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Strengthening civil society

An evidence gap map

May 2023

Evidence
Gap Map
Report 22

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About this evidence gap map report

This report presents the findings of a systematic search to identify and map the evidence base of impact evaluations and systematic reviews of interventions that aim to strengthen civil society. The EGM was developed by 3ie and made possible with generous support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Center for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance. All of the content of this report is the sole responsibility of the authors and does not represent the opinions of 3ie, its donors, or its Board of Commissioners. Any errors and omissions are also the sole responsibility of the authors. Please direct any comments or queries to the corresponding author, Miriam Berretta, at mberretta@3ieimpact.org.

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Executive summary

Background and scope

Civil society—defined here as inclusive of individuals, organizations, and formal or informal groups—is essential to maintaining an open society, building democracy, and supporting the rule of law. However, there are continuous threats to civil society across countries, such as violence, arrests, and excessive surveillance against civil society members (Cooper 2018). Further, according to CIVICUS, in 2020, only 12.7 percent of people around the world lived in countries with an open or narrowed civic space rating—an important decline from the 17.6 percent in 2019—and almost 70 percent of people lived in a repressed or closed civic space. Despite the need to improve civic spaces, there is a paucity of funding opportunities for civil society organizations. Indeed, with restrictions on foreign funding for civil society organizations in more than 50 countries (Buyse 2018), accessing funding is a challenge. At the same time, international funders increasingly demand evidence that their funds are used effectively on interventions that work. This requirement can be difficult to satisfy, especially for organizations without the technical expertise and long-term financial support (INTRAC 2013) necessary to demonstrate this.

Given the challenges around securing funding to improve civil society, there is an increased need to ensure the efficient use of limited resources. Thus, evidence on interventions effects should inform decisions about the types of interventions funders support and where such evidence is not available, it should be generated through rigorous evaluation as part of program implementation. Rigorous evidence on the effects of interventions aiming to support civil society can help policymakers and practitioners understand which interventions are effective and why (Snilstveit et al. 2013). It can also aid them in making the case for continued or increased support for interventions aimed at advancing human rights and addressing rights violations and abuses.

This evidence gap map (EGM) report presents the findings of a systematic search to identify and map the evidence base of impact evaluations (IEs) and systematic reviews (SRs) of interventions aiming to strengthen civil society in low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs).

The EGM draws on the following extended definition of civil society adapted for this project:

“In recent times, the different typologies of civil society are: Civil society organizations (CSOs) comprising NGOs, faith-based organizations, and community-based organizations that have an organized structure and mission and are typically registered entities and groups; Online groups and activities, including social media communities that can be ‘organized’ but do not necessarily have physical, legal, or financial structures; Social movements of collective action and/or identity, which can be online or physical; Labor unions and labor organizations representing workers; and Social entrepreneurs employing innovative and/or market-oriented approaches for social and environmental outcomes.” — (Vandyck 2017)

The EGM covers a comprehensive set of interventions and outcomes. The broad range of included interventions worked to (1) strengthen a regulatory environment to allow civil society to operate safely; (2) provide support to civil society to make sure they reach the right audience and have the skills and capacities to advocate for their cause; (3) provide support to strengthen civil society members' skills to monitor governments' activities, as well as aggregate people in public events to generate discussions on public issues; (4) develop civil society members' institutional capacities and technical skills by providing direct financial or technical support; and (5) create coalitions and collaborations between civil society and the government or other public and private institutions.

These interventions target intermediate outcomes such as civil society being supported by their counterparts; being able to engage with other civil society organizations, citizens, and marginalized groups; and having the power to influence public and private institutions. These improvements in civil society capabilities may influence social norms and decision-making within public/private institutions, as well as keep the government accountable. Finally, over time, changes in these outcomes may promote inclusive laws, policies, and practices and an overall inclusive development approach, where all people have equal access to rights, opportunities, services, and justice. The ultimate goal is a democratic, open, and peaceful society.

Methods

To identify all potentially relevant studies, we implemented a comprehensive search and systematic screening process. Relevant studies evaluated the effectiveness of interventions that aim to strengthen civil society, as outlined in the scope section above. We extracted descriptive and bibliographic data from all included studies. For systematic reviews, we critically appraised the methods applied and extracted the implications for policy and practice from medium- and high-confidence reviews.

Using 3ie's EGM software, we created an online, interactive matrix that maps all included studies according to the interventions evaluated and the outcomes reported. The platform provides additional filters so users can further explore the available evidence. For example, users can search for evidence by global regions, country income levels, or population. The EGM can be viewed at:
<https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/strengthening-civil-society-egm>.

Main findings

We conducted an extensive search of peer-reviewed articles and grey literature, which returned a total of 29,890 records. After removal of duplicates and screening, we included a total of 128 studies in the EGM: 116 quantitative IEs, 10 qualitative IEs, and two SRs. The field rapidly expanded in the early 2000s, but growth has levelled off, with about 13 new studies published a year since 2014. Research is mainly focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, where 45 percent of studies are conducted.

There is limited research from contexts where civic spaces are characterized as “closed,” as defined by the CIVICUS civic space ratings¹ for 20 L&MICs. Indeed, only two

¹ According to the CIVICUS national civic space ratings:
<https://findings2020.monitor.civicus.org/index.html>

countries rated as having closed civic spaces—China and Vietnam—are represented in our map. Most of the other studies were implemented in “repressed” (n=67) or “obstructed” settings (n=51).

The three most studied interventions are (1) convening/public events that provide education on civic values and political processes (n=21), (2) general education of civil society members (n=14), and (3) networking/coalition-building focusing on decision-making (n= 2). Convening/public events interventions are primarily civic education programs. The general education interventions are mainly related to adult literacy, often for women. The networking/coalition-building interventions are mainly about decision-making projects where citizens were involved in policymaking decisions, such as participatory budget initiatives. Among the studies evaluating the three interventions mentioned above, the most frequently reported outcomes are the rates of participation in civic life, including marginalized groups, and beneficiaries’ awareness of their rights and responsibilities. These outcomes are also the most studied overall in the map.

The qualitative studies evaluated interventions less amenable to quantitative impact evaluation, such as policy and reforms to create an enabling environment for civil society, networking activities to increase advocacy of civil societies, and training on communications. One of them measured the resilience of civil society and sustainability, which no other study measured.

There are a few methodological gaps. Studies identified in the EGM use a broad range of methods to evaluate interventions, including experimental (58%), quasi-experimental (34%), and qualitative (8%) approaches. More qualitative evaluations could be done across various intervention types, such as education of civil society members on advocacy, civil society-led initiatives to monitor public or private institutions, or networking activities to coordinate civil society initiatives. More than half of the studies consider equity aspects in some way (n=77), most frequently by focusing on interventions that target vulnerable populations (n=57). The most common dimensions of equity reported, likely connected to being a vulnerable population, are women (n=49), the place of residence (n=26), and socioeconomic status (n=24). There is limited meaningful integration of cost evidence (15%) and mixed-methods approaches (39%) in the existing evidence base. Both types of evidence are important for improving the usefulness of research findings for policy and practice.

Findings from the single high-confidence systematic review (Waddington et al. 2019) included in the map suggest that the interventions where citizens monitor public institutions might increase participation in the community life and attendance at the community meetings. Effects on outcomes further down the causal chain are varied. On average, citizens’ monitoring does not appear to improve providers’ responses,² nor were there significant improvements in service access and use outcomes, including service quality and user satisfaction. Overall, the authors suggest that these interventions seem to work better when the following conditions are met: (1) citizens are in direct contact with the front-line service providers; (2) both providers and citizens are involved in the monitoring processes and the creation of common knowledge about it; (3)

² In other words, providers’ actions, response perceived by users, public spending, and staff motivation.

performance benchmarks mechanisms are used; and (4) the intervention includes activities with local community organizations to strengthen community members' voices. The systematic review reported that participatory priority setting, planning, or budgeting interventions may improve physical access to services but there is no evidence for other intermediate or final outcomes. Key factors of success seem to be interventions that facilitate the growth of local civil society, for instance, by encouraging citizens to create coalitions that increase the capacity for collective action, ensuring the buy-in from local front-line service providers for the intervention, and addressing local barriers to allow vulnerable groups to participate in the intervention.

Conclusions and implications

Overall, the EGM shows an uneven distribution of the evidence base across interventions and outcomes. There are numerous gaps at different levels. We found no or very few studies for some interventions categories, such as Campaigns targeting policy makers; Public events focused on strategies development with stakeholders; Networking initiatives to coordinate on advocacy, education, and communication; Education on physical and digital security; Direct assistance on organizational management and emergency assistance; and Interventions to support civil society to conduct assessment and research to improve their activities and increase dissemination and awareness of their cause. Policymakers and implementers can use the body of evidence identified in the EGM during program design by relying on relevant rigorous evidence from both IEs and SRs. This is true especially for projects targeting citizens, because the evidence on civil society organizations is limited. Policymakers might also consider commissioning systematic reviews to fill in the synthesis gaps, for instance, on Convening/public event focused on education (22 studies), General education of civil society members (13 studies), and Coalition or group development to take part in decision-making process (13 studies). There are multiple implications for research, including the numerous primary gaps to fill in through rigorous IEs by using approaches such as mixed (qualitative and quantitative) research methods, sub-group analysis, and cost analysis. These approaches can improve future understanding of what works, for whom, and under what conditions to strengthen civil society.

Structure of this report

The report proceeds as follows:

- Section 1 presents the background, the objectives, and why it is important to do this EGM
- Section 2 describes the conceptual framework adopted for the EGM and the scope of included studies
- Section 3 describes the methods applied in the systematic search, screening, data extraction, and analysis of the identified studies
- Section 4 presents the findings from the map, including the gap analysis
- Section 5 outlines implications for policy and future research and concludes the report

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

3ie	International Initiative for Impact Evaluation
CBO	Community-based organization
CSO	Civil society organization
EGM	Evidence gap map
GONGO	Government-organized nongovernmental organization
HIC	High-income country
ICNL	International Center for Not-for-Profit Law
IE	Impact evaluation
IPO	Indigenous peoples' organization
L&MIC	Low- and middle-income country
MFAN	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
OECD–DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee
PVO	Private voluntary organization
QED	Quasi-experimental design
RCT	Randomized controlled trial
SR	Systematic review
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. Background

1.1 Development problem being addressed

Civil society is essential to maintaining an open society, building democracy, and supporting the rule of law. Civil society represents a diverse body, including civil society organizations (CSOs), nongovernmental organizations, private voluntary organizations, peoples' organizations, community-based organizations, civic clubs, trade unions, cultural and religious groups, charities, and environmental groups (MFAN 2019). A strong civil society is associated with a range of positive outcomes, from the creation of responsive states to spreading of progressive cultural values (Putnam 1993, Carothers 1999, Risse 2000, Peruzzotti 2007). However, some criticize civil society actors for falling short of these goals, failing to alleviate poverty, promoting civil unrest, and even promoting "uncivil" values (Pearce 2000, Easterly 2006, Caple James 2010).

Nonetheless, civil society can enable people to claim their rights, influence and monitor development policies and practices, provide essential services to poor and marginalized communities, respond to humanitarian emergencies, and contribute to public awareness of development issues (INTRAC 2013). It can also catalyze changes in policy and regulation, improve transparency, increase community participation, reduce corruption, and increase responsiveness to citizens' demands (World Bank 2014, 11). Political arms of civil society contribute to democracy by creating social capital, mutual trust, and shared values that are then represented in the political sphere (Essia and Yearoo 2009). By keeping citizens more informed and aware, civil society can help them make better voting decisions, participate in politics, and keep the government accountable and transparent.

Many governments attempt to restrict civil society's space through violence, arrests, repressive laws, restrictions on foreign funding for civil society, and bureaucratic red tape, which can silence or intimidate critics (Cooper 2018, FHI 2018). Restrictions on civil society threaten democracy and weaken or violate human rights, such as the right to association and freedom of expression (World Economic Forum 2013, Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014, Buyse 2018). In 2015–2016, governments all over the world adopted 64 new restrictive laws and regulations (*ibid.*). According to CIVICUS (2020), only 3 percent of the world's countries have a strong and open civil society space, which leaves around five billion people living in countries with a narrowed, obstructed, repressed, or closed civic space (CIVICUS 2020). In 2016, more than 1,000 human rights defenders were killed, harassed, detained, or subject to smear campaigns; more than 75 percent of those killed were in Latin America (Cooper 2018). Excessive surveillance, such as installing spyware on mobile phones, has been used to harass civil society members in countries such as Mexico (*ibid.*). However, closed civic spaces are also found in high-income countries (HICs), such as Hungary and Israel (Cooper 2018).

Often, governments use restrictions on civil society to silence or intimidate critics. Such restrictions can shield governments from exposure for abusing power and corruption (Kreienkamp 2017, Buyse 2018). Restrictions on civil society are often justified as being necessary for counterterrorism (Mendelson 2015). The Arab Spring and similar events may have led to governments to restrict civil society because they demonstrated the power of civil society groups and raised concerns over loss of domestic political control

(Kreienkamp 2017, Buyse 2018). In some instances, authoritarian governments created paradoxical government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), which enable them to meet development programs' requirements to work with non-state partners without actually ceding influence to civil society.

Government funding restrictions are a common approach to restricting civil society. These can include making funding dependent on their approval, implementing funding caps, taxing the international funding received, and prohibiting funding by certain donors or for specific activities (Rutzen 2015). Governments that impose restrictions on funding to civil society argue that the restrictions protect national sovereignty and security and increase transparency (Buyse 2018). For example, the government of India claimed that several CSOs, including Greenpeace India, had been involved in activities that were not in the national interest. As a result, in 2016, at least 30 CSOs were refused a government license to receive foreign funding (Cooper 2018). In 2018, more than 50 countries had restrictions on foreign funding for civil society (Buyse 2018). Because many civil societies rely on international funding, restricting funding can prevent civil society from forming or carrying out their activities (OGP 2019). These restrictions , therefore, affect the right to freedom of association (ibid.). Some CSOs must rely on governmental funding, which in turn, can affect their ability to serve as independent advocates (McDonough and Rodriguez 2020).

Since the start of 2020, the restrictions and lockdowns around the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic have increased challenges for civil society (CIVICUS 2020). According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL)'s civic freedom tracker, around one-third of countries have implemented measures that affect expression and privacy, and more than two-thirds have measures that affect assembly because of the pandemic. These measures affect civil society and how it can operate (ICNL n.d.). Frontline workers, civil society activists, and other concerned people have questioned their government's response to the pandemic and exposed failings of the government's pandemic strategy. As a result, they have experienced threats to their safety and privacy, as well as censorship and limitations on access to information (CIVICUS 2020). For example, in Zimbabwe, prison sentences of up to 20 years have been introduced for spreading false statements about officials involved in the government's pandemic strategy. Many aid workers have also been arrested for violating social distancing rules in Cameroon and Rwanda while distributing food, free protective masks, and sanitizing gel (ICLN 2020).

1.2 The funding landscape

Since the 1970s, international donors, such as the World Bank and United Nations, have worked with CSOs to strengthen multi-stakeholder engagement (World Bank 2014, UN n.d.). In subsequent decades, formal relationships between civil society, governments, and other international development actors have created spaces for joint efforts to address global issues through mutual consultations, policymaking discussions, and conferences. More recently, international funding has shifted priorities, specifically to address immediate crises, such as the global pandemic. Some governments have moved toward implementing tax relief to boost individual donations (CAF 2020).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development–Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC), civil society funding has decreased from 12 percent in 2014 to 10 percent in 2016, although it increased to 15 percent of total official development assistance in 2020 (OECD 2020). However, total funding to and through CSOs decreased by 6 percent points between 2017 and 2018 (OECD 2020), coming back to slightly increase in 2019 (OECD 2021). Many CSOs have seen entire funding streams dry up while demand for their services has increased, and as a result, they have adapted to completely different ways of working (CAF 2020, 1). Countries that have recently improved their economic status often experience sharp reductions in aid, especially if they have achieved middle-income status, because donors focus on areas where the need is the highest (Appel and Pallas 2018). Due to these funding shortfalls, civil society needs improved infrastructure to promote self-sustainability and new mechanisms to access financial resources, like crowdsourcing.

Funders increasingly require that civil society actors adopt evidence-informed theories of change and rigorous monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. A theory of change can present the intentions of civil society actors and demonstrate how their interventions contribute to anticipated outcomes and broader impact (NORAD 2012). Insufficient theories of change and M&E systems can reduce the effectiveness of programming and evaluation efforts (INTRAC 2013). However, the absence of skills, expertise, and long-term funding to allow efficient research and monitoring make it difficult to satisfy specific funders' requirements (ibid.). In some instances, funders provide the support civil society needs in this area. For example, the Danish Embassy provided capacity building to civil society in L&MICs. They used a unique "strategic partnership" approach, where the embassy provided ongoing advice to grantees, beyond supporting only discrete capacity building activities (McDonough and Rodríguez 2020).

1.3 Why it is important to do this EGM

The funding constraints civil society faces highlight the importance of effectively using limited funding by implementing appropriate and effective interventions. Proven interventions should be implemented, unproven ones should be evaluated, and disproven ones should be discontinued. Although there is qualitative and observational evidence available on a wide range of civil society interventions and outcomes, much of the evidence does not establish impact. Further, there is no comprehensive systematic map to collect these findings together and present them in an accessible format.

The purpose of this map is to determine the distribution of the evidence regarding interventions to strengthen civil society in L&MICs and provide easy access to this literature. By describing the evidence base, we hope to highlight areas for future research and facilitate critical thinking about the methods of evaluation used in the field. By cataloguing the evidence base, we hope to provide stakeholders with the information they need to make evidence-informed decisions. Through both approaches, the EGM can inform the future allocation of resources and transition to more evidence-informed civil society programs.

1.4 Study objectives and questions

This project aims to improve access to evidence on the effects of interventions to strengthen civil society in L&MICs among policymakers, researchers, and the development community. It will do this by identifying, describing, and summarizing the available evidence in a clear and structured way. In turn, it is expected that the project will facilitate the use of evidence to inform policy decisions. To meet this aim, the specific objectives of this EGM are twofold:

1. Identify and describe the evidence on the effects of interventions to strengthen civil society in L&MICs
2. Identify potential primary evidence and synthesis gaps

To meet these objectives, we will address the research questions shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: EGM research questions

No.	Research Question	Type
RQ1	What is the extent and what are the characteristics of empirical evidence on the effects of interventions to strengthen civil society in L&MICs?	Coverage
RQ2	What are the major primary and synthesis evidence gaps in the literature?	Gaps
RQ3	What intervention/outcome areas could be prioritized for primary research and/or evidence synthesis?	Research needs

2. Scope

This map considers the impacts of interventions to strengthen civil society. It does not consider (1) the development of new sectors of civil society or (2) the effectiveness of civil society actors in achieving their goals. Specifically, we do not consider interventions to improve the quality of services civil society actors provide (e.g., the provision of health or education services). In addition, we do not include the media and journalists, because we have developed a separate EGM for independent media.

2.1 Conceptual framework

2.1.1 Definition

There is no single agreed-upon definition for civil society and we will not add our own definition to the long list of proposed ones. Rather, we recognize the essential contributions to the conceptualization made by academics and practitioners in the field. We have identified several widely used definitions and combined them to develop an operationalizable working definition.

In classical social theory, civil society is the realm of social life where moral sentiments, norms, practices, and hegemonic ideologies are cultivated through institutions that mediate between the family and the state: the church, educational institutions, social movements, and so on (Gramsci 1971, de Tocqueville 2012). The Civil Society Index defines civil society as the “the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market where people associate to advance common interests” (Heinrich 2004, 13) and where citizens can organize themselves to pursue goals not directly related to personal or financial gain, which concern a wider group of people and are not necessarily taken care

of by the government, outside of the family, the state, and the market. However, in reality, the boundaries between civil society, family, state, and the private sector are fuzzy—these four entities often overlap, at least to some extent (Heinrich 2004, CCS 2006, CIVICUS 2019, MFAN 2019). The definition we are adopting is the following:

“In recent times, the different typologies of civil society are: Civil society organizations (CSOs) comprising NGOs, faith-based organizations, and community-based organizations that have an organized structure and mission and are typically registered entities and groups; Online groups and activities, including social media communities that can be ‘organized’ but do not necessarily have physical, legal, or financial structures; Social movements of collective action and/or identity, which can be online or physical; Labor unions and labor organizations representing workers; and Social entrepreneurs employing innovative and/or market-oriented approaches for social and environmental outcomes.” — (Vandyck 2017)

The definition highlights the relevance of all actors that form part of civil society. Consistent with CIVICUS's definition from its 2011 *State of Civil Society* report, civil society, therefore, encompasses CSOs' and less formalized groups' and individuals' actions. The term “organized civil society” refers to independent, non-state, and non-private sector associations and organizations with some form of structure and formal rules of operating, together with the networks, infrastructure, and resources they use. Civil society comprehends formal and informal organizations involved in development work, such as registered charities, development nongovernmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, trade association, self-help groups, business associations, community-based organizations (CBOs), indigenous peoples' organizations (IPOs), academia, journalist associations, coalitions, advocacy groups, private voluntary organizations (PVOs), civic clubs, social and sports clubs, environmental groups, professional associations, policy institutions, consumer organizations, and the media (UNDP 2006; Essia and Yearoo 2009; USAID 2012, 2018; MFAN 2019). We use a broad definition of civil society, because funders tend to focus on CSOs, making it easy to lose sight of all the other informal civil society actors that make up civil society. This is especially true in non-Western societies, where civil society commonly encompasses a diversity of spaces, actors, and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy, and power (CCS 2006, MFAN 2019).

2.1.2 The theory behind these interventions

“Support civil society as an effective arena that empowers citizens to advance democratic values of citizen participation and governmental accountability. This includes supporting an enabling legal environment that protects and promotes civil society and civic action; providing capacity development assistance to CSOs; supporting civic participation; bolstering government oversight and accountability activities; strengthening a democratic political culture that values civic engagement, tolerance, and respect for human rights; and strengthening independent and democratic trade/labor unions.” — USAID (2018) in the civil society program area definition under the Standardized Program Structure and Definitions

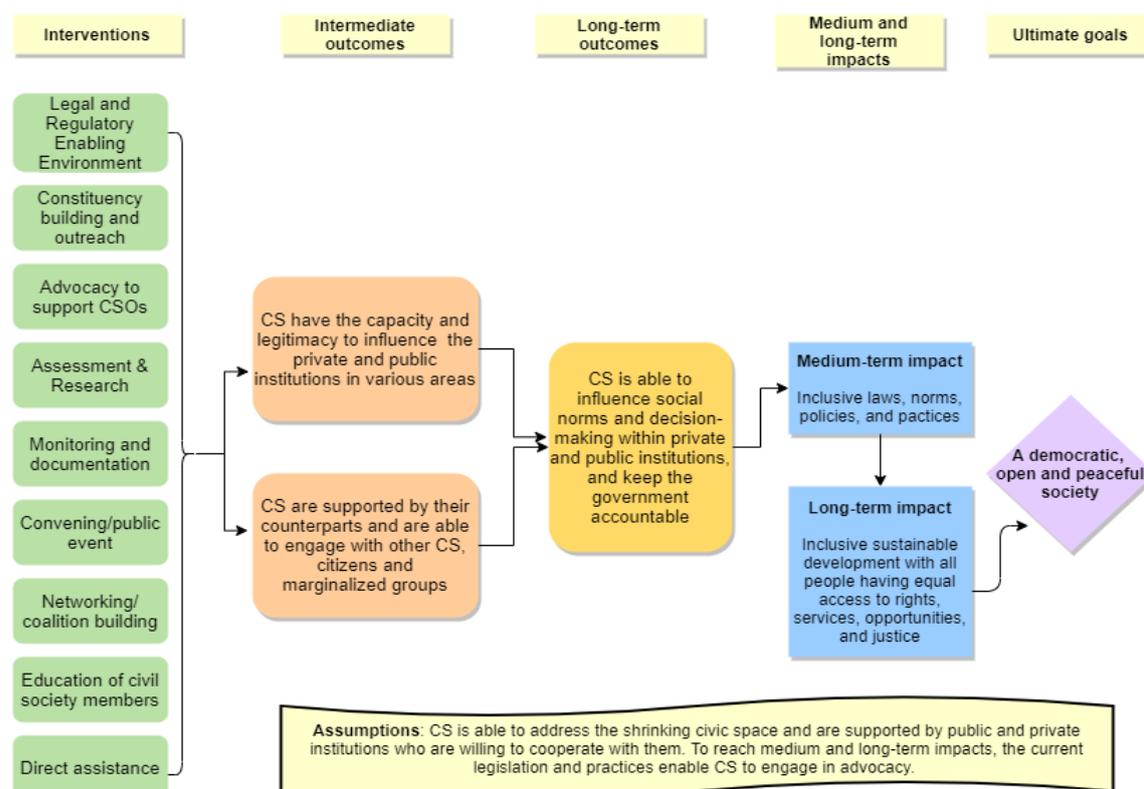
A strong civil society is thought to lead to more effective development and improve the quality of democracy. This can be achieved by (1) civil society and government having a good working relationship that enables them to solve problems the broader society cares about, and (2) civil society having sufficient independence and influence on government and broader society to appropriately define and analyze problems, and then hold the powerful accountable for solving them. In severely restricted civic spaces, development partners strengthen civil society to deliver services the government cannot deliver and channel information from the population to the state so that the state can better meet the needs of the population. In more democratic societies, a strong civil society can be a partner to the government in analyzing problems, crafting policy, and implementing solutions, as well as watchdogs and advocates for individual and collective rights, as well as for governmental and corporate transparency, accountability, and social inclusion.

The dominant theory of change for civil society work in international development is a “sandwich approach,” where interventions target both governments and civil society. The top-down approaches involve legislation to improve the enabling environment for civil society activity and work with the executive branch to improve the government’s capacity to receive and act on input from civil society. On the bottom-up side, interventions target civil society with material support and training to improve their capacity to do a variety of advocacy, watchdog, and social change activities, as well as materially supporting the implementation of those activities.

We adapted a version of a theory of change (**Figure 1**) from a policy document of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (MFAN 2019). We organized the interventions in broad categories, with several sub-categories explained Appendix A. The interventions include projects to (1) strengthen the regulatory environment to allow civil society to operate safely; (2) develop institutional capacities and technical skills, as well as direct financial or technical support; and (3) create coalitions and collaborations between civil society and the government or other public and private institutions.

These interventions are expected to lead to medium- and long-term outcomes and medium and long-term impacts. The map framework includes the outcomes likely to be measured through evaluation studies. In the medium term, civil society is expected to gain the capacity and legitimacy to increase their influence on public and private institutions’ decisions, for example, by advocating for human rights and inclusion of marginalized groups in policies and reforms (INTRAC 2013, Bahmani 2016, MFAN 2019). Private and public institutions may increase their support of civil society, which may improve civil society’s ability to engage citizens, including marginalized groups, giving them voice and power. In the long-term, interventions may result in an actual influence on policy and decision-making within private and public institutions, holding the government accountable and making pressure for laws and policies that benefit the poor and the marginalized groups (INTRAC 2013, USAID 2018, MFAN 2019). The medium- and long-term impacts are expected to be the existence of laws, policies, and practices that take into consideration the whole population, including the marginalized groups, allowing everyone to have equal access to services, rights, opportunities, and justice, assuming that the current legislation allows civil society to engage in advocacy activities. The final overall goal is to reach and maintain a democratic, open, and peaceful society. The main assumptions to reach these outcomes are the ability of civil society to function within the allocated civic space and the willingness of public and private institutions to collaborate with civil society.

Figure 1: Theory of change



Source: 3ie. Adapted from a policy document of the Ministry Affairs of the Netherlands (MFAN 2019). Note: In the figure, CSOs refers to civil society organization and CS refers to civil society.

3. Methods

3.1 Overall methodological approach

EGMs are tools to help policymakers and researchers working in a sector or thematic area make evidence-informed decisions. They make existing evidence more accessible and inform the prioritization of future research by mapping existing studies in a field on a framework of interventions and outcomes. We followed the standards and methods for EGMs developed by 3ie (Snilstveit et al. 2016, 2017).

The map is populated by systematically searching and screening all relevant completed and ongoing IEs and SRs. An IE measures the effects on targeted outcomes that can be attributed to a particular program or intervention; SRs extract and synthesize data from multiple IEs of similar interventions to generate more robust conclusions about their effectiveness than a single study could provide.

Using 3ie’s EGM software, we created an online, interactive matrix that maps all included studies according to the interventions evaluated and the outcomes reported. This provides a visual display of the volume of evidence for the intervention–outcome combination, the type of evidence (IEs, SRs, completed or ongoing), and a confidence rating for SRs. The platform provides additional filters so users can further explore the available evidence, for example, by global regions, income levels, or population. The EGM can be viewed at <https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/strengthening-civil-society-egm>.

This report serves as a complement to the interactive map. In the report, we address the key research questions through analysis of the characteristics of the available evidence and key trends (i.e., number of IEs published over the time, geography, focus on interventions and outcomes, targeted audiences).

EGMs highlight both primary evidence gaps, which should be filled with new IE studies, and synthesis gaps, wherein a cluster of IEs is ready for new SRs and meta-analyses. EGMs are envisioned as a global public good, which allows them to be used as a tool that facilitates access to high-quality research.

3.2 Criteria for including and excluding studies in the EGM

In **Table 2**, we summarize criteria we adopted to include/exclude a study in the EGM by populations, interventions, comparators, outcomes, and study designs (PICOS). When building the interventions/outcomes framework, we aimed to be comprehensive while setting a manageable scope we could present in a clear and interpretable manner. We report the whole interventions/outcomes framework in Appendix A.1.

Table 2: Summary criteria for studies to be included in the CS EGM

Criteria	Definition
Population	We included studies targeting any population type, implemented in any L&MICs.
Interventions	We included interventions that aim to strengthen civil society. The specific intervention categories are organized under six intervention groups in Table 2, Appendix A.1. We included studies that evaluated the impact of at least one intervention included in Table 2. We looked at the legal environment that allows the existence of an open civic space, the support to carry on advocacy and monitoring activities, the training to develop specific skills required by civil society to carry out their activities, the support to create coalitions, and the provision of financial fundings. In cases where the studies evaluated multicomponent interventions, if at least one of the subcomponents matched one of the civil society categories of Table 2, the study was included.
Outcomes	We looked at both intermediate and final outcomes, reported in Table 3, Appendix A.1. We included studies that measured at least one of the following intermediate or long-term outcomes. The intermediate outcomes included the development of civil society members' capacities to influence governments and private institutions by increasing the share of people who take part in the civil life and trust the civil society. Other intermediate outcomes are the support received from a counterpart who may create a favorable legal environment and the civil society's ability to coordinate with other groups to achieve a cause. The long-term outcomes include the civil society's ability to influence decision-making and actively monitoring public and private institutions.
Study designs	We included IEs and SRs that measured the effects of a relevant intervention on outcomes of interest. For IEs, we included counterfactual study designs that used an experimental, quasi-experimental, or qualitative design and/or analysis method to measure the net change in outcomes that were attributed to an intervention (i.e., policy, program,

Criteria	Definition
	project). We included randomized and non-randomized studies that were able to take into account confounding and selection bias. For SRs, we included effectiveness reviews that synthesized the effects of an intervention on outcomes of interest. We excluded reviews that only described programmatic approaches or synthesized findings on barriers and facilitators to implementation.
Language	Studies published in any language were included, although the search terms used were in English only.
Publication date	All studies published from 1990 onwards were eligible, provided that the intervention occurred after 1950.
Status of studies	We included ongoing and completed IEs and SRs. For ongoing studies, we included prospective study records, protocols, and trial registries.

3.3 Conceptual framework development

We developed the framework by consulting the literature cited in the paragraphs above. We received feedback on the proposed framework from stakeholders within USAID and an external Advisory Group (see Appendix D). Laura Adams, the subject-matter expert for this project, provided essential inputs to develop the intervention categories and the theory behind the interventions we looked at.

3.4 Search strategy

This project implemented a sensitive search strategy³ primarily constructed by a combination of intervention and study design terms. An information specialist developed the strategy and an example of the strategy developed for EBSCO is provided in Appendix B.2. The strategy was translated⁴ according to the requirements and functionalities of different databases. The search for evidence was conducted using a range of different sources of academic and grey literature, including bibliographic databases, repositories of IEs and SRs, specialist organizational databases, and websites of bilateral and multilateral agencies. We conducted forward citation searches of all included studies to identify further potentially relevant IEs and SRs. The review team contacted key experts and organizations through our review advisory group (presented in Appendix D) and published a blog post soliciting relevant studies from policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and academics. A full list of sources we searched and the detailed process we followed can be found in Appendix B.1.

3.5 Screening

We managed the selection of studies for data extraction as part of the review using EPPI-Reviewer 4 software (Thomas et al. 2020). We imported the studies into EPPI-Reviewer and, following the removal of duplicates, two team members independently

³ Sensitive search strategy: Here, sensitive is a synonym for comprehensiveness in relation to the types of studies that can be captured in a search strategy. An increase of sensitivity of a search will reduce its precision and retrieve more non-relevant articles (Higgings et al. 2011).

⁴ The search strategy run in different databases made of strings of key words, often truncated, and wildcards variations of the same terms, linked between them with Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT or proximity operator N3, N5, etc.). These operators are different for each database so they need to be “translated.”

screened the titles and abstracts in duplicate. We used EPPI-Reviewer’s machine learning tool “Classifier” to identify the studies that were more likely to be included and, therefore, assigned first for screening, which streamlined the review process. We screened all studies at title and abstract. Subsequently, two independent reviewers screened the studies included according to the inclusion/exclusion criteria at title and abstract at full text. A full list and details of each step can be found in Appendix A.2.

3.6 Data extraction and critical appraisal

We systematically extracted data from all included studies using the data extraction tools available in Appendix B. We converted the tools into XLSForms for use in KoBo Toolbox, a software that facilitates data extraction. The extracted data were related to the following broad areas:

- Basic study and publication information: Authors, publication date and status, study location, intervention type, outcomes reported, definition of outcome measures, population of interest, study and program funders, time periods for delivery and analysis
- Topical cross-cutting issues: Gender, equity, and cost-effectiveness focus

We also conducted critical appraisals for all included SRs, which assessed how the search, screening, data extraction, and synthesis had been conducted, covering all the most common areas where biases in the study design and analysis are introduced (see Appendix C3). Based on the appraisal, each review was rated as high, medium, or low confidence, indicating the level of confidence we have in the findings of the review based on the methods the authors used. A review classified as high-confidence used methods that align with best practices—the search process was sufficient to identify all potentially relevant studies, bias was avoided in the selection of studies, and appropriate methods were applied to assess risks of bias in included IEs and synthesize the findings on effects. We extracted and summarized the findings of the high-confidence systematic reviews.

3.7 Presentation of the map

We present the results graphically on an interactive online platform.⁵ The main framework is a matrix of interventions and outcomes, with grey, light red, blue, and traffic-light colored circles representing quantitative IEs, ongoing IEs, qualitative IEs, and SRs with their confidence level. The SRs follow a traffic-light system to indicate confidence in their findings: green for high, orange for medium, and red for low confidence. The size of the bubble indicates the relative size of the evidence base for that intersection of intervention and outcome. The bubbles within each box of the matrix represent studies reporting effects for that intervention/outcome combination. Clicking on any bubble will display a list of the studies with hyperlinks to the full text.⁶

The interactive aspect of the EGM allows users to filter the results based on key variables, thereby facilitating efficient, user-friendly identification of relevant evidence. The filters and their definitions are provided in **Table 3**.

⁵ More information available at: <https://gapmaps.3ieimpact.org/evidence-maps/strengthening-civil-society-egm>

⁶ Where possible, we have linked to the full text directly; however, for studies behind paywalls, the hyperlink goes to the study landing page that typically, at a minimum, provides the abstract and references.

Table 3: Definition of EGM filters

Filter	Definition
Region	This filter identifies studies according to the geographic region where the interventions were implemented, using the regions as defined by the World Bank.
Country	This filter allows users to identify the evidence base from a specific country.
Income Level	This filter allows users to identify the evidence base from a particular country income group, as classified by the World Bank, and identify evidence from low-income countries, low medium-income countries, or medium-income countries. The income level is based on the status of the country in the first year of the intervention, or if not available, the publication year.
Electoral Democracy	This filter allows users to identify evidence base from a particular country electoral democracy categorization. It uses categories from the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index ordinal (D) (e_v2x_polyarchy) based on the status of the country in the first year of the intervention, or if not available, the publication year.
FCS Status	This filter allows users to identify the evidence base from countries that are affected by fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCS) , as defined by the World Bank’s list of fragile and conflict-affected situations from 2006–2021. It is based on the status of the country in the first year of the intervention, or if not available, the publication year.
Population	This filter enables users to identify studies that contain specific results for a range of key population groups: LGBTQI+ ⁷ sexual and gender minorities; ethnic, racial, caste-based, and religious groups; survivors of large-scale violence/displacement (includes refugees and internally displaced populations); survivors of gender-based violence; survivors of trafficking; people living with disabilities and chronic health conditions; people with substance use issues; incarcerated people and those reentering society; sex workers; and dissidents. In case this information was not explicitly specified, the “unspecified” option was chosen; when it was stated that population of any ethnic group, caste, and religious group had been included, the option “ethnic, racial, caste-based, religious groups – whole population” was chosen; the same is valid for “LGBTQI+ – whole population.”
Age	Children, adolescents, youth, adults, older adults, whole population (in case there were no restrictions on the age of the participants)
Sex	Female, male, whole population
Setting	Urban, peri-urban, whole population
Study Design	This filter enables users to identify studies that employed a particular study design, using the list of study designs in Appendix A.1.e.
Cost Evidence	This filter enables users to identify studies that incorporated cost evidence into their analysis.
Theme	This filter enables users to identify studies included in EGMs from other DRG Center Program Areas: Rule of Law, Civil Society, Independent Media, Governance, Political Competition, and Consensus Building.

⁷ LGBTQI+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex persons or other sexual and gender identities affected by the issues the LGBTQI community faces.

3.8 Analysis and reporting

To answer Research Question 1 regarding the extent and characteristics of the evidence base, we present the distribution of studies by date of publication, intervention(s) studied, outcomes reported, and population considered, including regions, countries, and specific population groups. For the high confidence SR included, we further extracted summaries of the key findings for policy implications.

To answer Research Question 2 regarding gaps in the evidence, we combined knowledge of the evidence distribution with sectoral knowledge to determine meaningful primary evidence gaps—where no IEs exist, and synthesis gaps—where no up-to-date or high-confidence SRs exist despite a cluster of IE evidence.

To answer Research Question 3—which intervention/outcome areas can be prioritized for primary research and/or evidence synthesis—we shared the draft findings with stakeholders at USAID and the Advisory Group, and solicited input regarding policymakers' and practitioners' priorities for future research.

4. Findings

This section represents the EGM's key findings, including the search results, characteristics of the included studies, interventions and outcomes captured, study designs and types.

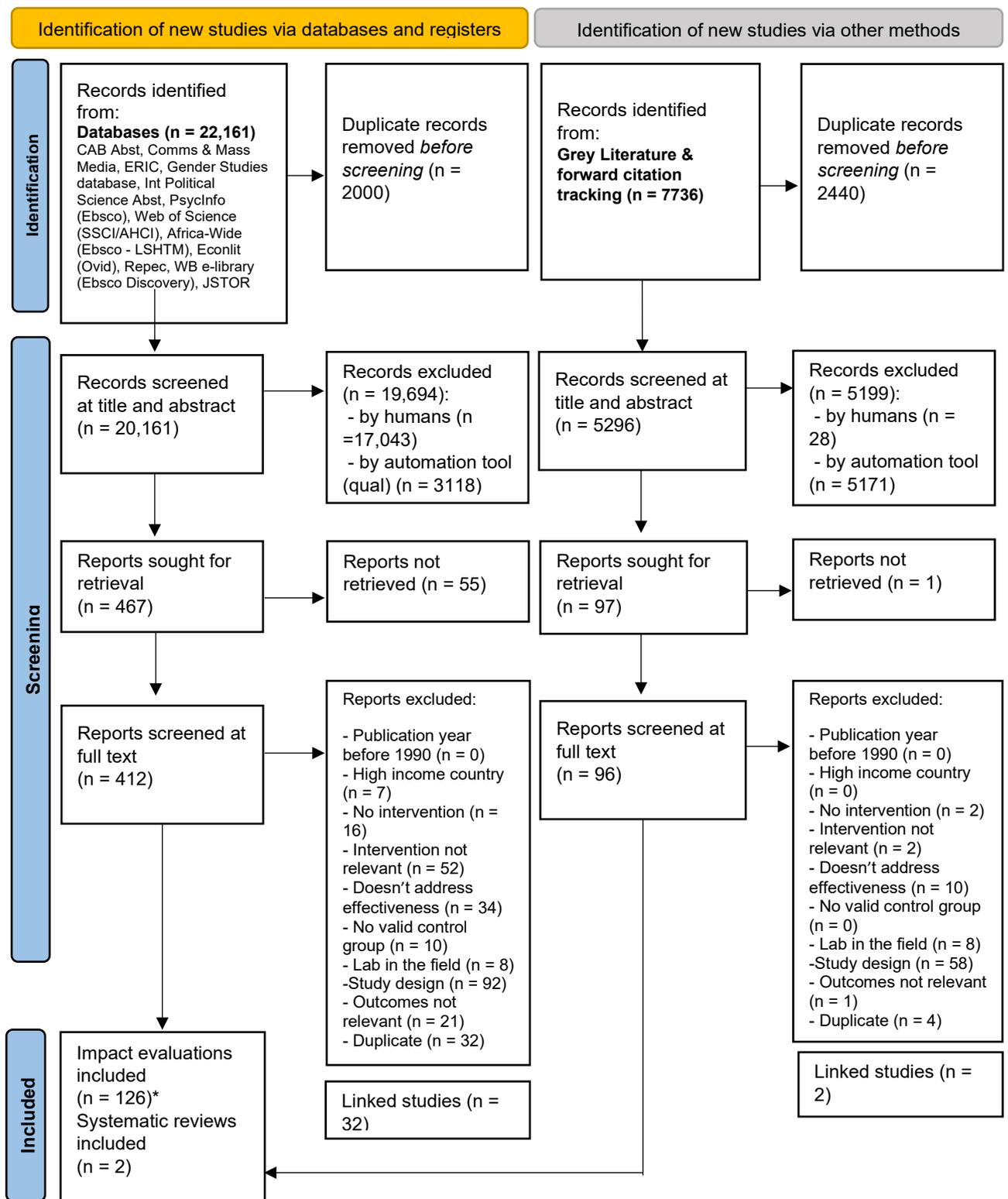
4.1 Volume of the evidence

We conducted three searches in March, June, and July 2021, for quantitative studies, qualitative studies, and forward citation tracking of included IEs, respectively. As shown in the PRISMA diagram below (**Figure 2**), the search identified a total of 22,161 studies from academic databases, and 7,736 studies from grey literature search, backward and forward citation tracking. Studies flagged for backward citation tracing tended to be non-systematic reviews, which might have relevant information in their references.

After removing duplicates from the studies retrieved through databases, we screened 20,161 studies at title and abstract. We excluded most of these studies because they did not have an intervention (n=8,373) or the intervention was not relevant (n=6,050).

We included 467 studies for full-text screening, but could not attain the full text documents for 55. Therefore, we screened 412 at full text and included 140. We excluded 92 studies because they did not have an eligible study design, 52 because their interventions were not relevant to the scope of the EGM, and 34 because they did not address effectiveness (**Figure 2**). We then manually searched for grey literature in relevant organizations' websites and conducted forward citation tracking. We followed the same process described above and included additional 19 studies. In the end, we included 128 eligible studies (125 reports of which one report included two distinct studies, so 126 studies): 116 quantitative, 10 qualitative, and 2 SRs. The full list of included IE studies and SRs can be found in **Section 7.1**.

Figure 2: PRISMA Diagram



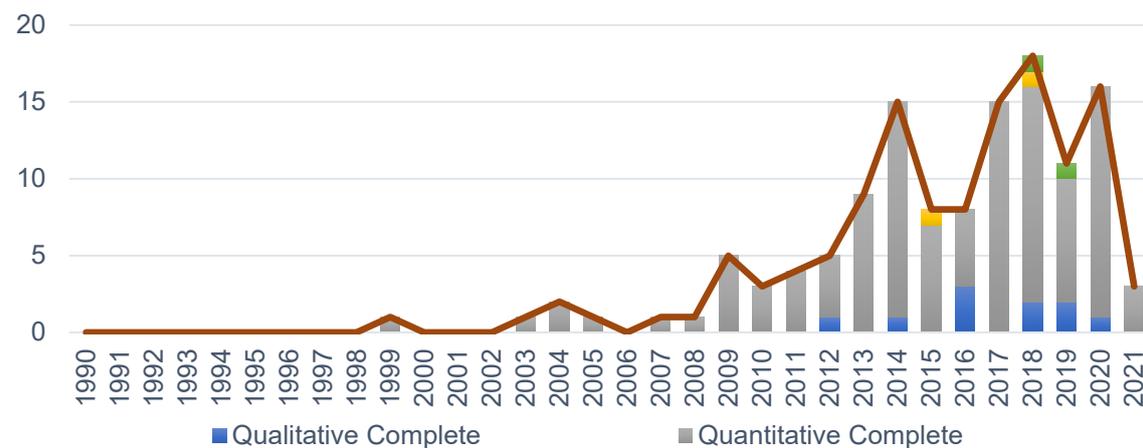
Source: 3ie (2021). Note 1: The number of reports is 125, but the number of studies is 126, because one report included two separate studies.

4.2 Characteristics of the evidence base

4.2.1 Publication trend over time

Generally, publications per year have increased since 1990; however, this trend is not consistent. There was only one study published before 2000. Since 2003, there has been at least one study published each year, except for 2006. The qualitative studies identified in the EGM were published between 2012 and 2020, with three of them published in 2016. The SRs were published in 2018 and 2019. Because we searched the studies between March and July 2021, we identified only three studies in 2021.

Figure 3: Publication trend since 1990 by number of studies



Source: 3ie (2021). Publication trend of the 128 included IEs and SRs. Note: The drop in 2021 is due to the fact the search was conducted between March and July 2021.

4.2.2 Geographic distribution

Most of the included studies were implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa (n=57; 46%), followed by South Asia (n=22; 18%), East Asia and the Pacific (n=23; 18%), and Latin America and the Caribbean (n=19; 15%). We found few studies in the Middle East and North Africa (n=3; 2%) and Europe and Central Asia (n=1; 1%).

At the country level, India has the highest number of studies (n=17), followed by Uganda (n= 1), Indonesia (n=9), Kenya (n=9), and the Philippines (n=7). The World Bank classifies most of the countries covered by the included studies as lower income⁸ (n=64; 49%) and low-middle income countries (n=64; 49%), followed by upper-middle income (n=23; 18%).

Half of the qualitative evaluations are concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa (n=5; 50%), specifically Benin, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, and Uganda. Most of the remainder of the qualitative studies were in the Middle East and North Africa (n=2; 20%), specifically Jordan and Tunisia. Two qualitative studies were implemented in East Asia and the Pacific (Indonesia and the Philippines) and Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil and Guatemala).

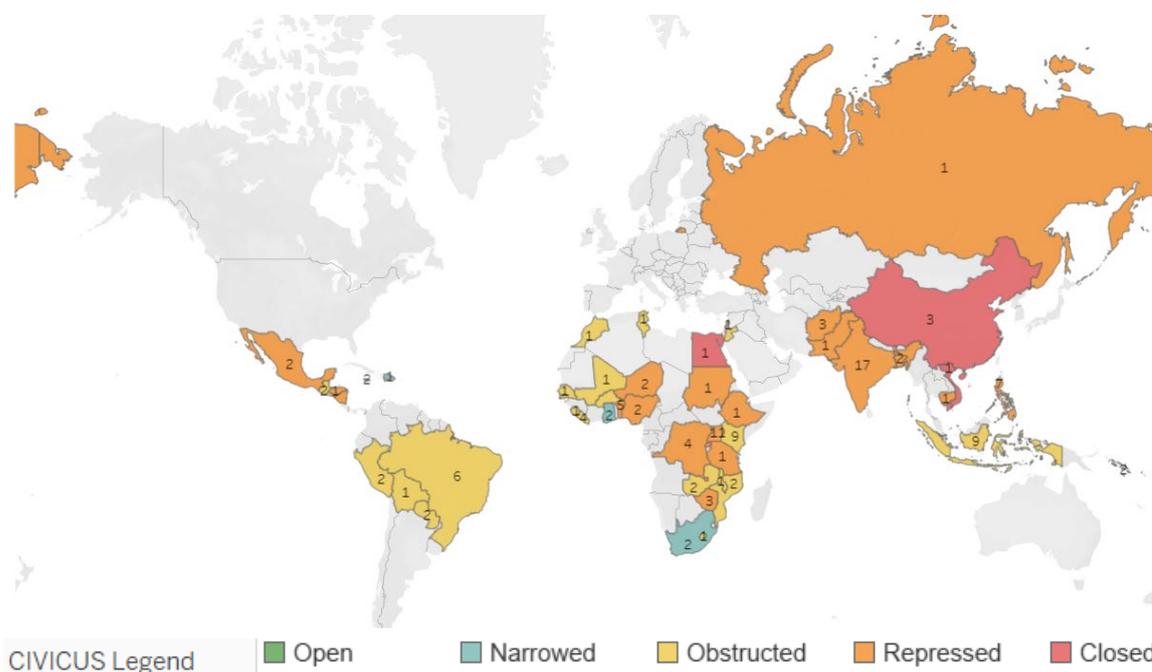
⁸ Country income status defined by the World Bank as per 2020:

<https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>. For income status of countries in the EGM, the first implementation year of each study's intervention of interest was considered. If there was no implementation year available in a study, the study's publication year was taken.

The SRs' geographic distribution is in line with that of the IEs: The two SRs have studies mostly implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Gugerty et al. 2018, Waddington et al. 2019).

By comparing the CIVICUS civic space Index⁶ with the distribution of our included studies, we see that evaluations have only been conducted in 2 of the 20 countries rated as closed (China and Vietnam; **Figure 4**). Most of the studies included in the map were implemented in countries rated as having “obstructed” (n=49; 39%) or “repressed” (n=65; 52%) level of freedom for civic space. Therefore, conducting evaluations in restricted settings is viable. In fact, evaluations have been conducted in 45 percent of the countries rated as “obstructed” or “repressed.” The remaining studies took place in countries rated as either “open” (n=2) or “narrowed” (n=6). The heat map below (**Figure 4**) overlays the number of IEs found in each country with the rating of the CIVICUS civic space Index⁶ to illustrate overlap between IE coverage and a country’s degree of freedom for their civic space as defined by CIVICUS.⁹

Figure 4: Geographical evidence base and the CIVICUS civic space ratings in 2021



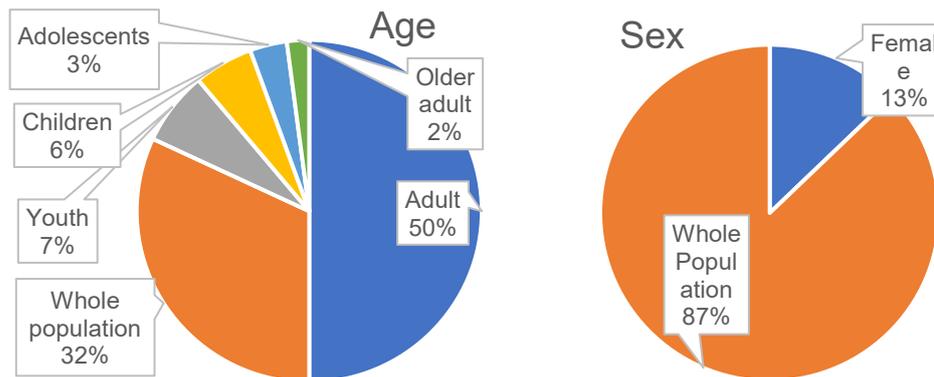
Source: The data source for CIVICUS civic space ratings is the CIVICUS Monitor (2021). Figure was created with Tableau. Note: Colors on the map indicate the CIVICUS civic space ratings. Overlaid numbers indicate the number of studies per country identified in the EGM.

⁹ Full description of the Index is available at: <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/innovate/civicus-monitor>. The CIVICUS civic space rating system assesses civil society conditions of 196 countries based on key indicators, such as the degree of freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression existing in a country (CIVICUS 2021). Each country is rated in one of five categories: open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed, or closed. These categories range from the highest to the lowest freedom a country’s civil society experiences.

4.2.3 Types of populations

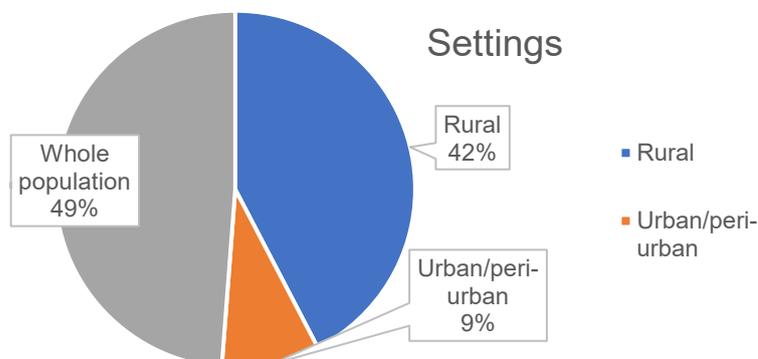
Most of the studies targeted adults (n=72, 50%) and both females and males (n=46, 32%). There is a small proportion of studies that specifically targeted women (n=16, 13%) and youth (n=10, 7%) (Figure 5). Almost half of the studies (n=53, 42%) were implemented in rural settings (Figure 6), with a small proportion of studies (n=11, 8%) conducted in urban/peri-urban areas, and the remaining studies implemented in all the settings mentioned above.

Figure 5: Distribution of IEs by targeted age and sex of intervention participants



Source: 3ie (2021).

Figure 6: Type of populations by urban/rural setting



Source: 3ie (2021).

4.2.4 Interventions

The included studies are not distributed evenly across all 36 intervention categories in the EGM. The most studied intervention groups are the ones related to networking/coalition-building (n=65, 39%) and the various forms of education of civil society members (n=36, 21%) (Figure 7). Looking at sub-categories, the most frequently evaluated interventions are networking/coalition-building on education (n=40, 25%) and convening/public events that are education-oriented interventions (n=21, 13%). Many of them provided information related to elections. The other frequently evaluated interventions are general education of civil society members (n=14, 8%); networking/collation-building for decision-making (n=12, 7%); networking/collation-building to coordinate activities (n=9, 6%); constituency-building and outreach (n=9, 6%); and monitoring of public and private institutions by civil society (n=8, 5%). There are 12 intervention sub-categories for which we found zero evaluations.

Figure 7: Studies identified by intervention and study type



Source: 3ie (2021). Created with Datawrapper. Note: Multi-coding was allowed for studies if they used more than one method or focused on more than one intervention listed in our inclusion criteria. Note: The total number of studies reported in **Figure 7** is higher than the total number of included IEs because any time there was in a study more than one intervention group/arm, each group was coded under the corresponding intervention category, resulting in having one study coded under multiple intervention categories.

Nine studies calculated effects for two distinct interventions, and three studies evaluated three interventions. In these cases, the studies with distinct interventions appear twice or three times in the online map, depending on the number of distinct interventions. Eight studies evaluated multicomponent interventions; they are discussed in detail below.

The high-confidence systematic review (Waddington et al. 2019) considered monitoring/documentation and networking/coalition-building for decision-making. The low confidence review (Gugerty et al. 2018) synthesized evidence on networking/coalition-building to coordinate activities, specifically related to self-help group interventions. Further information on the SRs is provided in **Section 4.3**.

4.2.5 Multicomponent interventions

A multicomponent intervention adopts a set of activities that fall into distinct intervention sub-categories in our framework. We included a total of seven studies of multicomponent interventions in this map. All the studies included two intervention components, as reported in **Table 4**, alongside their corresponding intervention groups. We cannot observe any trend in the combinations of these components. Some of them considered decision-making or policy interventions with financial support, while two studies considered sub-categories falling under education of civil society members and advocacy to support civil society.

In the map online, these studies are coded under one sub-category called “multicomponent interventions.”

Table 4: Multicomponent intervention studies

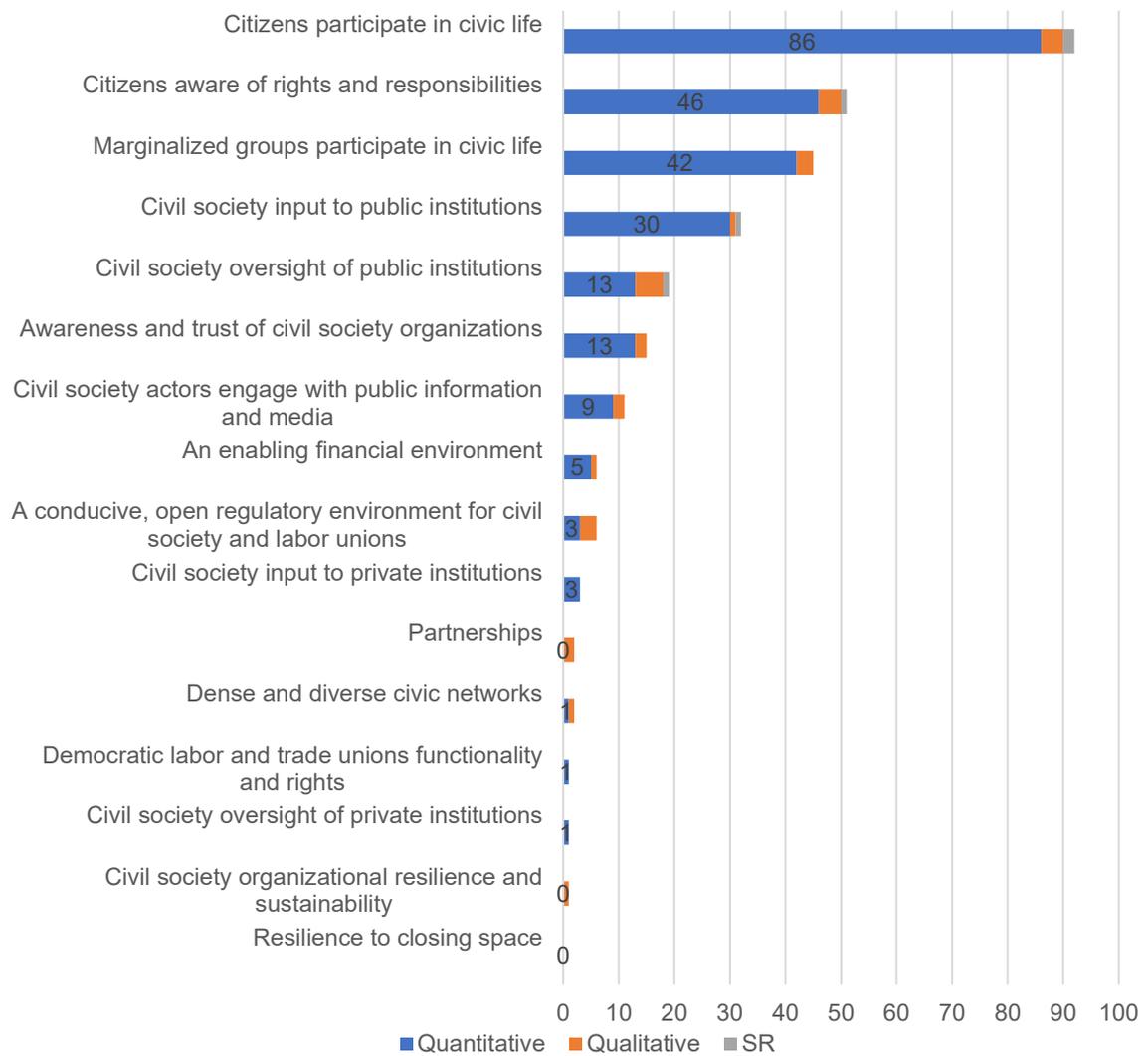
Study	Intervention group component one	Intervention category component one	Intervention group component two	Intervention category component two
Mvukiyeye and van der Windt (2020) Community-driven development program [Congo, Dem. Rep.]	<i>Networking/ coalition building</i>	Decision-making	<i>Direct assistance</i>	Sustained financial assistance to an organization
Hearn et al. (2016) Australia Indonesia partnership for justice [Indonesia]	<i>Legal and Regulatory Enabling Environment</i>	Policies, laws, reforms	<i>Direct assistance</i>	Sustained financial assistance to an organization
Heaner Gwendolyn (2012) Raising Poor and Marginalised Women’s Voices [Liberia]	<i>Education of civil society members</i>	On advocacy	<i>Advocacy to support civil society</i>	Campaign targeting policymakers
Sawada et al. (2016) Impact of school management committees on social capital [Burkina Faso]	<i>Networking/ coalition building</i>	Coordinating activities	<i>Education of civil society members</i>	On service provision

Study	Intervention group component one	Intervention category component one	Intervention group component two	Intervention category component two
Grillos (2015) Women empowerment intervention on political participation [Kenya]	<i>Convening/public event</i>	Education oriented	<i>Networking/coalition building</i>	Coordinating activities
Hernandez et al. (2019) Citizen-led initiatives for indigenous population health rights [Guatemala]	<i>Networking/coalition building</i>	Coordinating activities	<i>Advocacy to support civil society</i>	Campaign targeting policymakers
Chong et al. (2020) Social interactions female voting urbanization patterns GOTV campaigns [Paraguay]	<i>Advocacy to support civil society</i>	Public campaigns	<i>Education of civil society members</i>	On general education

4.2.6 Outcomes

Citizens' participation in civic life (n=97, **Figure 8**), citizens' awareness of rights and responsibilities (n=48), and marginalized groups' participation in civic life are the most studied outcome categories. These studies focused on civil society engagement and their active involvement in civic life. Most of the remaining studies measure the level of citizens' participation in civic life (n=91, 32%), the level of citizens' awareness of rights and responsibilities (n=51, 18%), outcomes related to the participation of marginalized groups in civic life (n=45, 16%), and civil society's input to public institutions (n=32, 11%). The least measured outcomes are the presence of dense and diverse civic networks, the presence of democratic labor and trade unions, the capacity of civil society to oversee private institutions, and civil society's organizational resilience and sustainability. No study measured resilience to closing space. Two outcomes—changes in partnership rates and the civil society's organizational resilience and civic space—are measured only in qualitative studies, reflecting that certain outcomes may be easier to measure through qualitative methodologies.

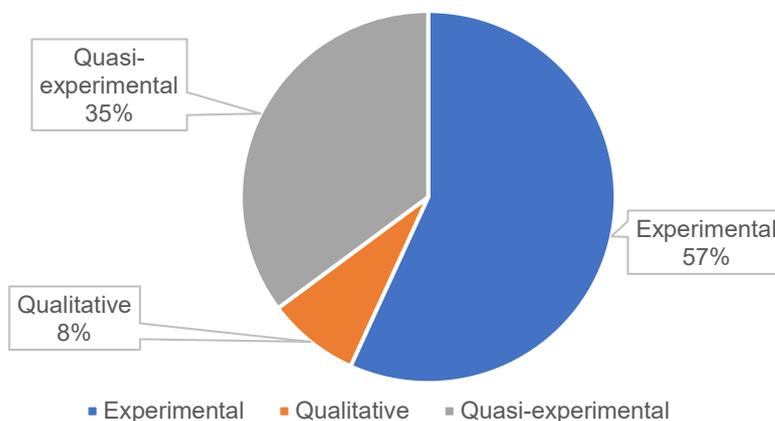
Figure 8: Outcome by study type



Source: 3ie (2021). Created with Datawrapper. Note: x-axis indicates the number of studies. More than one outcome was often reported in each study, so studies are counted multiple times.

**4.2.7 Study Design
Impact Evaluations**

Figure 9: Study designs used in the included IEs

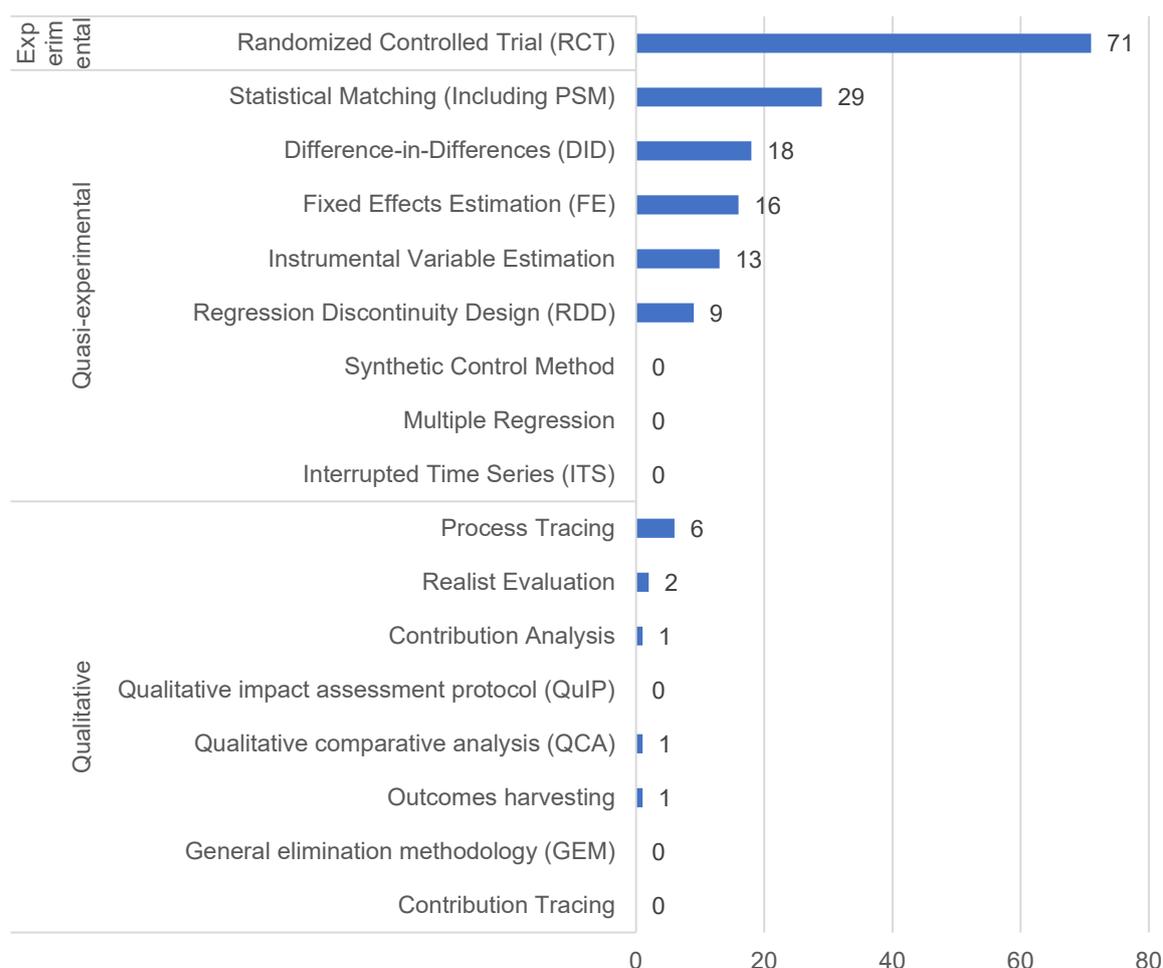


Over half of the included evaluations used experimental methods as the main study design (n=71, 57%) (**Figure 9**). Quasi-experimental designs were used in 44 studies (35%). Statistical matching was used in 29 studies, 19 used difference-in-difference, 16 fixed effects estimation, 13 instrumental variable estimation, and 9 studies used regression discontinuity design.

Process tracing is the most common qualitative evaluation design (n=6), followed by realist evaluation (n=2). Outcome harvesting, qualitative comparative analysis and contribution analysis are each used once. Gona and colleagues (2020) leveraged two distinct qualitative methods: realist evaluation and process tracing. We did not find any study that used contribution tracing, the qualitative impact assessment protocol, or the general elimination methodology.

Fewer than half (n=49, 39%) of the IEs employed a mixed-methods approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative components. We also found 19 studies that reported cost evidence: 10 reported the cost only, 4 reported the cost-benefit, 3 reported the cost-effectiveness, 1 reported both cost only and cost-effectiveness, and 1 reported a return on investment analysis.

Figure 10: Distribution of study designs



Source: 3ie (2021). Note: x-axis represents the number of studies. In case a study used more than one method, they were counted multiple times.

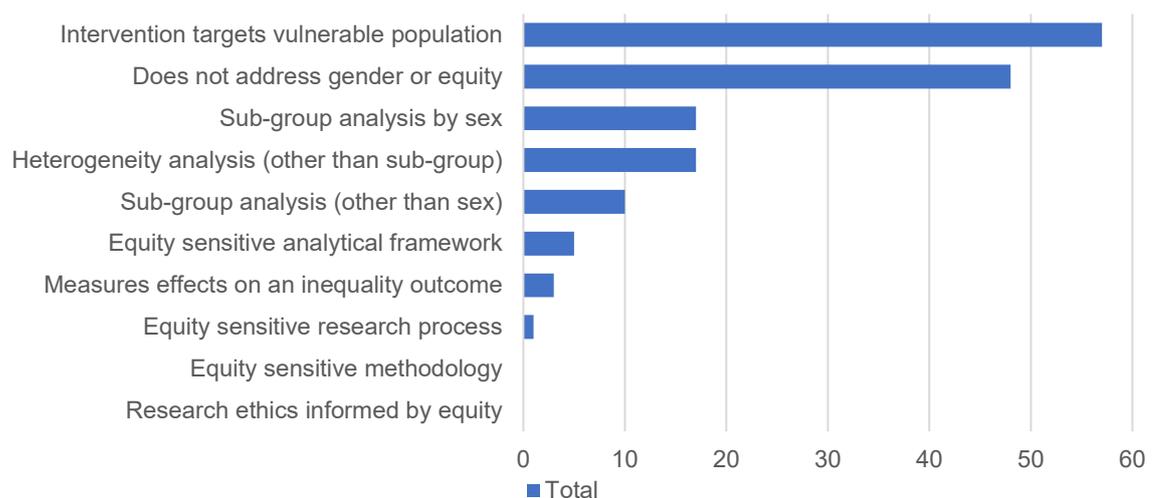
Systematic Reviews

The two included SRs undertook a narrative or thematic synthesis of the quantitative findings. One of them also used a realist synthesis for the qualitative information (Waddington et al. 2019). One SR is rated as high-confidence (Waddington et al. 2019) and the other as low-confidence (Gujerty et al. 2018) due to the lack of assessing the risk of bias in included studies.

4.2.8 Equity dimensions and focus

More than half of the studies (70%) addressed gender or equity (**Figure 11**). The most common approach was targeting vulnerable populations (36%), typically increasing civil society's participation in underrepresented groups (e.g., quota systems in elections to reserve seats for women and civic education for marginalized groups). The second most commonly used approach considered equity is the sub-group analysis (17%), of which 17 considered sex. In 17 studies (11%), heterogeneity analysis other than sub-group analysis was used. Few studies adopted other approaches to address equity, such as an equity-sensitive analytical framework (3%), measuring effects on an inequality outcome (2%), and equity-sensitive research process (0.8%). No IEs used equity-sensitive methodology or research ethics informed by equity.

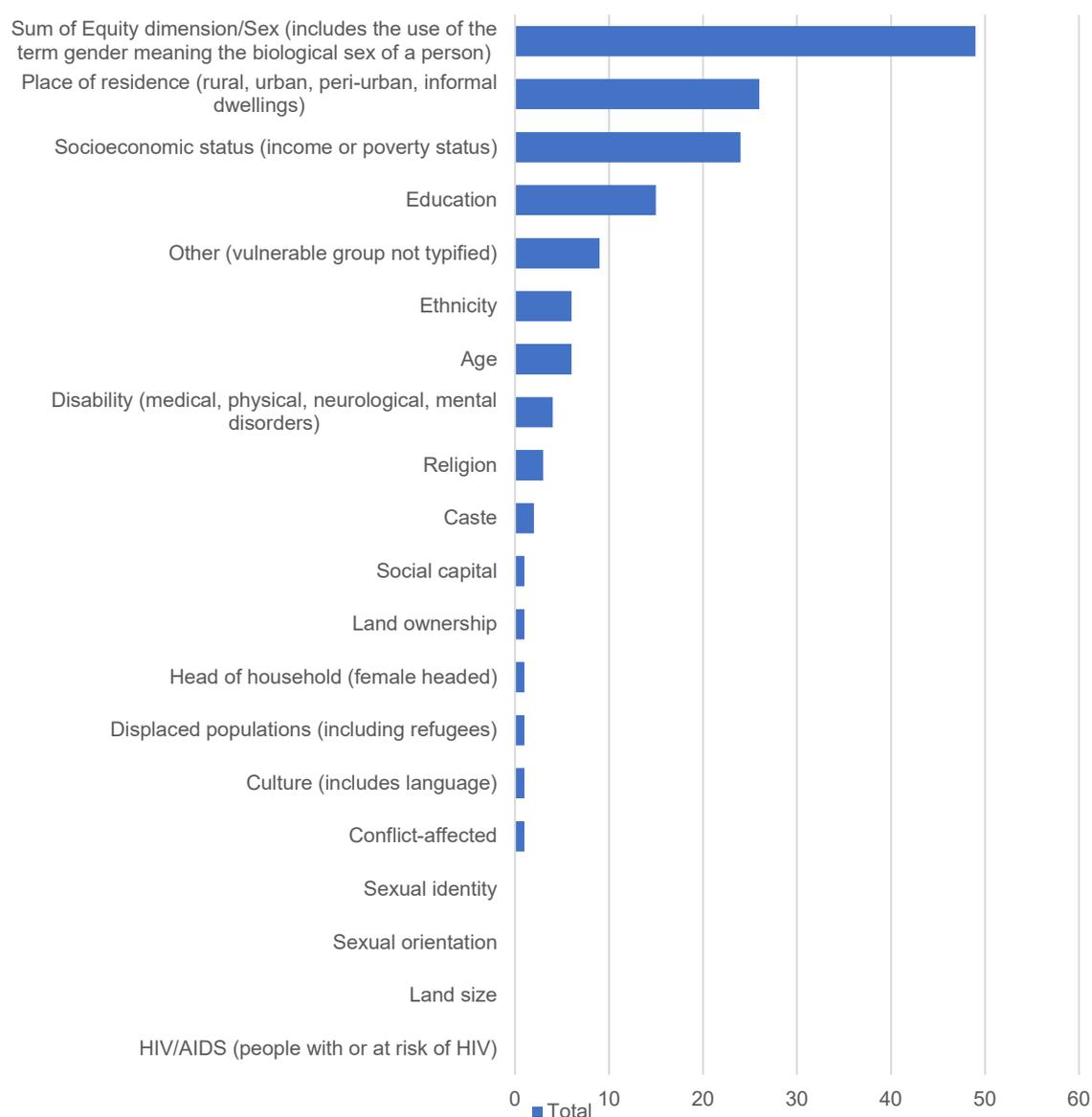
Figure 11: Equity focus of IEs



Source: 3ie (2021). Note: x-axis represents the number of studies.

Among the studies that did consider equity, most focused on sex (33%, **Figure 12**), followed by other household characteristics of the participants, such as place of residence (urban/rural) (17%) and socioeconomic status (16%). Some studies considered the characteristics of the participants themselves, including their education level (10%), age (4%), ethnicity (4%), disability (3%), religion (2%), and caste (1%).

Figure 12: Equity dimension of IEs

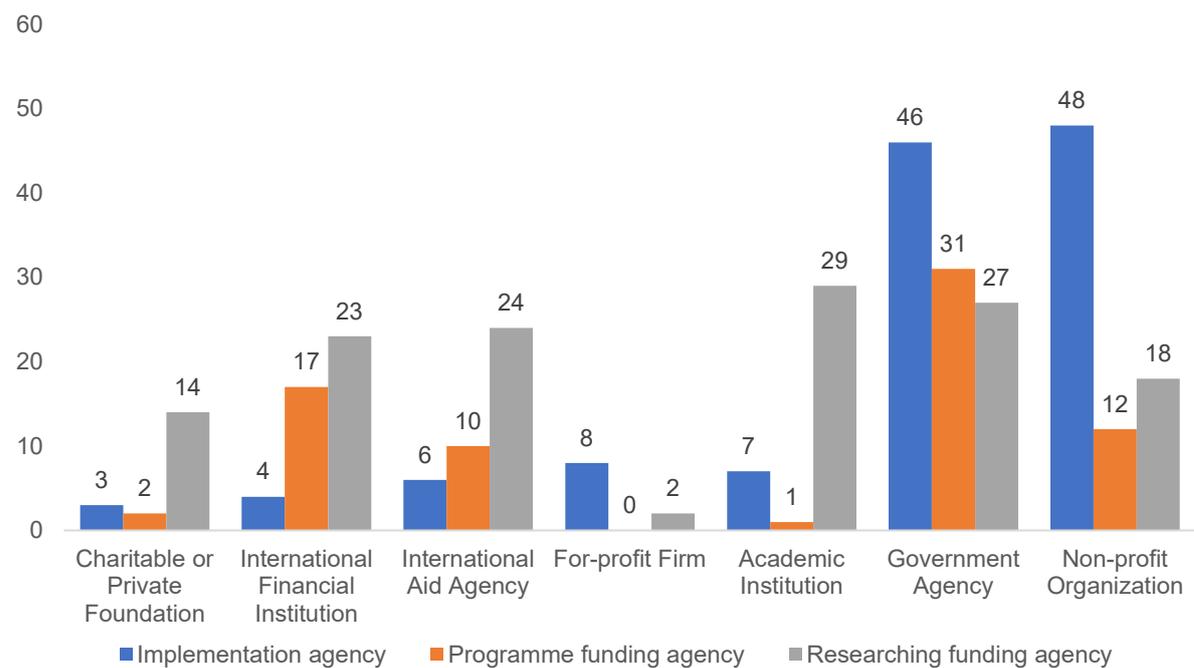


Source: 3ie (2021). Note: x-axis represents the number of studies.

4.2.9 Research and implementing funding organizations

Many studies did not specify the agency that funded the program (51%) or the research (27%), or which agency implemented the program (18%). Non-profit organization (33% **Figure 13**) and government agency (32%) were the most common implementation agencies. A few interventions were implemented by academic institutions (5%), for-profit firms (6%), and international aid agencies (4%). Government agencies were still the most common program funders (22%), followed by international financial institutions (12%) and non-profit organizations (9%). Some studies reported multiple program funders (n=13, 10%); in these interventions, governmental agencies, international financial institutions, or international aid agencies may have collaborated. The agencies funding the research were fairly evenly distributed between academic institutions (17%), government agencies (16%), international aid agencies (14%), and international financial institutions (13%).

Figure 13: Type of funding agency



Source: 3ie (2021). Note: y-axis represents the number of studies.

4.3 Findings from high- and medium-confidence SRs

The review by Waddington and colleagues (2019) is the only included SR of medium or high confidence. It focuses on PITA (participation, inclusion, transparency, and accountability) interventions in L&MICs. Some of the citizens' engagement interventions analyzed include citizens' feedback mechanisms and participatory planning interventions, which fall within our framework.

Citizen's feedback or monitoring mechanisms interventions – Ten (10) studies included in the review evaluated interventions where citizens were involved in keeping service providers and institutions accountable for executing their power and mandates as expected. Some specific factors seem to make these interventions more successful: (1) having citizens in direct contact with the front-line service providers; (2) involving both providers and citizens in the monitoring processes and the disseminating information about these processes; (3) using performance benchmarks; and (4) supporting local community organizations to strengthen community members' voices.

Participatory priority setting, planning, or budgeting interventions – Nine studies evaluated interventions where citizens were involved in the planning and/or setting priorities of local services, including support for participatory planning, participatory budgeting in municipal governments, and inclusive participation in two fragile contexts: Afghanistan and Democratic Republic of the Congo. Three factors seem to be key to the success of these interventions: (1) situations that facilitate the growth of local civil society—for instance, by encouraging citizens to create coalitions that increase capacity for collective action; (2) attaining buy-in from local front-line service providers for the intervention; and (3) addressing local barriers to allow vulnerable groups to participate in the intervention.

4.4 Gap analysis

4.4.1 *Interpreting evidence gaps and clusters*

On the interactive online matrix,¹⁰ blank squares indicate intervention–outcome configurations for which we identified no IEs or SRs. Evidence clusters are those combinations with a large number of studies. Although the EGM can help identify gaps and clusters, it does not explain the reason for these patterns. Not all evidence gaps must be filled. Clusters of evidence do not indicate that the intervention evaluated is effective. In fact, the opposite may be true—the evaluations may conclusively show that an intervention is ineffective. Findings from the high-confidence SR are presented in **Section 4**. However, beyond this, an EGM does not present results regarding the findings of included studies.

Evidence gaps can exist for three reasons:

1. There is limited underlying theory suggesting a causal relationship. Most interventions are not expected to affect all outcomes within an EGM. So, some blank squares may represent areas where there is no reason to expect a relationship and no need to investigate one. Examining the strength of the theory for each intervention–outcome configuration on the map is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of an EGM.
2. There are methodological limitations on the utility of quantitative IEs or ethical considerations that prevent the use of such methods. For example, measuring outcomes related to awareness and trust of civil society or the presence of dense and diverse civic networks might be challenging through counterfactual IEs and more feasible with qualitative IEs. In such cases, alternative methods may be used, such as qualitative theory-based IEs. However, we only found 10 qualitative evaluations in this map.
3. Other meaningful gaps in the evidence base that should be filled in to inform future research agendas might be those corresponding to an intervention that has been widely implemented with the aim of achieving a particular outcome, despite a lack of rigorous impact evidence to support the causal claim.

There are two potential explanations for why concentrations of evidence may exist for a given intervention–outcome configuration:

1. There is a commonly recognized theoretical link between an intervention and the outcome, which is of theoretical and practical significance.
2. The intervention is easy to evaluate, making it more likely to be evaluated. Most studies in this map considered public events focused on education, which seem to be easier to evaluate than most other interventions. These interventions are common and have a well-defined set of activities, which make rigorous evaluation methods relatively easy to employ.

¹⁰ More information available at: <https://gapmaps.3ieimpact.org/evidence-maps/strengthening-civil-society-egm>

4.4.2 Using the evidence patterns in the EGM

Users may draw on the patterns identified in the EGM to support future work. EGMs can be used to:

1. **Inform research of the agenda-setting processes.** EGM findings can help identify priority areas for future research investment, particularly when combined with expertise from diverse stakeholders to effectively interpret the gaps.
 - a. Investments in new IEs may be particularly beneficial where they target interventions for which limited evidence exists, or where there is limited evidence for the effects of the intervention on a population or context of interest.
 - b. Where large concentrations of primary evidence already exist, investments in additional IEs may not provide as much value as investments in evaluations of interventions and outcomes for which little or no effectiveness evidence exists.
 - c. Where there are concentrations of IE evidence and SRs do not exist, are out of date, are of low confidence, or do not cover populations of interest, new SRs may help make sure policymaking and programming are informed by the best available evidence.
2. **Support policy and program design.** Stakeholders can use the hyperlinks within the online EGM to easily access rigorous evidence regarding specific interventions and outcomes of interest. The filters in the EGM help stakeholders identify evaluations relevant to their specific interest, such as certain sub-populations and evidence types. This impact evidence should be consulted when designing new policies and programs. However, the results from individual IEs should be interpreted cautiously and contextualized within the larger body of literature.
3. **Identify potential challenges.** Using examples of IEs undertaken in a particular context or employing a particular method can be useful for identifying potential challenges and strategies to address these challenges that may strengthen the quality of future research.

4.4.3 Primary evidence gaps

Some intervention sub-categories do not have any studies. We did not find any eligible studies for the following sub-categories: campaign targeting policymakers; public events focused on strategies development; networking on advocacy, education, and communication; education on physical and digital security; and direct assistance on organizational management and emergency assistance.

There are three outcomes that are not evaluated. We did not find any eligible studies for the following outcomes: measures of an open and regulatory environment for civil society, an enabling financial environment, and levels of civil society organizational resilience. This gap might be due to the difficulties in measuring such outcomes.

Limited research occurs in closed civic spaces. No IEs were conducted in most countries rated as “closed” by the CIVICUS¹¹ civic space rating. Only 2 out of 20 L&MICs rated as “closed” have been included in at least one study—China and Vietnam. While this might be due to the restricted level of freedom in conducting research given the political situations, it also highlights an urgent need to try conducting more studies in such critical settings.

¹¹ More information available at: <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

One intervention group (Assessment and Research) does not have any evaluations. This might be because it is quite challenging to conduct IEs on efforts to support civil society by carrying out research and assessment to improve their activities. These processes might take a long time to be implemented, making it difficult to detect results through an IE.

4.4.4 Synthesis evidence gaps

We identified only two SRs and assessed only one as high-confidence; therefore, this entire field has limited evidence synthesis.

We found 21 studies on convening/public events focused on education, which could represent an interesting opportunity for synthesis. Some of these were synthesized by a low-confidence review, but a more rigorous synthesis may be useful. This category includes interventions where people were brought together in public events, such as workshops, meetings, or civic education programs, and given information, often about the political processes. These programs encourage active participation in public and community life and try to instill values such as tolerance and support for individual liberties. Other studies under this category focused on women's empowerment, including training women how to vote, organizing collective action, or managing community funds.

We also found 12 studies that evaluated the impact of general education on civic participation outcomes and could be synthesized. These studies looked at the impact of increasing citizens' education levels, both at the school level and among adults, through specific school reforms or educational development projects. They generally considered changes in how people and marginalized groups participated in civic life and awareness of rights and responsibilities. Given the relatively low number of studies, we suggest doing an additional scoping search before starting a systematic review to identify new, relevant studies.

Ninety-five (95) evaluations measured outcomes related to citizens' participation in civic life, 52 studies measured the level of citizens' awareness of their rights and responsibilities, and 46 reported measures of marginalized groups included in civic life. Comparative effectiveness synthesis of these, considering which interventions are the best at moving these outcomes, would be useful to the field and for stakeholders interested in changing specific aspects of civil society.

4.4.5 Methodological gaps

There are a few methodological gaps. Studies identified in the EGM used a broad range of methods to evaluate interventions, including experimental, quasi-experimental, and qualitative work.

More than half of the studies considered equity in their evaluations, although no studies used a research ethics approach informed by equity or an equity-sensitive methodology; a few studies used a sensitive to equity research process, reported inequality outcomes, or used an equity-sensitive analytical framework.

Fewer than half of the studies (39%) used mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative methods).

Cost evidence, such as cost effectiveness or cost benefit analysis, is limited, with only 15 percent of studies presenting some types of cost analysis.

5. Conclusions and implications

What is the extent and what are the characteristics of empirical evidence on the effects of interventions to strengthen civil society in L&MICs?

The evidence base regarding the impacts of interventions to strengthen civil society is limited, with 128 IEs and SRs published since 1990. The field rapidly expanded in the early 2000s, but growth has leveled off, with about 13 new studies published each year since 2014. Research is focused on sub-Saharan Africa and most studies take place in repressed, but not closed civic spaces. Most studies looked at interventions that provided education on civic values and political processes, general education of civil society members, and community decision-making interventions. We did not find studies for 12 intervention categories. The most frequently measured outcomes are the levels of participation in civic life, including marginalized groups, and people's awareness of their rights and responsibilities.

The research base used a variety of methods, especially randomized control trial and statistical matching. These approaches were often mixed methods combined with qualitative methods. However, cost evidence was somewhat limited, with only 15 percent of studies considering it. Most studies targeted the entire population, with little focus on a specific sex, age group, or setting. Nonetheless, 60 percent of studies in this field focused on equity in some way. The most common equity dimensions considered were sex, place of residence, and socioeconomic status.

What intervention/outcome areas could be prioritized for primary research and/or evidence synthesis?

Not all evidence gaps can or should be filled. In some cases, there is no theoretical reason to expect a relationship. In others, interventions may be uncommon and unlikely to affect a lot of people. However, evaluations of resource-intensive interventions and interventions that affect a lot of people are imperative. Once enough of these evaluations are conducted on a specific intervention type, synthesis work should be carried out.

Primary research evaluating the impacts of “assessment and research” interventions could be beneficial because there are no evaluations in this intervention category. Researchers may tend to assume that assessment and research are inherently valuable and, therefore, may have decided not to quantify its impacts. However, the value of assessment and research should be both assessed and researched.

5.1 Implications for policy

Despite the moderate evidence base of 128 studies, policymakers can rely on this evidence when designing and implementing interventions, and contribute to add more by commissioning IEs and SRs.

Policy lessons can be drawn from the high-confidence SR included (Waddington et al. 2019):

- Interventions where citizens monitor a public institution are effective in increasing participation in the civic life, but they do not consistently have an effect on the quality of the service provided. Generally, they seem to work better when both citizens and providers are in direct contact and both involved in the monitoring process, benchmark systems are used, and local communities are engaged.

- Interventions on participatory priority setting, planning, or budgeting may improve physical access to services, but not other outcomes. These interventions seem to work better when civil society is strengthened—for instance, by supporting the creation of new coalitions for collective actions, involving service providers in the process, and eliminating barriers to the participation of vulnerable groups.

Exploring this map, policymakers should find information on not only what works, but also *how* interventions are likely to achieve impacts by looking at the qualitative and mixed-methods studies. In particular, if policymakers wish to affect the participation of marginalized groups in civic life, awareness of rights and responsibilities, or voter turnout, they should find sufficient evidence to inform their intervention design.

However, because most of the research focuses on individual citizens, policymakers will find evidence on CSOs lacking. In addition, policymakers are likely to be limited in their ability to determine whether the impacts are worth the costs due to the limited evidence on costs.

Policymakers interested in the specific interventions for which information is missing—for example, the intervention group assessment and research—may commission IEs on those type of interventions.

In areas where there are clusters of IEs on an intervention/outcome intersection of interest, but no medium- or high-confidence SRs, policymakers may consider commissioning high-confidence SRs to further strengthen the available evidence for decision-making.

5.2 Implications for future research

The evidence base collected in this map is limited and there are some important research gaps that could be filled. Researchers should continue adding to the evidence base on civil society to make sure decision makers have the evidence they need.

- Researchers should try to fill the evidence gaps around the six intervention groups for which we found few or no studies to make sure there is enough knowledge across these areas (see the gap analysis section for more details).
- Researchers might consider conducting systematic reviews on the three synthesis gaps identified and reported in the gap analysis section.
- More research is needed on interventions to support collective action, because most studies targeted individuals. This may be a valuable avenue for future research because it could support large-scale, societal change.
- More evidence is needed from countries with repressed or closed civic space. Although there are practical limitations to conducting this work, researchers may reference the included studies that take place in these contexts for insights about how it can be conducted.
- Additional cost evidence would provide insight into not only whether these interventions work, but also whether they are worth the cost.

Online appendixes

Online appendix A: Detailed methodology

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Civil-society-Online-appendix-A.pdf>

Online appendix B: Search strategy

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Civil-society-Online-appendix-B.pdf>

Online appendix C: Coding tool summary

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Civil-society-Online-appendix-C.pdf>

Online appendix D: EGM advisory group

<https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Civil-society-Online-appendix-D.pdf>

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