



Rapport technique

2025

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How to cite

LARSEN, Peter Bille, SCHOUTEN, Femke. Shrinking civic spaces: a growing conservation challenge. 2025

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:188288>



SHRINKING CIVIC SPACES: A GROWING CONSERVATION CHALLENGE

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September 2025

Photo: protest mining in the Philippines © ATM



**UNIVERSITÉ
DE GENÈVE**



IUCN | National Committee
of The Netherlands



International Union
for Conservation of
Nature

INTRODUCTION

A new survey among members of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reveals rapidly shrinking spaces for conservation NGOs. As biodiversity is being lost at alarming rates, calls for disruptive, innovative and courageous action abound. Despite recent funding cuts, civil society networks and NGOs remain key protagonists in leading conservation. Yet, NGOs across the world are finding it increasingly difficult and dangerous to promote conservation. Despite the adoption of a global biodiversity framework calling for the full and effective contributions of cooperation with civil society, the message from NGO members of the IUCN is clear; working conditions are deteriorating rapidly and there is an urgent need to secure open and equitable civic spaces for biodiversity engagement at both field and national policy levels. A proposed resolution for the IUCN Congress 2025 calls for “Strengthening safe civic spaces to fulfil the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework”.

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‘IUCN should play a more proactive role in ensuring appropriate civic spaces are guaranteed for all member organizations.’ - European IUCN member

In 2025, the University of Geneva, with support from the IUCN National Committee of the Netherlands conducted a survey among IUCN’s membership to understand their experience with civic space challenges. Some 85 NGOs working locally, nationally and globally responded over a 3-month period to the survey conducted in English, French and Spanish (for further details, see appendix 1). Several trends stand out and should serve as an alarm bell for the conservation community.

Key insights

Respondents emphasized that conservation is becoming more dangerous and civic spaces are becoming more restrictive. Surveillance, financial restrictions and reduced access to environmental decision-making were clear risk concerns for many. In some countries, NGOs are losing working permits and experiencing restricted access to critical conservation areas. Attacks against conservationists and their organizations are also on the increase. While NGOs often respond through collective action, far too many admit reducing their conservation efforts. Reinforcing collective action with IUCN and others is seen as an urgent priority.

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‘Liberal democracy is being constrained around the world, and the effects are very evident in affecting the activities of NGOs.’ - Latin American IUCN member

1. CONSERVATION IS BECOMING MORE DANGEROUS AND CIVIC SPACES MORE RESTRICTIVE

40 % of survey respondents considered that it has become more dangerous to do conservation work in the last four years. Whereas such dangers may cover a variety of factors, the shrinking of civic spaces plays an important role. More than half of the respondents noted that policies governing NGO action in their respective countries had become more restrictive.



'Today, working for nature conservation has become a challenge. Threats are increasingly abundant. Illegal activities, despite so much technology, continue unabated, and political decisions endorse them, defending criminals and passing laws that benefit illegality.' - Latin American IUCN partner

The [2025 State of Civil Society Report from CIVICUS](#) states: "amid a global landscape of civic space restriction, climate activists, and defenders of environmental, land and Indigenous rights, are among the groups most targeted for repression" (2025: 32). Not only are spaces becoming more restrictive, but half of the IUCN respondents also perceive that threats and violence are on the increase.



'There is increasing pressure and plans to discontinue well-established participation in administrative admission procedures, e.g. for hydropower, in contradiction with the Aarhus Convention.' - European IUCN member

Within the last four years, ...% of environmental organisations...



2. SURVEILLANCE, FINANCIAL RESTRICTIONS AND REDUCED ACCESS TO ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION-MAKING ARE THE TOP 3 RISK AREAS FOR IUCN MEMBERS

Asked about changing risks over the last four years, more than half of the respondents emphasize growing surveillance, reporting requirements and control. This ranges from state surveillance to almost half of the respondents noting restrictions on receiving financial support from abroad (including “foreign agent” legislation in several countries).

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‘Many topics can put an NGO at risk of being perceived as an ‘enemy’: receiving international funding or having international links, doing things that they perceive should be done by the government (even national red list assessments), doing anything that gives them a bad image (e.g. communicating illegal trade or the impacts of mining).’ - Latin American IUCN member

The latter has drastically affected the ability of conservation NGOs to cooperate internationally. Perhaps even more dramatically, yet not as mediatised, concerns the 40 % of respondents experiencing “restricted access to critical decision-making processes locally, regionally or nationally”.

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‘Due to restrictions and sanctions, we were unable to even pay our membership dues and IUCN never listened.’ - Asian IUCN member



3. LOSING WORKING PERMITS AND FACING RESTRICTED ACCESS IS COMMON

The ability to register as a conservation NGO or renew licenses to operate is also identified as a challenge. Many NGOs are closing or changing their legal status in a broader context of environmental institutions being dismantled and civic spaces.



In my country basically anything that requires any level of government engagement, even just permits, has become like walking on eggshells. - Latin American IUCN member

The survey clearly confirms that the downward spiral continues for many. Loss of working permits or no longer being able to access or work in specific regions hampers conservation NGOs from reaching areas where their presence is direly needed. The survey also confirms specific fields of activity becoming off-limits for conservation action. While a more profound understanding is required, the results send a clear signal about a shrinking conservation space.



'In our country, the enforcement power of the government's environmental department is being significantly reduced, the environmental legal system is being dismantled, and there is a threatening political discourse from the political establishment.' - Latin American IUCN member

Within the last four years, ... % of environmental organisations or their staff experienced...



4. ATTACKS AGAINST CONSERVATIONISTS AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS ARE INCREASING

A quarter of the respondents have experienced personal threats, physical violence or intimidation. A third of the respondents also noted the increase in stigmatization, hate speech and social media attacks, a phenomenon rarely monitored. Working in conservation is no longer safe neither for individuals, nor their organizations. Some 11 % specifically raised legal attacks against individuals and organizations. It should also be noted that almost a fifth of respondents had experienced cyber-attacks such as hacking.

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‘It is necessary to establish protection mechanisms for Indigenous peoples and their leaders, who are often killed due to illegal activities in their territories.’ - Latin American IUCN member

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‘Increased threats for us come largely from 1) greater pressure from the government, sometimes corrupt and 2) mining interests. So far, this is mostly in the form of intimidation, but not direct violence. Because we are being cautious to try to AVOID getting direct threats of violence, it has a chilling effect on the awareness-raising work we are doing.’ - Asian IUCN member

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‘Often I could not answer positively (to the survey) because our NGO works in a land with growing dictatorship; any visible help would lead to jail or being pushed out of the country.’ - Northern/Central American IUCN partner

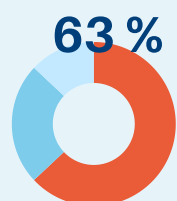
5. MANY ARE FORCED TO LIMIT THEIR CONSERVATION EFFORTS

When faced with violence, threats or restrictions, some 63 % of the respondents reported joining like-minded organizations in finding adequate responses. Indeed, the survey shows the creativity of membership in mobilizing social media and requesting international support. 37 % of respondents also disclosed taking active protection measures such as safety protocols for staff, yet far too many conservation NGOs operate without adequate protection. Still, almost a third of respondents reported reducing their public protests and activism and almost a fifth of the respondents reported stopping their work on a project or given issue. At a moment where more, not less, conservation action is needed this trend is deeply problematic.

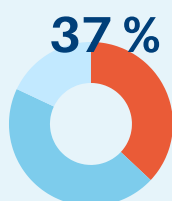


‘INGOs and other institutions can support smaller organizations with field activities by providing additional resources to implement safety safeguards, as well as any necessary extensions for local NGOs to carry out their projects when timelines are affected by security concerns.’ - Latin American IUCN member

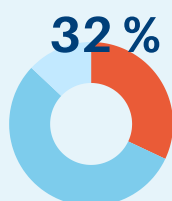
If faced with violence, threats or restrictions, ...% of environmental organisations have



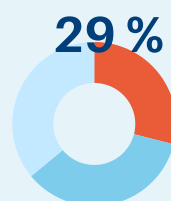
joined forces with other like-minded partners



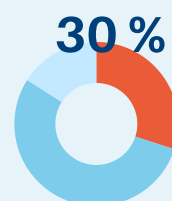
taken active protection measures



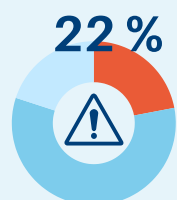
voiced concern through social media



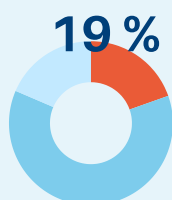
reduced public protest and activism



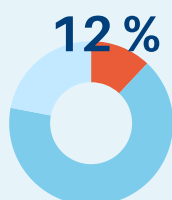
requested support from international networks



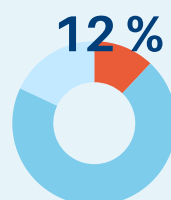
stopped working on a project or issue altogether



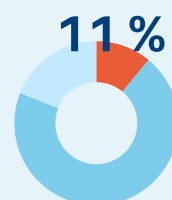
shifted partners



taken legal action



engaged with IUCN to find responses



requested protection support from public authorities

YES NO N/A

6. REINFORCING COLLECTIVE ACTION WITH IUCN AND OTHERS IS A PRIORITY

Almost half of respondents call for more mediation and dialogue between NGOs, governments and third parties mobilizing IUCN convening power. There is also a strong call (45 %) for monitoring, research and early warning systems for shrinking civic spaces, as well as training and awareness raising.

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‘There is a need to generate national and international advocacy mechanisms and processes that allow for the development of projects with greater security and generate indicators that make it possible to understand the level of progress in each country.’ - Central American IUCN member

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‘Induced financial support for capacity building and institutional strengthening is the most vital strategy here.’ - African individual commission member

Top priorities for the IUCN to support safe and enabling working environments



1

Mediation and dialogue between NGOs, governments and third parties mobilizing IUCN convening power



2

Monitoring, research and early warning systems for shrinking civic spaces



3

Training and awareness raising

4

Development of a civic space protocol and grievance mechanisms for immediate assistance for Members and partners facing threats

5

Supporting national and domestic protection mechanisms

Public statements, donor dialogue and advocacy on behalf of membership

6

Development of an IUCN standard and guiding principles for safeguarding civic spaces half of membership

Contribute to international protection, complaint and grievance mechanisms

7

Policy reform and model legislation for environmental civic spaces

CONCLUSION

While the figures raised above offer an initial snapshot and actual conditions vary across different countries, they confirm common trends of shrinking civic spaces and threats against individuals and organizations ([Larsen et al, 2021^{\[1\]}](#)). While the extent and conditions of shrinking spaces differ considerably, such dynamics stand in contrast with global standards of public participation and rights-based approaches in conservation. At a historical moment where more, not less action, is needed from civil society, scientists and others in response to the triple planetary crisis, the chilling effect on conservation action is a matter of deep concern. Not only are some NGOs, in extreme cases, being forced to close or severely limit their conservation efforts due to financial or legal reasons, but many others are reducing their field of activity to remain safe.

Let us be clear: Committing to conservation should not put your life, career or organization at risk. As the 4-yearly IUCN Congress convenes in October 2025, it is a matter of urgency that collective action to protect and expand conservation civic spaces is fast-tracked. IUCN is not merely about monitoring threatened species, protected areas and ecosystems, but also about enhancing equitable governance arrangements and protecting the very people and organizations that make conservation happen.



‘In a world where money is worth more than life, working for nature has become a challenge. However, as the president of an emerging association working to defend nature and as a manager of a conservation area, I have no regrets about the path I have decided to take, dedicating my life to protecting life.’ - Latin American IUCN partner

CONTACT DETAILS

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^[1] Larsen, P.B., Le Billon, P., Menton, M., Aylwin, J., Balsiger, J., Boyd, D., ... & Wilding, S. (2021). Understanding and responding to the environmental human rights defenders crisis: The case for conservation action. *Conservation Letters*, 14(3), e12777.

Selected quotes

- 'We believe it is important to activate mechanisms of cooperation that go beyond projects, to activate forms of solidarity and cooperation on environmental protection and dialogue between partners and local community organizations.'
- 'INGOs and other institutions can support smaller organizations with field activities by providing additional resources to implement safety safeguards, as well as any necessary extensions for local NGOs to carry out their projects when timelines are affected by security concerns.'
- 'IUCN should play a more proactive role in ensuring appropriate civic spaces are guaranteed for all member organizations.'
- 'More international spotlighting and shame on corruption and greed in industry, mining, and govt could help deter them from using such tactics. Just because the world is going more "harsh" these days and even leaders become more corrupt, I don't think we should let up on publicizing the evils of corruption! You can still talk about it, even if you don't want to put yourself at risk by naming names.' - Asian IUCN member
- 'I believe even the IUCN is acting more like a government and won't listen. Maybe the first step is to care about us! ...we can not afford to participate in the IUCN congress because it will cost more than one year of our staff salary. So, we miss the opportunities to present ourselves and talk about the issues raised in this survey.'
- 'We are a new, small organization; we haven't yet experienced many of the situations described here, but we are aware of the difficult environment in which we work and are exposed to what could happen at any time.' - Latin American IUCN member
- 'It is important to monitor and counter government actions against NGOs.'
- 'We can work with safeguard standards from national or multilateral cooperation agencies.'
- 'It is necessary to develop a broad strategy to counter extractivism and the encroachment of mercantile interests on lands as well as on natural goods and services, while addressing the negative interactions of monolithic capitalist approaches to governance and rights.' - Latin American IUCN partner
- 'We believe it is important to activate mechanisms of cooperation that go beyond projects, to activate forms of solidarity and cooperation on environmental protection and dialogue between partners and local community organizations.' - Latin American IUCN partner
- 'Perhaps an important part is missing when it comes to communication, which are the image campaigns about the work carried out by NGOs and their contributions to society.' - Latin American IUCN member