

EUROPEAN CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW

ECNL STRATEGY

2025-2030

EMBOLDENING
CIVIC ACTION

ENRICHING
SOCIETIES



European Center for
Not-for-Profit Law

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Who We Are

ECNL is a team of dedicated, bold and creative legal experts, analysts, and activists committed to protecting and expanding the space for people to gather, organise and take action for a better world.

We focus on the laws, policies, processes and practices that enable our spaces for action. Over the last 20 years, we have tenaciously worked to protect the rights that empower people to achieve change and actively participate in democratic and civic life.

Our vision is:

of a world where every individual has the freedom, power and possibilities to shape a just, inclusive and sustainable future through collective action.

In our vision, people flourish in a world and a planet which are thriving, just and safe. People are empowered with the freedoms and resources to unite, express themselves and shape their societies. Institutions and processes are participatory, rooted in justice, human rights and equity. A diverse, vibrant ecosystem of advocates protects and expands the ability of people to create a positive change.

Our mission is to:

work with individuals and groups to take collective action and address societal challenges.

By championing civic freedoms, anticipating and analysing trends shaping collective action and strengthening legal protections, ECNL partners to defend our spaces for action and inspire progressive change. We help create environments where people have the power, resources, and legal support to unite in solidarity, where communities engage in social movements, and individuals actively contribute to democratic processes. Collaborating across sectors and with diverse global and regional institutions, we co-create dynamic coalitions that safeguard rights and foster vibrant platforms for meaningful, transformative change.



Our Values and Principles



Civil society at the core

Our work is fundamentally rooted in civil society. We foster national leadership and amplify civil society voices. But we also take the lead in initiatives or responses when circumstances demand.

Embracing the future proactively

We embrace curiosity about the future and the opportunities it holds. Our approach is proactively innovative, not merely reactive. Through horizon scanning, we identify emerging trends and challenges, balancing the need for long-term transformation with the need to protect existing frameworks and achievements. We foster a culture of creativity, adaptability and sustained commitment to lasting change.

Rooted in the ecosystem of change makers

We recognise our role within a broader network of groups expanding the space for collective action. Our collaborative strategy builds strategic partnerships that harness diverse perspectives and strengths, mobilise cross-sector solidarity, and address power imbalances in civil society to ensure equitable participation. We also cultivate a culture that values both individual contributions and collective knowledge-sharing.

Commitment to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion

We are deeply committed to advancing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion by centring the voices of marginalised and minority communities. We embed these principles throughout our work and approaches, continuously assessing and refining our practices to ensure genuine inclusivity.

A place to thrive

We strive to create an environment where all team members can flourish. By fostering a culture of mutual respect, support, and celebration of achievements, we nurture both individual and collective resilience and wellbeing. We continuously review our policies to embed environmentally sustainable practices, acknowledging the vital connection between planetary health and human wellbeing.



Models of change and our approaches



Forward-thinking

We are focused on what is on the horizon, so we:

- Proactively monitor emerging signals of change
- Identify, connect and anticipate trends shaping collective action
- Apply a cross-disciplinary lens to grasp intersecting issues
- Explore diverse models of organising and collective responses
- Collaborate with partners to seize new opportunities and address challenges

Testing different approaches

We approach challenges through innovation, so we:

- Experiment with novel strategies
- Engage diverse actors and unconventional allies
- Mobilise global advocacy campaigns with a broad range of stakeholders
- Develop new models and champion improved laws and policies
- (Co)Create practical tools to enhance protection and participation

Cultivating vibrant coalitions for action

We believe in the importance of connecting global and national actions and the imperative for local leadership, so we:

- Build equitable partnerships across sectors
- Rapidly mobilise diverse partners for action
- Co-create global and national hubs for expertise and action
- Support partners to lead change
- Open pathways for direct participation in global and regional bodies

Providing cutting-edge legal and strategic expertise

We recognise that legal knowledge is vital for asserting and protecting rights, ensuring access to justice, and promoting fairness, equality and equity, so we:

- Conduct research and develop legal arguments on emerging and cross-cutting trends to support advocacy and litigation
- Document insights on tactics, strategies, risks and success pathways
- Develop guidance to monitor, anticipate and protect spaces for action
- Challenge prevailing narratives and counter emerging threats



These values and approaches empower us to drive meaningful change while navigating the complexities of a constantly evolving global landscape. Although our focus remains on transformative, long-term progress, we prioritise protecting existing spaces for action and advancing incremental steps toward our vision. We concentrate on outcomes, adapting our strategies to the specific contexts, institutions, and audiences where we can achieve the greatest impact.

Developing our Strategic Framework: Understanding the present and shaping the future

To develop this Strategic Framework, we examined global trends to date and anticipated future developments that will shape our lives and the role of civil society in the years ahead. We engaged with a diverse range of voices to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities confronting us.¹

Throughout this collective reflection, a recurring theme emerged: we face multiple, interconnected crises within a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. Our partners highlighted a wide array of profound global events: the Covid-19 pandemic, regional conflicts, rising unchecked corporate power, financial and cost-of-living crises, rapid technological advances, the rise of authoritarian and far-right populist movements, and the urgent threat of ecological collapse and resource scarcity. As we finalised this Strategy in early 2025, civil society confronted unprecedented threats, including significant funding cuts imposed by the US administration and related political, regulatory and narrative challenges. These developments jeopardise the core principles and values that rights-promoting civil society upholds, affecting organisations across human rights, civic space, democracy, transparency, accountability, migrant protection, social justice, digital rights and climate action.

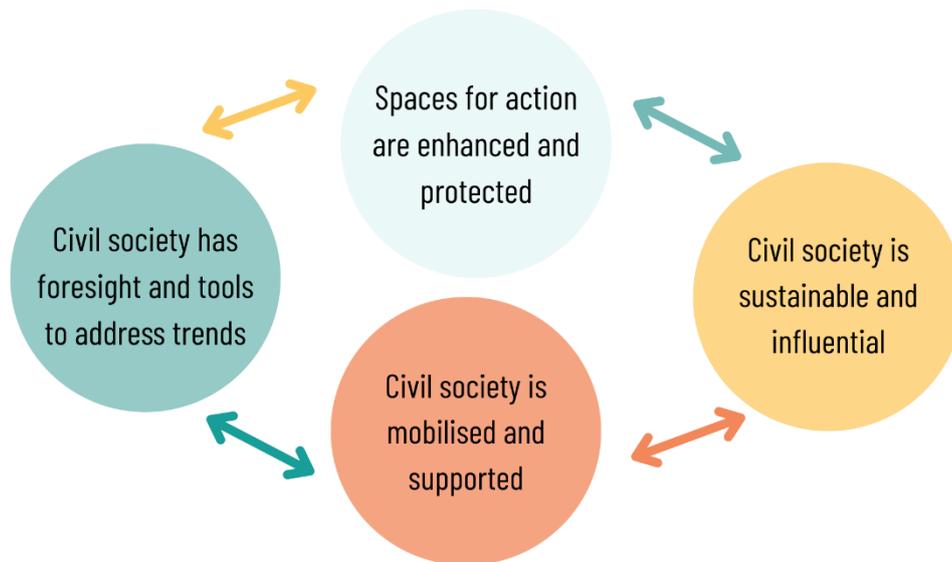
Yet, amid these challenges, we also witnessed inspiring acts of collective resilience and transformation. Individuals and communities are organising in powerful, innovative ways to protect the planet and foster peaceful, thriving societies. They are harnessing technology and new forms of activism to advance their goals. We analysed these trends, their root causes and their impacts on different sectors, including civil society organisations like ours.

¹ A summary of interviewee feedback that informed this Strategy can be found here: *The Second Quarter of Our Century – The Future of Civil Societies*, ECNL 2025 <https://ecnl.org/publications/future-civil-societies>



Strategic Goals

We believe that when people are equipped with a clear vision, effective models, supportive legal frameworks, and adequate resources to organise, mobilise and act, they can successfully enhance human rights and address critical challenges. To bring this theory of change to life, we will concentrate on the following strategic goals:



1. Spaces for collective action are enhanced and protected

Drive the advancement and protection of freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and participation, and people’s spaces for action by influencing and shaping policies and systems at national, regional and multilateral levels.

2. Civil society is sustainable and influential

Reinvigorate the capacity of activists and groups to influence, protect, and create impact by co-developing innovative models, resources and tools that ensure sustainability and foster the essential conditions for meaningful engagement.

3. Civil society is mobilised and supported

Strengthen connections among civil society working on different issues to benefit from diverse expertise in reaching goals; and build bridges with other sectors by identifying synergies, cultivating partnerships with new actors, and aligning around shared goals to amplify collective impact.

4. Civil society has foresight and tools to anticipate and address trends

Enhance civil society’s resilience and adaptability to address ongoing and new trends by anticipating trends, providing forward-looking insights, strategic guidance for preparedness, and expert support to protect collective action and achieve change.



Areas of Focus

Our work under this Strategy will centre on addressing critical needs aligned with our vision to foster a just, safe, and thriving world and planet where people are empowered to unite, express themselves in physical or digital spaces, and actively shape inclusive societies. Through a diverse and vibrant network of advocates, we protect and expand the freedoms and resources necessary for positive, lasting change rooted in human rights, equity and participatory governance.

Climate and Environmental Activism

Climate change is the defining challenge of our time, threatening every aspect of life on Earth. Urgent, coordinated global action is essential to limit its impact, mitigate damage and adapt to irreversible changes. Climate change action must prioritise the needs of the people most affected. Action must therefore involve environmental human rights defenders, indigenous groups and other civil society organisations. But, when these groups mobilise, governments and companies often stifle their voice or their freedom and enact laws to restrict their work. Civil society groups working for the environment urgently need recognition, protection and participation in debates and decisions that are shaping the future. Over the next years we will work with environmental defenders and climate activists by combining legal advocacy, coalition-building, capacity strengthening, and international engagement to protect their rights and amplify their voices in climate and environmental governance.

- **Legal exchange and protections:** Research and legal arguments to strengthen protections for environmental human rights defenders including in emerging and cross-cutting areas; advance legal standards and judicial protections for diverse forms of environmental activism, including civil disobedience.
- **Multilateral action:** Advocate for a multilateral platform that guarantees recognition, protection, and meaningful participation of defenders with our global coalition of defenders, organisations, experts and allies.
- **Challenge restrictions:** Work with groups to anticipate and prepare strategies to challenge restrictive legislation targeting environmental defenders, build connections and solidarity with other movements facing similar laws, advise environmental groups campaigning for reform.
- **Exchange:** Strengthen the legal skills of defenders to use international or EU law, co-create practical tools, and share knowledge on tactics and risks to better protect their spaces for environmental and climate action.
- **Counter trends:** Explore the nexus between security and climate change to anticipate and counter the misuse of security frameworks and measures that threaten climate activism, including impact on climate activism but also other issues of society (for example, migration).



Just Societies

Global movements are rising to confront systemic injustices faced by racialised and marginalised communities. However, this progress faces significant backlash, with anti-rights, anti-gender, and racist agendas gaining political traction and threatening the space for equity-driven action. This exacerbates what is often called a “crisis of representation” in many democracies, restricting marginalised groups’ ability to influence our shared futures positively. The very concept of diversity is increasingly under attack. It is urgent that we protect and expand the space for those advocating justice, equality and rights—especially those targeted because of their identity. In the coming years, we will deepen our connections with these communities, enhance our understanding of their needs and threats, and integrate social justice considerations across our programmes to strengthen our support.

- **Learning communities:** Connect with groups on the national level to increase understanding of emerging trends and their impact on them, facilitate exchange on signals and tactics, and support coordinated actions with global initiatives to protect spaces for action.
- **Amplified voices:** Co-develop new tools and models that elevate marginalised voices and advocate for resourcing and influence of these groups within all areas of our work.
- **Inclusive engagement:** Enhance processes and practices to ensure sustained, inclusive, and meaningful engagement of marginalised communities in different policymaking areas.
- **Legal empowerment:** Provide targeted knowledge-sharing sessions, particularly across Europe, to empower groups in effectively using European law to defend their spaces for action.
- **Challenged harmful policies:** Collaborate within coalitions to prepare legal arguments against new types of restrictions, advocate against harmful policies and legislation while actively countering damaging narratives.

Vibrant and Participatory Democracies

Democratic systems worldwide face unprecedented challenges. Independent civil society is increasingly marginalised, as governments restrict freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and participation. Authoritarianism is rising not only in fragile states but also within established democracies. Crises such as pandemics and conflicts are exploited to justify restrictive measures, while polarising narratives erode public trust. Many citizens feel unheard and disconnected, viewing current democratic models as ineffective. Rapid change, harmful narratives, and funding cuts targeting human rights, climate action, and diversity initiatives further undermine civil society’s financial stability and influence. This weakens its ability to defend rights, deliver services and counter authoritarianism. Civic activism is thus transforming at



both global and national levels. Intensified government focus on security undermines human rights defenders and civil society actors, while geopolitical shifts weaken human rights mechanisms and institutions.

- **Civic innovation and reform:** Promote innovative participatory models, including with use of digital technology, co-create strategies to reach out to broader communities of diverse societal actors and generate support against legal restrictions; and provide strategic guidance for enhancing association and assembly laws.
- **Sustain activism:** Evolve funding models and legislative frameworks to build a resilient civil society; engage the financial sector to improve financial access for defenders and organisations; and enhance self-governance models to deepen accountability and community engagement.
- **Safeguard action:** Monitor emerging trends and develop targeted strategies to strengthen resilience and protect freedoms; strengthen the capacity of partners, judges and lawyers to utilise international and EU law; support strategic litigation, work with pro-bono lawyers and provide legal guidance to groups operating from exile; engage financial institutions and policymakers to secure uninterrupted funding.
- **Transform and elevate civic action:** Work with diverse partners on strategy and action to revitalise civil society's appeal; adapt narratives, evolve skillset; and harness movement energy to mobilise broader societal engagement and to empower civil society as a global actor.

Digital Spaces for Action

Technology profoundly shapes people's fundamental rights and the civic and democratic spaces they inhabit—both online and offline. Emerging technologies, especially artificial intelligence and neurotechnology, offer new opportunities for individuals and civil society to initiate and participate in collective action. These possibilities must be actively explored and expanded. However, the same technologies are also wielded by governments and non-state actors to restrict rights and freedoms. It is therefore essential to embed human rights principles into the development and deployment of technology. Yet, civil society—particularly marginalised groups most affected by these technologies—are often excluded from both policy-making processes and the development and deployments of technologies. To address this, we will work around four sub-thematic pathways:

- **Research for stronger safeguards:** Conduct rigorous, evidence-based research on the intersection of human rights, civic space, participatory democracy, justice, environmental defence and emerging technologies (in areas such as internet governance, artificial intelligence (AI) regulation, the impacts of AI - including generative AI and the security-technology nexus).
- **Modelling technology for civic action:** Explore and co-develop civic technology solutions (for example, for digital fundraising, deliberative democracy,



organising) to allow for broader inclusion, influence and civic engagement and pilot them with partners in specific countries or cities.

- **Protect action in tech and AI regulation:** Provide expertise and advocacy to shape AI-related regulations, develop best practices to support implementation of global and regional policies, and support strategic litigation addressing the impact of technologies on civic space. Advocate for robust procedural safeguards as human rights impact assessments, expose harms linked to emerging technologies, and engage the private sector to prevent, mitigate and remedy these impacts.
- **Learning and engagement:** Support human rights and civic actors to engage in technology policy by enabling knowledge sharing and collaboration with digital rights groups. Promote best practices for inclusive participation of civil society and marginalised communities in AI governance. Partner with AI developers to design tools prioritizing these groups; form cross-sector alliances—including investors, journalists, trade unions, consumer organisations—to advance rights-based AI.

Who we work with

We collaborate with individual defenders, activists, civil society and other actors who are safeguarding democracies and public interest—such as judges, prosecutors and journalists—across diverse regions. Our strategies are shaped by the needs of those confronting the most pressing challenges of our time and where civic action is most urgent, we foster their leadership in driving transformative change. We prioritise the voices, experiences and needs of people facing the greatest barriers to organising, especially those marginalised or minoritised due to race, ethnicity, religion, migrant status, gender and sexuality, age, socio-economic status or disability. We remain committed to engaging a wide spectrum of change-makers, whether formal organisations or grassroots, including movements, community leaders, organisers, protesters, and we continue to work with our coalitions across themes of the Strategy.

To drive meaningful change in our focus areas, we partner with allies who bring thematic expertise or have strong connections to the audiences we aim to influence. These include academics, think tanks, journalists, media outlets, trade unions, as well as mission-aligned businesses, financial institutions, investors and entrepreneurs capable of mobilising for impact. Additionally, we co-create coalitions dedicated to expanding and safeguarding the rights, space and conditions necessary for effective civic action.

Moreover, we actively seek to engage and influence key institutions relevant to our priorities. Depending on the issue, this includes governments, national and multilateral bodies, parliamentary institutions and courts.





Where we work

With 20 years of legal expertise and experience in protecting and expanding spaces for civic action, we design and implement programmes in close collaboration with partners across Europe and around the world. This approach enables us to amplify knowledge and maximise our and our partners' impact.

Our deep understanding of both European and global trends is continually enriched through ongoing partnerships and shared learning in Europe and across regions. This positions us to offer valuable insights and co-create solutions to challenges that transcend regional boundaries.

Recognising that today's opportunities and challenges are inherently global, we are dedicated to building robust regional and international partnerships. By leveraging our position in Europe and engaging with multilateral actors, we work to address common threats and help shape evolving standards that protect civic action worldwide.



ECNL: A Thriving Organisation

To bring these ambitions to life, we will continue to evolve ECNL into an organisation that not only reflects our deepest values but also ignites creativity, drives meaningful impact, harnesses the passion and talent of our team, and the resources needed to power lasting change. Our commitment is to build a future-ready organisation, where challenges are met with expertise and innovation, where every voice is heard, and where every team member is empowered to thrive. Together, we will:

- Continuously expand our **knowledge and skills**, staying ahead of the curve and embracing new possibilities with confidence and agility.
- Shape an **organisational culture and structure** rooted in our values—one that nurtures flexibility, sparks innovation and inspires bold thinking.
- Foster a **vibrant inclusive learning community** that shares wisdom openly, amplifying our collective strength.
- Enhance staff skills on **communications** and crafting messages to increase visibility of the impactful work they and our partners do and support wider outreach.
- Create a **supportive and inclusive environment** where wellbeing is prioritised and every individual can flourish.
- Embed **justice, equity, diversity and inclusion** at the heart of everything we do, championing these principles through every policy, process and action.
- Lead by example in **minimising our environmental footprint**, committing to sustainable practices that protect our planet.
- Continuously **assess risks** and develop mitigation strategies.
- Transform our **governance** to reflect the rich diversity of the partners we work with, ensuring their voices guide our path forward.
- Seek out diverse and flexible **funding** opportunities that fuel innovation, empower experimentation, and enable swift, impactful responses to emerging challenges.

We will cultivate these principles not only for our organisations, but also partnerships and coalitions we work with to contribute to a civil society movement that inspires hope, drives change, and shapes a more just, equitable and sustainable world.





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