

Small Grants for Civil Society Organisations and Networks Protecting Civic Space

“There is no country whose space is not shrinking. We need to learn from each other about shrinking space. It is an existential crisis. Every national platform needs a relationship with grass roots organisations, as, if you have legitimacy you have an added advantage; we need financial independence because no countries can conduct advocacy with foreign money and we need flexibility”¹

We are witnessing a global shift toward authoritarianism. The restrictions on civic space we have seen increasing over the past decade are being accelerated by COVID-19. There are many examples of countries that are abusing their power during the pandemic, curtailing free speech and free movement, obstructing the operations of NGOs and CSOs and introducing intrusive surveillance of citizens. In many countries civil society has been rendered voiceless.

It is vitally important for civil society to identify, monitor, and resist extreme State measures that further restrict their space. AFSC’s Under the Mask project is a contribution to this effort. AFSC is concerned that special measures that restrict civil liberties, introduced during the pandemic, will remain in place longer than necessary.

As a part of the Under the Mask project AFSC has developed a code of best practice (Annexe One) for governments to sign up to, based on the UN suggested best practice². This includes recommendations that governments should be explicit about how long special measures and states of emergency are intended to remain in effect, and what the criteria are for ending them.

Introduction & Background

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization that promotes a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression. Under the Mask is an AFSC project and website that tracks restrictions to civic space during the COVID-19 pandemic, and shares resources to support networks, movements and organizations to protect their space.

According to the UN, ‘Exceptional measures and states of emergency based on public health requirements must:

- Be necessary and proportionate to the public health need
- Be the least intrusive means of accomplishing the public health objective
- Be non-discriminatory

¹ [71 \(forus-international.org\)](https://www.forus-international.org) p.21

² [Newsletter \(ohchr.org\)](https://www.ohchr.org)



- Be limited in duration
- Not infringe on certain rights (“non-derogable”), including the right to life, the prohibition against torture and other ill-treatment, and the right not to be arbitrarily detained.³

The objective of this Request for Proposal (RFP) is to identify four civil society networks or organisations, one from each of the following regions; Africa, Asia, Latin America & the Caribbean and the Middle East, who are advocating for the protection of civic space.

AFSC is offering funding and support to the four selected bodies to launch a short campaign to either advocate their governments to sign-up to best practice commitments during and following pandemics, or propose other projects that will protect civic space during a pandemic. The selected applicants will document the advocacy process, including successes and lessons learned, in a case study that will be published with the intention of aiding other activists working to protect civic space.

The goal of this project is to raise awareness of effective approaches to protect civic space. The advocacy campaigns need to address the infringements of civil rights by governments around the world as they tackle COVID-19. The project will contribute to rebalancing the asymmetry of power between the people and their governments, and affirm the role of local actors.

Submission Guidelines & Requirements

Please submit your application by 27st June 2021. If you have questions or ideas you would like to discuss before submitting an application, you are welcome to email underthemask@afsc.org. **Your application should not be longer than 3 pages**, and should include a description of;

1. Your organisation or network, your goals and process of operating
2. Your current work
3. The context in which you are operating, government restrictions on civic space during the COVID-19 pandemic, and why you want to challenge this
4. An outline of how you will advocate your government to adopt best practice approaches during pandemics, with a timeline, or an alternative approach to protecting civic space during pandemics. Alternative suggestions for integrating protecting civic space into the structures and institutions in your context are welcome, feel free to present these
5. How you will write up the case study, and who will be responsible for this
6. Any ideas of continuing the campaign or work into 2022
7. A budget for up to USD10,000, stating how the funds will be used.

³ [COVID-19 Branding template Guidance \(external\) \(ohchr.org\)](#)



Please submit your application to underthemask@afsc.org and include 'Protecting Civic Space Funding Application' in the subject line.

Short Project Description

The purpose of this project is to protect civic space during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, and other future pandemics. AFSC would like to support four bodies to advocate for their civic space, and produce a case study on the process. The time frame is short, so you may also have some ideas on how to continue campaigning beyond this project. We will arrange an on-line event to share the case studies in November or December 2021, with analysis of successes and lessons learnt, so that other networks and civil society organisations may be able to take action and protect civic space in their own contexts.

We intend to work collaboratively and inclusively with the four organisations, and we are interested in supporting dynamic networks or movements with good ideas, and in need of help to be heard, be it financial help or other forms of support.

Project Scope

The scope of the project entails AFSC's responsibilities as follows;

1. This Request for Proposals
2. The selection of four applicants
3. The transfer of funds. If you are not a formal or registered organisation with a bank account, you can still apply, but you will need to find a financial sponsor – i.e. a registered organisation that can vouch for you and receive funds on your behalf
4. Regular contact between AFSC and the selected applicants during the project implementation, for support, sharing information and strategizing
5. The publication of case studies (AFSC's responsibility)

AFSC is able to offer many forms of support to the applicants as well as the grants including help with strategic development, guidance on social media and communications strategy, support in networking and so on.

The successful applicants will be responsible for;

1. Developing a strategy and plan of action, with support if needed
2. Implementing the work, managing the campaign
3. Engaging actively with AFSC on progress
4. Writing the case study and submitting by the deadline
5. Debriefing with AFSC



6. Presenting case study at an on-line event
7. Sustaining the campaign into 2022, after the formal relationship with AFSC is closed

RFP & Project Timelines 2021

The Request for Proposal timeline is as follows;

- 7th June: RFP published
- 27st June: Deadline for submitting application
- 2nd July: Applicants informed on the success or not of their application
- W/O 5th July: Introductory planning call with successful applicants
- July – Oct: Advocacy Campaign beginning of campaign
- 22nd Nov: Submit case study
- 6th Dec: Participate in event and present case study

Budget

Proposals can be for up to USD10,000. Please include a budget to show how you will use the funds during the project period.

Monitoring & Evaluation

There will be monthly calls between the selected applicants and AFSC to discuss progress and give the opportunity for sharing of ideas and options. The key tool for evaluating the process will be the written case study at the end of the project.



Annexe One: Best practice for governments during and following pandemics

The UN Office of the High Commission of Human Rights published [COVID-19 guidance](#) in May 2020. AFSC has undertaken a number of consultations with activists and civil society networks around the world since then, and based on this listening exercise, has condensed the UN guidance into these ten priority areas, presented as best practice for governments to adopt during and after any pandemic.

1. Internet access is essential to ensuring that information reaches those affected by the virus. Governments should end any internet shutdowns, ensure the broadest possible access to internet service, and take steps to bridge digital divides, including the gender gap.
2. Relevant information on the COVID-19 pandemic and response should reach all people, without exception. This requires making information available in readily understandable formats and languages, and adapting information for people with specific needs, including the visually- and hearing-impaired, and reaching those with limited or no ability to read.
3. Governments should inform the affected population of what the state of emergency means, where it applies and for how long it is intended to remain in effect. As the crisis passes, it will be important for Governments to return life to normal and not use emergency powers to indefinitely regulate day-to-day life, recognizing that the response must match the needs of different phases of this crisis.
4. Health monitoring includes a range of tools that track and monitor the behaviour and movements of individuals. Such surveillance and monitoring should be specifically related to and used for public health-specific aims and should be limited in both duration and scope as required in the particular situation⁴.
5. As people are being called upon to stay at home, it is vital that Governments take urgent measures to help people without adequate housing and governments must prevent or mitigate the closing or destruction of markets. COVID-19 measures for staying at home and practising social distancing should reflect that this is extremely hard for some – for example people living in overcrowded conditions, and those lacking access to water and sanitation⁵.
6. Authorities should take particular care to prevent additional people from becoming homeless – for example as people face eviction when loss of income makes it impossible to pay mortgages and rents. Good practices such as moratoriums on evictions, deferrals of mortgage payments should be broadly replicated.
7. With regard to COVID-19, emergency powers must be used for legitimate public health goals, not used as a basis to quash dissent or silence the work of human rights defenders or journalists. Some rights are non-derogable, meaning they cannot be restricted even during a state of emergency, and these include the principle of non-refoulement (not



forcing refugees or asylum seekers to return to a country in which they are liable to be subjected to persecution), the prohibition of collective expulsion, the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment, the use of arbitrary detention, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and others.

8. Governments should take care to ensure state authorities follow best practice, such as the police force, particularly in relation to enforcing restrictions. Use of gratuitous force and violence is unacceptable. Communities should be engaged to develop effective means to reduce virus transmission.

9. Political leaders and other influential figures should speak out forcefully against the stigma and racism this crisis has generated and must at all costs avoid fuelling the fire of such discrimination. States should act quickly to counter rhetoric that stokes fear, and ensure their responses to COVID-19 do not make certain populations more vulnerable to violence and discrimination.

10. Many persons, including persons with disabilities, rely on home and community services. These services should support minimizing risk, and States should put in place additional measures to guarantee the continuity of support for people with disabilities throughout the crisis. Should restrictions on movement impede existing family and social support networks, they should be replaced by other services.

