. This means working with partners in a complementary way, avoiding competing with local expertise and duplicating efforts. This also means recognizing that both DRC and our partners can bring knowledge and expertise to the partnership, fostering an opportunity to mutually learn from each other, and work better together.

### *Intervention Area 3: Facilitating active and meaningful participation of civil society to strengthen their voice and role in influencing decision making*

With the aim to reach the ultimate objective articulated in our global theory of change on civil society engagement, DRC sees its role as one of facilitating the active participation of civil society to strengthen their voice and role in influencing decision making that affects the fulfillment of rights of people affected by conflict and displacement. DRC can leverage existing relationships with relevant actors to strengthen linkages horizontally – between civil society organizations through supporting networks, forums, alliances (either formal or informal); and vertically – between civil society and duty bearers and communities by enabling safe spaces for dialogue and trust building. DRC also recognizes the power imbalances that exist that hinder access to participation in forums that provide an opportunity to influence decision making. While this requires a systems wide shift for wider participation, DRC can play a role as an advocate and convenor of local participation in relevant forums, coordination mechanisms, and donor meetings.

#### *Intervention Area 4: Supporting advocacy efforts to hold duty bearers accountable*

Central to our work in supporting rights holders to claim their rights are the partnerships we have with civil society, facilitating and supporting their advocacy efforts to influence decision making on policies affecting the rights of those displaced. This entails increasingly shifting from advocating on behalf of rights holders to advocating alongside rights holders through joint advocacy initiatives and supporting rights holders' own advocacy efforts. These advocacy efforts target local, national, regional and global agendas, with DRC utilizing its position to facilitate increased access for civil society to relevant advocacy opportunities and forums. In conjunction, DRC offers capacity support to civil society to generate evidence to inform advocacy efforts and develop advocacy strategies to influence policy and legislative change.

DRC acknowledges local civil society as the legitimate voice and representative of people affected by conflict and displacement. As such DRC places importance on legitimacy when it comes to whose voice DRC supports amplifying, prioritizing partnering with civil society organizations that are legitimate representatives of rights holders affected by conflict and displacement. This is a key consideration when selecting relevant partners, with the perspective of giving voice, or bringing support, to people affected by displacement or conflict.