

IFEX Dispatches from 2023

A NETWORK THAT WORKS

ifex

THE GLOBAL NETWORK PROMOTING AND DEFENDING FREE EXPRESSION

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LOOKING AHEAD

March 2024

Dear friends,

I am proud to share this report on IFEX’s 2023 activities with you.

It’s common to begin an introduction like this by sharing an accurate but disturbing litany of new or exacerbated threats that characterized the past year. And let’s not kid ourselves – the threats are very real, and if you are working in the field of human rights and didn’t feel somewhat overwhelmed by the end of 2023, you probably weren’t paying attention.

However, since so many governments around the world keep invoking a sense of crisis in order to justify dismantling more human rights, I prefer not to give that narrative any more oxygen here.

What I do want to stress is that the rights of freedom of expression and information are more essential than ever; the use of these rights lies at the very heart of our ability to counter the crushing suppression of civic space and the undermining of democracies we are witnessing around the world.

The more challenging the external situation, the more IFEX’s approach and commitment to innovation is needed. As 2023 threw us challenge after challenge, IFEX continued to adapt.

In addition to undertaking strategic operational initiatives, like the work on achieving authentic collaboration, we:

- ▶ provided members facing intensive pressures while working in and on Myanmar, Palestine, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and Kyrgyzstan with holistic strategic and financial support and solidarity;
- ▶ collaborated with regional members and partners on a convening in Asia that engaged civil society actors including journalists and digital rights activists on the issue of gendered disinformation;
- ▶ supported a member in Nigeria building a database that tracks attacks against journalists and media freedom, to be better equipped to call out systemic injustices against free expression as they happen;

- ▶ worked with two members to facilitate an exchange of expertise that resulted in the active participation of young people at the COP 28 environment conference in Dubai;
- ▶ enabled two Venezuelan members to advocate, directly with states, against a repressive draft law, through the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society;
- ▶ worked with a member on a communications strategy and rebrand to strengthen their reach and impact in defence of cartoonists’ rights; and
- ▶ facilitated a connection between a member in Kazakhstan and a contact at META to tackle the issue of platform abuse and disinformation in the country.

Those are just a few examples...you will find many more throughout the report. The benefits of the sustained efforts IFEX has put into building authentic connections with each other and partnerships with allies have never been more apparent. The network has really hit its stride.

We are grateful for the flexibility of our funding, organisational structure, staff, and membership, which allowed us to pivot throughout the year and respond to the new challenges and opportunities that arose.

Thank you again for your continued commitment to the IFEX network and our work.

In solidarity,



RACHAEL KAY
IFEX Executive Director

What we do, why we do it – and *how* we do it

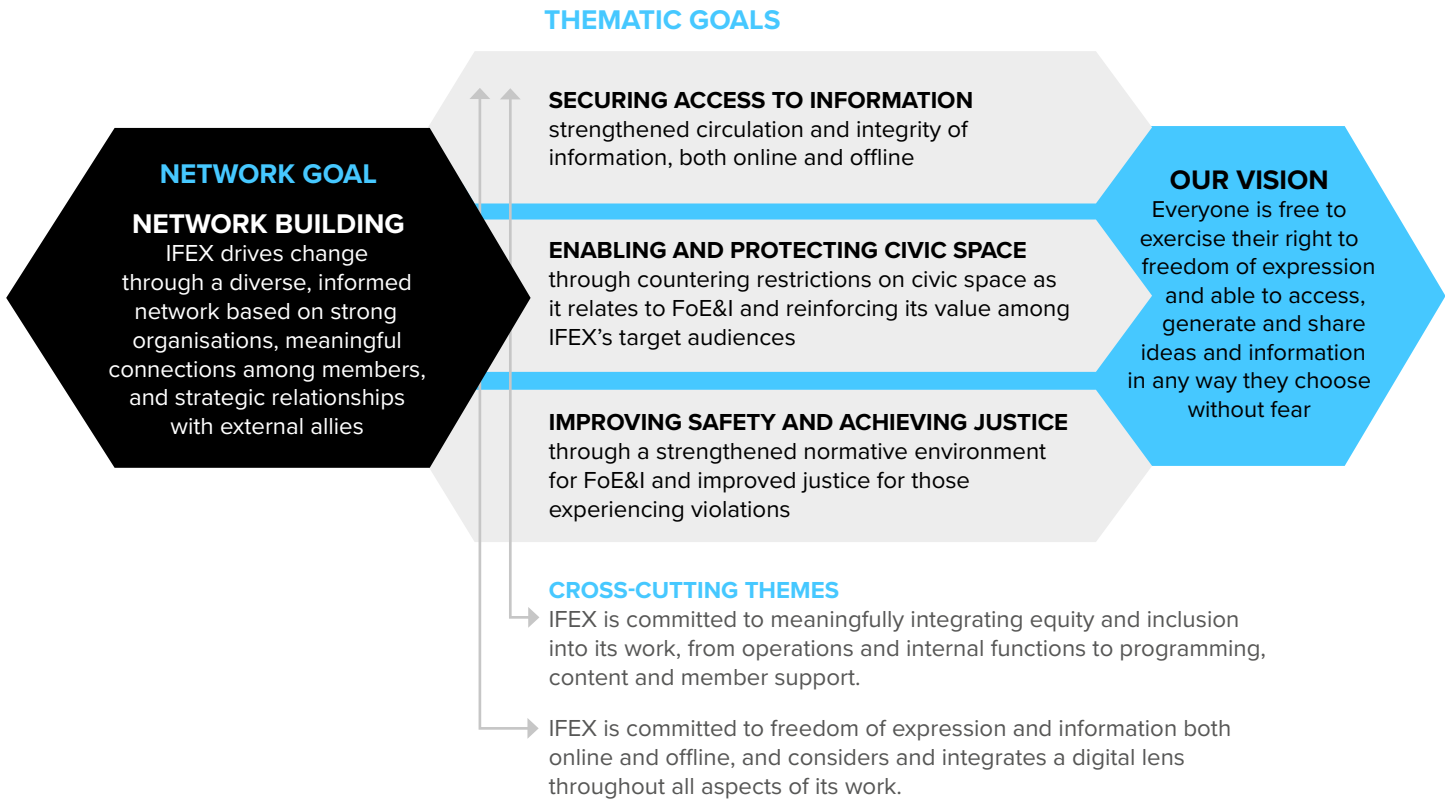
IFEX'S STRATEGIC PLAN

Our vision is a world where everyone is free to exercise the right to freedom of expression and able to access, generate and share ideas and information in any way they choose, without fear.

All of our initiatives are guided by IFEX's 2020-2024 Strategic Plan. And because the process of

developing a strategic plan every five years is a sustained, collaborative effort that is both *informed* and *led* by IFEX members, we can ensure that the work we commit to responds to the realities and priorities of the network.

We capture our work under a network goal, three thematic goals, and two cross-cutting themes.



COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND INCLUSION

At IFEX, we are committed both to our impact, and to how we achieve it. Not only because how we do the work must live up to our values, but because we understand that this is the most strategic, effective, and sustainable way to approach it.

Here are some of the overarching approaches that guided our work in 2023 and set an ambitious agenda for the network in 2024, and beyond.

Developing a code for collaboration

A commitment to strategic collaboration has been at the heart of IFEX since its inception over 30 years ago. How that commitment is realised continues to evolve and grow. We want to ensure this work is meaningful, equitable and inclusive – and we aren't afraid to ask the hard questions.

IFEX undertook a project in 2023 to reflect more deeply on what makes collaboration truly authentic, and to what extent we as a network are living up to our stated and shared values. We contracted a consultant to conduct extensive interviews with stakeholders from the free expression and access to information ecosystem, including IFEX members, allies and donors.

“There is a need for thought provoking spaces in which you can look ahead and try to imagine alternate futures together. [...] I think we need to be looking at what the enabling conditions are for creativity.”

COLLABORATION CODE INTERVIEWEE

“We have to disrupt our natural tendency to be focusing on outcomes, and say: ‘Hey, wait, what has just happened?’ And take time to focus on trust. [...] Because we were doing that, people trusted the process.”

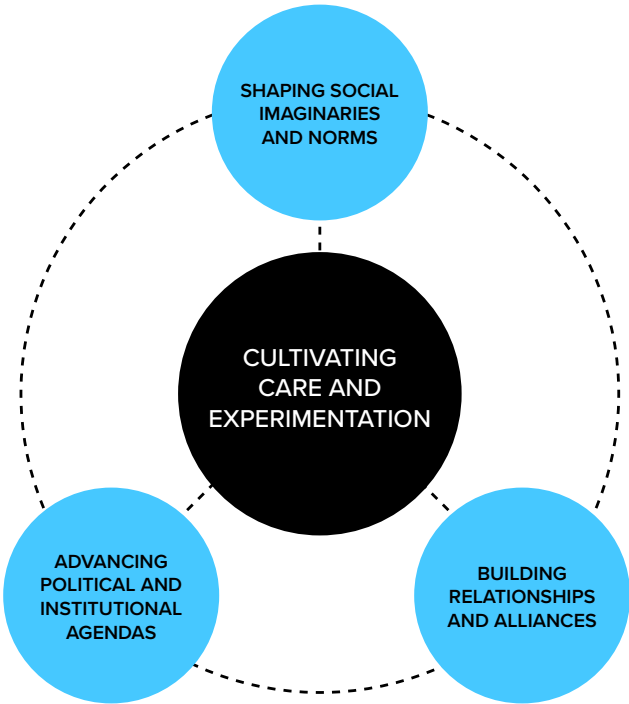
COLLABORATION CODE INTERVIEWEE

We launched the report in October, presenting the main findings with a Q&A opportunity for all stakeholders. We then brought together a number of members for a focused two-day face-to-face convening in Berlin to go over the report's findings and discuss how we can build on this research to reduce the barriers to meaningful collaboration and create and sustain the enablers that were identified.

The process identified four key learnings that are serving as a catalyst for our work.

1. There is a need to deepen the understanding of practices and principles that underpin ‘genuine collaboration’ among CSOs, and to continue to engage with the discomfort of talking about power and privilege.
2. There is a need to develop tools to improve collaboration and to tackle unequal power dynamics within and beyond the IFEX network.
3. There is a need to explore collaboration tactics and strategies to engage with non-CSO stakeholders.
4. There is a need to strengthen the case for funding collaboration efforts with donors, and to call attention to how donor practices perpetuate power imbalances and hinder collaboration.

INNOVATING CHANGE APPROACH



Innovating for advocacy

In 2022, we developed and adopted an approach to our work that we named Innovating Change. It comprises four spheres: Shaping social imaginaries and norms; Building relationships and alliances; Advancing political and institutional agendas; and Cultivating care and experimentation. Applying these elements is intended to ensure that IFEX and members are continuously innovating our tools, tactics, and structures to better enable us to anticipate and respond to new realities in our advocacy efforts.

During the IFEX Special General Meeting in May 2023 we took the opportunity of being together to dive further into one sphere: Advancing Political and Institutional Agendas. Our focus was on impactful and creative advocacy to target governments, intergovernmental bodies, and private sector actors. Together, we identified ways that the voices of traditionally marginalised groups can be better represented in policy debates at various levels, and the interview portion focused on how this applies to children and youth.

Communications and advocacy: Stronger voices together

The network’s impact is tied to our ability to effectively identify the most important developments, concerns, and needs within the FoE&I ecosystem, and communicate information and messages in a way that influences policy and decision-makers.

- ▶ IFEX members are a key source of current, accurate information on freedom of expression and information. Finding ways to support and amplify individual member voices is a key part of our value to members, as well as to donors, partners and allies.
 - ▶ approaches to ensure that the voices, perspectives and concerns of IFEX members were heard in those spaces.
- ▶ Through virtual presentations, written briefs, and inputs to joint calls for action, we facilitated the engagement of more members and brought more cases to the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society than in any prior year. We engaged with governments, tech actors, and civil society to contribute pledges for the Media Freedom Cohort of the Summit for Democracy - the first time we had engaged directly with tech actors as stakeholders with a responsibility to help uphold media freedom. And we identified new strategies and tactics for keeping international attention on Belarus through an in-person meeting with members and allies.
- ▶ Following Elon Musk’s acquisition of Twitter in late 2022, the social media platform underwent a number of changes that led us to put more effort into our strategies on other platforms. We began to explore LinkedIn and how it could help us reach our audience, creating new and more visual types of content for it. As a result, we saw a 52% increase in followers and up to 228% increase in our post impressions.
- ▶ In terms of advocacy, we expanded our activities with coalitions in 2023, and applied a number of different



AMPING UP OUR POWER

In 2023, IFEX implemented 109 initiatives to strengthen the capacity of the IFEX network to promote and defend the right to FoE&I, of which 56% included elements of equity and inclusion

Shifting geopolitical realities, new and ongoing conflicts, and restricted financial opportunities in 2023 meant that many IFEX members were forced to regroup and find new ways of working.

The challenges were clear. What became even more evident over the past year is how our individual powers are amplified when we work together. Sharing our knowledge, experiences, and resources has continued to yield far more robust and sustainable results than working in isolation. In particular, the past year has revealed the tangible benefits of IFEX's long-standing practice of connecting members to learn from one another through knowledge exchanges.

Finding intentional ways to collaborate and innovate, together, is one of the ways that IFEX ensures our ability and that of IFEX members to adapt to a continually changing environment. Identifying and acting on opportunities to strengthen our network and the impact of member organisations continues to be the foundation for all of our work in support of free expression and human rights.

INVESTING IN THE NETWORK

In 2023, IFEX provided support to members for work ranging from core operations to strategic planning, investments in systems, and coaching and training. All of these initiatives are identified by working directly with members to determine what they need most, and how IFEX can be a partner and resource to help them achieve those goals. Secure, flexible funding enables organisations to have the freedom to respond to rapidly shifting issues in the best way possible.

This year IFEX supported 49 initiatives to enhance members' organisational capacity.

Palestine: Adapting and responding to crisis

The word 'unprecedented' can be overused, but it is an accurate way to describe the level of free expression violations experienced in Palestine in the closing months of 2023.

As IFEX members have reported, over 75% of all journalists killed last year were killed in Gaza. Journalists in both Gaza and the West Bank experienced violence, harassment, intimidation, and censorship from Israeli forces. Direct attacks on telecommunications infrastructure, checkpoints, and blockades all contributed to extreme barriers for journalists and civilians to access and share information. Invasive surveillance and cyber attacks were deployed by Israeli forces within and outside of Palestine to target critics and silence dissent.

[TRT Arabi Reporter Reba Khalid al-Ajami reports from Gaza amid ongoing Israeli attacks in Rafah, Gaza on 29 February 2024. Forced to move several times due to Israeli attacks, al-Ajami says she won't stop reporting from Gaza, despite Israel's targeting of Palestinian journalists.](#)



PHOTO BY ABED ZAGOUT/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

Shortly before the 7 October Hamas attack and the launch of the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, IFEX had provided a flexible core grant to the Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA) to support the development of a new organisational strategy after the passing of its founder. When the crisis escalated, that funding allowed MADA to prioritise the most urgent needs in a rapidly shifting and insecure environment.

Since then, MADA has been:

- ▶ **Monitoring and documenting** the violations of media rights and freedoms in Gaza, West Bank, and Israel, including attacks, arrests, raids, and censorship.
- ▶ **Advocating** for the protection of journalists and media workers in Palestine, issuing urgent appeals and reports to local and international authorities and organisations.
- ▶ **Networking** with other IFEX members and partners to exchange information, and coordinating initiatives on media rights and freedoms in Palestine and the region.

A prominent figure in Palestinian media, Mousa Rimawi dedicated his career to advocating for media freedom, human rights, and the protection of journalists in Palestine. He co-founded the Palestinian Center for Media and Development Freedoms in 2006.

A legacy of advocacy

Mousa Rimawi, the co-founder and former general director of IFEX member the Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedoms, passed away in late 2022. He had played a critical role in supporting civil society in Palestine and establishing the organisation's work on free expression issues. This past December, we marked the one-year anniversary of his passing by adding him to our series of [Face of Free Expression profiles](#) [↗](#), to celebrate his legacy and underscore the importance of Palestinian civil society.

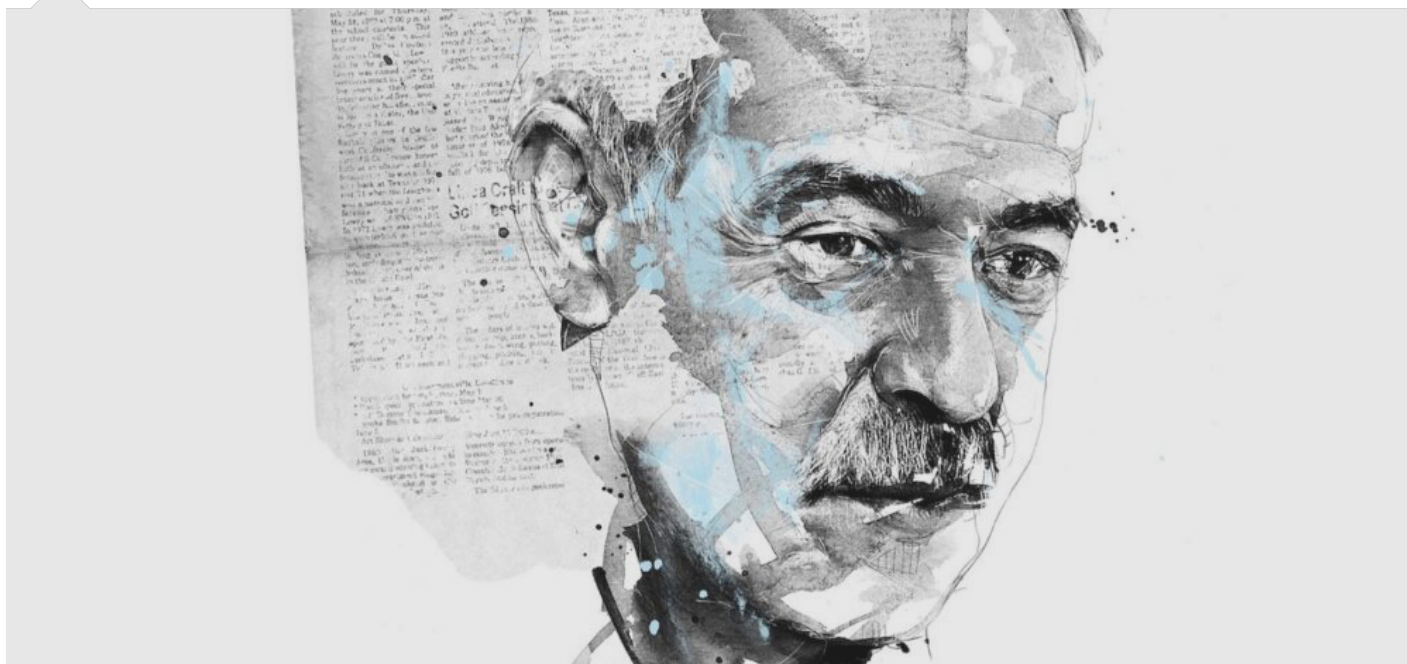


ILLUSTRATION BY FLORIAN NICOLLE

The broader IFEX network has also been working closely on these issues. Members have been monitoring the continued horrific toll on journalists in Gaza, issuing joint statements, launching advocacy campaigns and amplifying the lived experiences of those on the ground. The Secretariat has coordinated efforts and curated voices to bring a global focus to the region.

Here are a few of those initiatives:

- ▶ **Special Issue on Palestine:** Two weeks after Israel began its bombardment of Gaza, IFEX produced a feature that pulled together [some of the immediate examples of civil society's response](#) and featured voices and reports of IFEX members.
- ▶ **Calling on the UN:** IFEX worked with MADA on a letter supported by several IFEX member organisations, calling on the UN Special Procedures to use their mandate to condemn the attacks on Palestinian journalists since 7 October 2023, speak out against Israel's systematic targeting of journalists and media outlets through discriminatory administrative and punitive measures, and call for Israel to abide by its legal obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law.
- ▶ **Joint statement:** Reliable information is most critical during conflicts, but is often the first casualty. When internet access was cut off in Gaza, accessing and distributing information became much more difficult. IFEX joined members and global allies in signing a [statement](#) calling for internet access to be restored.

Myanmar: Strategising for the long term

Working under threat is a reality for far too many IFEX members. Promoting free expression and sharing accurate information in the public's interest remains an extremely dangerous task in Myanmar, as the military junta continues to directly attack critics, activists, and journalists.

In 2022, Mizzima held a strategy conference to plan its path forward in this volatile context. In 2023, it built on this work and developed a long-term plan for financial sustainability. IFEX has been working closely with Mizzima to support this objective, including through sharing funding opportunities and providing resources for a second conference, held in December 2023 in Chiang Mai, that focussed on sustainable fundraising as well as developing new tactics to spotlight the situation in Myanmar.

Given the dangers to local media in Myanmar, Mizzima's strategy includes support for Thai journalists to report on the conflict. Ensuring accurate and timely access to information about developments, including violations of the right to freedom of expression, can help spark greater engagement by the international community. IFEX connected Mizzima with the Thai Journalists Association (TJA) to brief Thai journalists and ensure they are equipped to report on Myanmar. Moreover, Mizzima brought together a dozen media partners across Myanmar and Thailand to participate in their strategy meetings as a means to represent ethnic minority groups and promote collective discussion and inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences.

“While the formal gatherings are an important and critical component of strategy meetings, the significance of informal opportunities presented as a part of bringing people together should not be overlooked [...] Mizzima team members were able to meet with attendees, including donor representatives and Bangkok-based diplomats, on the sidelines in a relaxing environment.”

MIZZIMA, 2023 PROJECT REPORT



FLIP's website design, part of a new communications strategy developed in 2023, helps amplify the organisation's core messaging and provides an engaging platform for their advocacy-focussed content and resources.

Colombia: Communications for greater inclusion and influence

Investing in new internal tools and processes can be a difficult call to make when it takes time, resources, and energy away from the core deliverables of an organisation. But to remain relevant, responsive, and impactful, the important organisational strengthening work that takes place outside of the spotlight must continue.

In the Colombian context, journalists have been facing threats and violent attacks for decades, and at least 167 have been killed [↗](#). A lack of justice perpetuates the country's culture of impunity; ensuring these issues remain in the public spotlight is critical. IFEX has been working with the Fundación para la libertad de prensa (FLIP) on some of these cases for years, including key cases such as that of journalist Jineth Bedoya Lima.

This year, IFEX worked with FLIP to focus on strengthening the organisation more broadly by investing in a new communications strategy. FLIP worked with an external agency to develop a new

strategic narrative and make sure their messaging about v of press and freedom of expression is delivered successfully. Through this process, they developed a mission statement, core messages, and a narrative to clearly articulate their role in the Colombian civil society space.

“Within civil society organisations there is an urgent need to build communications plans and strategic narratives that allow us to focus our efforts on the transmission of key messages. It is vital to reflect on our mission, target audiences, who is the protagonist of our story, our values and obstacles. All this serves as a guide to communicate better and have a greater impact.”

FLIP

The work continues into 2024. FLIP has developed a plan to update and improve their existing communications, and strengthen how they reflect and respond to the needs and lived experiences of different groups: journalists from all regions, including ethnic and rural communities, women, and the LGBTQIA+ population. The lack of broad awareness among Colombian journalists of the risks specifically faced by women and LGBTQIA+ people came to their attention during a series of workshops.

Africa: Building connections and impact

With 14 members based in a number of different countries, the African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX) found ways to deepen their connection, advocacy, and impact in 2023 by amplifying each others' voices and increasing the network's visibility.

With support from IFEX, AFEX participated actively in:

- ▶ World Press Freedom Day (WPFDD) events including the launch activity of the 2023 Joint Declaration from Special Mandate holders on media freedom and freedom of expression from both the UN and regional intergovernmental organisations.
- ▶ Convenings at the 77th session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) held in Arusha, Tanzania.
- ▶ The Africa Media Convention, which brought African editors, journalists and media stakeholders together in Lusaka, Zambia, to craft a future of rights on the continent and spotlight the link between press freedom and freedom of expression as drivers of other freedoms and human rights.

AFEX's presence at the 30th anniversary celebration of WPFDD helped enhance the visibility of the network. It was particularly important, not only because of the historical origins of the Day and the role of African media and civil society organisations in the proclamation, but also because there were few other African organisations in attendance.

At the ACHPR session, AFEX voices were front and centre. They also held a session on online safety for women journalists, during which panellists and participants shared the challenges they encounter in their line of work and on social media and made several recommendations – including the need to disaggregate data on gender-based violence to inform evidence-based advocacy.

“[During] the Covid-19 pandemic, corruption, abuse of power, and the appropriation of resources to fight the pandemic increased across the continent [...] I was delighted to attend the Africa Media Convention where we strategised to increase coordinated efforts to protect journalists, revive the Platform for the Safety of Journalists, and build a strong network of actors from journalists to CSOs, state actors, the African Union institutions and donor agencies.”

GILBERT SENDUGWA,
AFRICA FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTRE

During the course of the year AFEX also produced several country-specific reports, participated in campaigns calling for the respect of freedom of expression and digital rights, and continued to strengthen the sustainability and impact of members and the broader network.

Forging connections

Immediately following the Nigerian election on 25 February 2023, the country was facing contested election results and the consequences of violent voter suppression and targeted attacks against journalists. IFEX worked with local members to organise talking points and highlight their analysis and expertise, ultimately bringing the Institute for Media and Society, the International Press Center, and Media Rights Agenda together with donors to share their perspectives on the situation in Nigeria, and identify tactics and forge connections to help facilitate their work moving forward.

Afghanistan: Living and working in exile

The Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC) was established in 2009 as an independent non-governmental organisation working for the promotion of freedom of press. Since 2014, AFJC has been monitoring the situation of journalists, signalling and denouncing violations of press freedom. Through their social media channels they keep the public, policy makers, and media informed, and support the free flow of information.

IFEX has been working with AFJC for years, and witnessed their working conditions deteriorate following the Taliban's takeover, to the point where they were forced to leave the country.

This year, we wrote letters in support of their visa applications and provided financial support to plan and implement a way forward for the organisation to operate and thrive in exile. But in exile, even something as simple as receiving a grant is extremely complicated, in part due to legal requirements and banking factors outside of our control. Despite sustained communications and creative collaboration, it was months before IFEX was able to transfer funding support to AFJC.

Masooma Gholami, founding member of the Afghanistan Parliamentarian and Leaders Network, with her daughter in Athens, Greece. Several Afghan women who escaped Afghanistan when the Taliban seized power have been holding meetings in Athens to consolidate their network and work in advocacy.



PHOTO BY LOULOU D'AKI VIA GETTY IMAGES

In spite of these hurdles, they continued to operate their website successfully and, by translating content into Pashto, met their goal of reaching those communities in Afghanistan. Through their advocacy efforts, AFJC was successful in reversing the Taliban's closure of Hamisha Bahar Radio and TV network and two local radio stations. As well, AFJC's efforts led to the Taliban lifting a ban on journalists that had prevented them from taking photos and producing video stories. AFJC's coverage seemed to have had a domino effect, with other news organisations sharing their reports and press releases.

“I am incredibly grateful to you all for your unwavering support, contributions and commitment to this cause, it is a shining example of the power of collaboration and the strength of our shared values.”

AHMED QURAIHI, AFJC

Responding to the challenges of working from exile

A growing number of governments are criminalising human rights work and civil society organisations, hampering their ability to operate by limiting access to foreign funding. That's why we're building connections with allies, including the Thomson Reuters Foundation, with whom we are working on a project to access lawyers' support to guide members facing similar challenges to establish banking and organisational registrations outside their home countries.

Afghan media personnel work inside a broadcast control room at Hamisha Bahar Local Radio station in Jalalabad, 11 December 2021.



PHOTO BY WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP



ILLUSTRATION BY DR JACK AND CURTIS

“Dr. Jack and Curtis” is a partnership between two South African cartoonists, “Dr” Jack Swanepoel and John Curtis. Their illustration appears on the Cartoonists Rights website, above the words: “Cartoonists defend our rights. Who’s there for theirs?”

Building a brand and financial sustainability to better defend cartoonists’ rights

Diversifying funding sources to ensure long-term financial sustainability is a key priority for IFEX members. This has recently become more critical as major donors and foundations are shifting their focus away from the sector, and core funding remains a challenge to secure. That’s why we supported member Cartoonists Rights Network International to invest in developing their communications and fundraising capacity.

When it was established in 1999, it was the first global human rights organisation to focus on the need for the protection of socio-political cartoonists to carry out their work without fear of recrimination. In 2023, they brought in consultants with an external perspective, and reflected on their needs and realities to build a clear path forward. The project gave the organisation a fresh outlook, and a new name: Cartoonists Rights.

With a clear brand identity, Cartoonists Rights is now finding new ways to stand out. They’ve built comprehensive social media and marketing

strategies, and introduced a newsletter subscription. But most critically, the project has allowed Cartoonists Rights to pilot a new funding stream. Trying out a new donation processing platform, the organisation tested a fundraising campaign on Giving Tuesday to attract individual donors. Even though it’s early days, results indicate they’ve found a significant new revenue stream they can use and build to support their work for years to come.

CONNECTING MEMBERS, ALLIES AND EXPERTS TO AMPLIFY IMPACT

Between changing political environments, the challenges posed by new technologies, and the limited resources available, CSOs are increasingly finding they have to respond to threats against them as well as do their work. Being connected increases our collective and respective work and impacts. That’s why IFEX is so focused on ensuring that we’re working together with members to find the right connections to maximise the exchange of knowledge, resources, experiences, and strategies.

Beyond our full network convenings, IFEX has been facilitating and forging more strategic connections between members and relevant external stakeholders, and finding tactical opportunities to leverage the network to maximise our impact.

Reconvening to renew energy and connection

The COVID-19 pandemic weighed on civil society in countless ways. But for the network of 24 IFEX member organisations in Latin America and the Caribbean (IFEX-ALC), the real toll of disconnection wasn't fully clear until they had the opportunity to reconvene and realise the benefits of in-person connection.

While in-person meetings used to be a regular tool for them, the last time they were able to meet face-to-face was in April 2019. So it was exciting when 22 members met in Mexico City for a two-day meeting in September 2023. IFEX partnered with a member in Mexico to plan and coordinate logistics to plan and finance logistics for the convening.

The objective was to work together on developing the next iteration of the regional network. Agenda items included reviewing their added value, position in the field, and the practicality of operating in this structure moving forward. We also ensured there was flexibility to afford participants the space to identify other common challenges and opportunities to work together.

As members across Latin America and the Caribbean struggle with new threats, political contexts, and attacks on civil society, this opportunity to reconnect with friends and colleagues, share their experiences, and step out of the isolation of the past few years, to reset and refocus their ongoing work for the year to come, was invaluable.

The degree of renewed energy and sense of connection between members that came out of this meeting far surpassed expectations. The enthusiasm and excitement from participants was palpable even over text messages and emails as they debriefed everything they had gained from the gathering, and shared their reflections on the convening back with IFEX.

As one member shared in the anonymous survey: "The face-to-face meeting is irreplaceable!" Participants reported that they left the meetings feeling "hope and a will to transform" and "a sense of renewal". They appreciated "the dynamic sessions" "the format (no tables or laptops)" and "the group discussions about where we are, where we are going, and our future as a network."

[A demonstrator shouts slogans after a man died after being arrested and immobilized by police following clashes during a protest against the upcoming primary election, in Buenos Aires on 10 August 2023.](#)



PHOTO BY LUIS ROBAYO / AFP

Combating abuse of tech platforms

The digital era has introduced a whole new set of stakeholders to work with – or fight against – beyond the usual legal systems, governments, and oversight bodies. Technology platforms now play an outsized role in our interactions with each other, our access to information, and the power dynamics between activists, advocates, and authorities. This is something that is impacting all areas of IFEX’s work.

In Kazakhstan, the government and its supporters have long been weaponizing Facebook against critics by falsely reporting or hacking activists’ accounts. This impedes citizens’ ability to connect with one another, organise, or openly criticise the government. But while the abuse of the tool is clear, finding someone at Meta to reverse these kinds of automated account suspensions is challenging. As a result, critics’ voices in Kazakhstan have continued to be silenced, downgraded in Facebook’s algorithms, and blocked from broader access to their networks.

Kazakh member Adil Soz approached IFEX for advice and support to tackle this issue. We reached out to other network members and partners, and identified an ally – the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre – able to introduce IFEX and Adil Soz to the right people at Meta to work on this problem. As a result, we were able to arrange a meeting between Adil Soz and the Heads of Public Policy and Human Rights Policy at Meta. Adil Soz shared the specific challenges of Facebook users in Kazakhstan, and forged a new connection – one that will hopefully yield faster remedies when these kinds of attacks take place in future.

While there is no single solution to this complex issue, and challenges remain moving forward, this new connection will be an important one that can continue to help address abuses in future.

Cross-continental knowledge exchange

A huge benefit of being in the IFEX network is the ability to connect with and learn from others with similar experiences. While connections can happen more organically between members in the same country or region, we’ve been focusing on facilitating cross-regional exchanges to help bring new perspectives to each other’s work, and help members expand their networks beyond the usual suspects.

In 2023, IFEX facilitated a connection between Ecuador-based Fundamedios, and Indonesian member Aliansi Jurnalis Independen (AJI). As the founding organisations for two regional collaborations (Voces del Sur and Press Freedom Monitoring in Southeast Asia) Fundamedios and AJI met over Zoom to exchange experiences, resources, and lessons learned from the development of their respective collaborations.

It was a fruitful opportunity for exchange between a more established collaboration and one that was still taking root. Despite their differences, the organisations found they had much more in common than expected, and shared monitoring tools, fundraising resources, social media plans and training opportunities. We hope the connection continues in 2024. It is a great example of the many fruitful exchanges powered through the IFEX network.

“I really hope we can proceed further with Meta. And I am very thankful for your support in that. Let’s not give up on this at this stage.”

KARLA JAMANKULOVA,
ADIL SOZ



FIGHTING FOR FACTS

In 2023, IFEX implemented 46 initiatives to strengthen freedom and integrity of information, of which 67% included elements of equity and inclusion

When it comes to information – the basis for informed participation in civic space – many regimes continue to block access during critical periods by making use of the tools in their authoritarian toolkit, from shutdowns to censorship.

The sheer volume of information can be overwhelming, along with the challenges for citizens trying to distinguish what is real, and determine who to trust. And the rapid evolution of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) means that the capacity to generate disinformation is growing exponentially.

IFEX members are working to support reliable content and ensure citizens have access to quality information, as well as the knowledge and skills to keep pace with new technologies and threats as they emerge.

SUPPORTING QUALITY INFORMATION

Whether it's advocating for improved laws or providing training to identify misinformation, IFEX is working closely with members to support a wide variety of initiatives to strengthen our global information ecosystem.

Verifying the reliability of information: Lebanon

In recent years, Lebanon has seen a series of political and economic factors contribute to a reduction in civic space, a lack of trusted independent media, and a dearth of evidence-based reporting and fact-checking. This impacts civil society and the public's ability to meaningfully hold authorities accountable and participate in civic discourse.

In response, Lebanese IFEX member Maharat launched a number of initiatives to help address this problem. They have implemented training for journalists on how to best tackle misinformation and disinformation, as well as media literacy sessions with youth groups. They are researching issues related to women journalists' and activists' safety and security, to help identify the next steps needed to maintain an informed and robust media landscape. They are also producing monthly articles to support media development and literacy, and fact-checking commonly found misinformation in the country's public discourse.

[A woman uses her phone as she walks past a mural of an Iranian flag, in a street in Tehran, 10 April 2023; two days earlier Iranian police had announced they planned to use "smart" technology in public places to identify and then penalise women who violate the country's strict Islamic dress code.](#)



ATTA KENARE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



PHOTO BY JAMES WAKIBIA/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

A trader reads newspapers next to her dry grain stall in Nakuru City Market, Kenya, in March 2024.

With the escalating conflict in Israel and Palestine and Israeli military shelling in the south of Lebanon, the local security situation became extremely tense. As a result, Maharat had to make the difficult decision to cancel an in-person cooperation meeting scheduled for November, and pivoted to an online convening instead.

Throughout the year, IFEX leveraged its communications channels to provide context for the project and amplify its activities, promoting the [new issue](#) of Maharat Magazine in its World Press Freedom Day regional brief, and profiling a number of related developments including new laws that [target the region's LGBTQIA+ community](#) and [limit free expression](#).

This project was made possible by a joint proposal between Maharat and IFEX that secured funding from a new donor, ifa-zivik. We have applied for funding to undertake a broader and more holistic set of activities in 2024, to build on this project's success and engage another member working on the region.

Access to information for all: Africa

Improving access to information is at the very core of the Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC)'s mission. As a member-based organisation itself, AFIC also works with a number of IFEX members and other organisations within Africa.

AFIC is a force to be reckoned with, campaigning for all African Union member states to ratify and/or domesticate African Union treaties that guarantee the right of access to information, and advocating for them to implement ATI laws. They also strengthen the capacities of citizens and CSOs so that they can actively demand public information to advance sustainable development and ensure that ATI oversight bodies have the capacity to fulfil their mandate.

By providing core support for AFIC to continue its work, IFEX is not only supporting AFIC's mandate, but also the interconnection between IFEX members, initiatives, and our broader strategic goals.



A protest to support women victims of online harassment in Skopje on 3 February 2021. Human rights groups in the Republic of North Macedonia are demanding action after thousands of photos of women and underage girls, some explicit, were shared without their consent on Telegram.

Exposing and countering disinformation: Republic of North Macedonia

Disinformation is increasingly a problem in our global political discourse, as malicious actors work to spread doubt, fear, and discontent. In the Republic of North Macedonia, IFEX is supporting member Metamorphosis - Foundation for Internet and Society to counter this disinformation by exposing the influence of propaganda, and building resources and capacity to help citizens access better information.

Metamorphosis is in the forefront of the fight against disinformation and hate speech, addressing issues ranging from local anti-democratic narratives to false news about the war in Ukraine that reached audiences in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans region.

Their research, monitoring, and analysis has yielded reports on the state and trends of disinformation in the country and region. Their trainings for journalists and other stakeholders have built capacity to counter disinformation and antidemocratic influences. And their long-term advocacy has resulted in the government's commencement of building a strategy for societal resilience to disinformation.

Their commitment to equity and inclusion is also visible in a mandate to make content available in Macedonian, Albanian, English, and other Balkan languages, which makes it a broadly accessible resource for reliable information in an otherwise challenging information ecosystem, and is paving the way for other organisations looking to them for how to combat disinformation in their own regions.

Combatting gendered disinformation: Asia & Pacific

While disinformation is a global challenge, women and marginalised groups are more frequently the victims of explicitly targeted online harassment and disinformation campaigns. This has a gendered chilling effect on digital participation, and makes it even more challenging to safely access reliable information online.

With IFEX's support, Pakistan member Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) held a three-day regional convening where women journalists and human rights defenders in Asia Pacific could engage and create an action plan to combat gendered disinformation online. The intention was to ensure collaborative spaces and efforts, and identify ways to make the internet a safe and more welcoming space for women and marginalised groups to engage in and use freely.

Held in collaboration with MMfD, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and IFEX, in Bangkok, Thailand from 4-6 September 2023, the convening was attended by 31 participants from Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, India, Singapore, the Philippines, Mauritius, and Myanmar.

“This regional convening has been very enlightening and at the same time very oriented towards solutions. And moving forward, I am really excited [about] how this session will move forward and create a network, a network which supports digital rights and addresses gendered disinformation.”

ARIANNE OLEGARIO, GESI ADVISOR FOR ASIA PACIFIC

By engaging with civil society actors, including journalists and digital rights activists, the project facilitated a collaborative discourse, fostering a shared understanding of the challenges and contributing factors.

Tackling a global societal issue as large as gendered disinformation doesn't have a quick or single solution. But supporting stakeholders' understanding of all of the variables that contribute to the problem is fundamental in charting a path forward, and this convening helped provide regional alignment on what's needed and how they can each continue to contribute to the work in future.

Advocating for language accessibility: Middle East and North Africa

Recognizing the equity challenges that come from having to navigate linguistic barriers, IFEX member Global Voices is advocating for Indigenous, minority, and low resource communities in the Middle East and North Africa region to have the right to access information and express themselves in their native languages.

With funding support from IFEX, this research project is working to shed light on how colonial and majority language use has impeded the rights and abilities of Kurdish, Assyrian, Armenian, Nubian, Soqotri and Tamazigh minority communities to meaningfully engage in expression, society, and access information. Global Voices is examining the existing policies being used by governments to curb free expression online by minority language communities. They are also advocating for recognition and respect of linguistic rights to ensure meaningful participation in society, and were able to present their work at RightsCon 2023.

Demonstrating how equitable access to information is tied to linguistic rights is an important illustration of the close connections between different rights, and how advancing one supports another.

[An online hate campaign is putting transgender people at greater risk in Pakistan. Pictured here: transgender rights activists at a meeting in Karachi on 19 September 2023; freelance journalist Rayhan Muqadam, digital content creator Aradhya Khan, and member of Karachi's municipal council, Shahzadi Rai.](#)



PHOTO BY ASIF HASSAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Litigating for freedom of information: Nigeria

Behind all successful advocacy is knowing what is needed to make a compelling argument and win your case, and then ensuring the availability of quality information.

With IFEX's support, Media Rights Agenda (MRA) has been taking a holistic approach to improving its effectiveness in promoting and defending expression and information rights in Nigeria. From developing a new organisational strategic plan, to training and empowering women journalists to use the country's Freedom of Information Act to obtain information for their own reporting, MRA is focused on increasing impact.

MRA has been building a database that tracks attacks against journalists and media freedom in Nigeria, to be better equipped to call out systemic injustices against free expression as they happen. They've also been taking some of these specific cases to court, providing legal assistance and advocacy to journalists in three different cases, where they have been successful in winning or reducing the charges in each.

Initiatives like this illustrate how access to reliable information supports advocacy towards our other goal areas and human rights in general. With detailed evidence, the ability to analyse and articulate trends and patterns on attacks against journalists strengthens efforts to advocate for change.

“IFEX’s support has empowered MRA to proactively prepare for forthcoming changes and challenges.”

MEDIA RIGHTS AGENDA



PHOTO BY PIUS UTOMI EKPEI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

A journalist sourcing information on the internet at the Arise News in the Ikoyi neighbourhood in Lagos, Nigeria on 10 June 2021.

BROADENING THE SCOPE

The ability – or inability – to access reliable information has repercussions that extend into every aspect of our lives. Initiatives that explicitly make these connections help ensure that access to information is valued, promoted, and defended.

Centering children in the encryption debate

The rise of encryption as a security tool is often seen as a challenge to law enforcement agencies seeking to surveil digital information and communications. Children's safety is often used as the justification for legislative attempts to break or restrict these encryption technologies, but children are rarely if ever consulted in these discussions.

Child Rights International Network (CRIN) is working to change this, by centering children's rights in these discussions, and helping children engage directly in these processes.

“We are immensely grateful to IFEX for giving us the support needed to make a timely intervention on this important and controversial topic. This support is now providing us the opportunity to further our work on this important issue. Thank you!”

CHILD RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

With financial support from IFEX, CRIN has been exploring the legal and policy implications of encryption technologies, and how they impact the rights of children. They produced a discussion paper and report which have caught the eye of regulators and politicians. Their work garnered international media attention, and they have been invited to subsequent meetings with experts, tech companies, and other practitioners to help positively shape legislation moving forward.

CRIN is a great example of one of the key strengths of IFEX’s diverse network, with members able to effectively centre their communities’ needs, and ensure that policy proposals are directly measured against who they will help or harm, to uphold broader democratic principles.

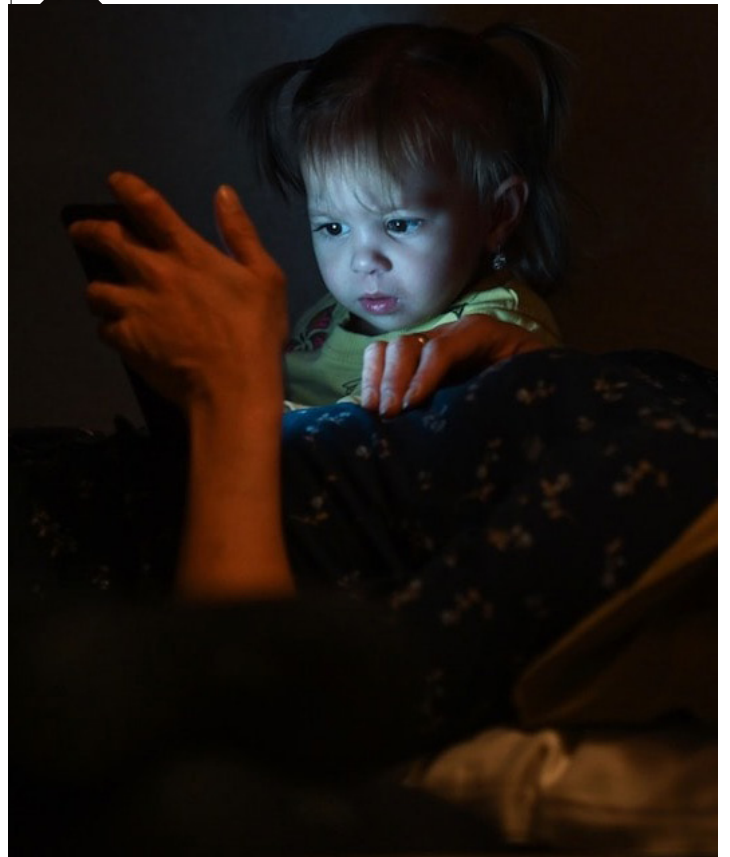
Preventing legal overreach online

As governments are increasingly working to tackle online activities within their legal frameworks, we’re seeing the introduction of new laws and regulations that can infringe on free expression online. In some cases, this is intentionally malicious as authoritarian governments weaponise laws to abuse or target individuals. In other cases, however, the free

expression implications can be an unintentional byproduct of overbroad definitions of criminal activity in otherwise well-intended initiatives that are targeting real problems.

To address some of the legal overlaps between cyber laws and free expression, IFEX member the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) brought their expertise to host a workshop where 13 IFEX members exchanged ideas on the proposed UN cybercrime treaty and other harmful cyber laws. The session provided information for members who were newer to working on these issues, and helped identify opportunities for engagement and advocacy between all participants. It engaged members in discussions about the potential ramifications of the proposed global cybercrime treaty for their respective countries, and enabled a productive sharing of national advocacy strategies.

[A woman and her daughter look at a mobile phone inside an evacuation train from Kherson, Ukraine, 18 December 2022.](#)



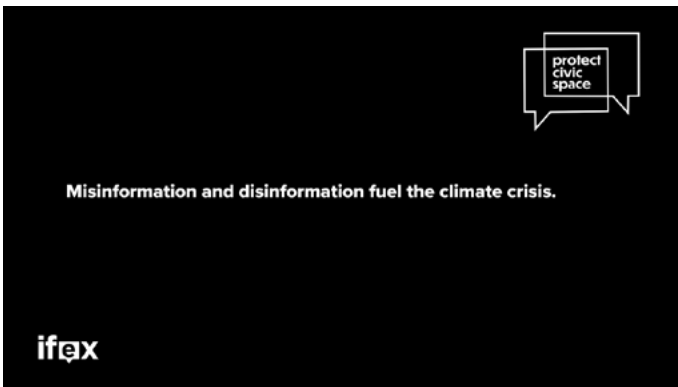
ARTUR WIDAK / NURPHOTO

Following the workshop, four members joined an existing working group of civil society stakeholders, strengthening cooperation within civil society to ensure that strong human rights protections prevent restrictions on free expression and access to information, both online and off.

These kinds of exchanges make the most of IFEX members’ deep knowledge and subject matter expertise, while also providing other members with opportunities to track developments that may impact them – even if they fall outside their normal scope of activities. This enables us all to be agile and alert to new issues as they arise.

An image created by IFEX to denounce the weaponization of disinformation by bad actors and its impact on the environment, part of a communications campaign timed to coincide with COP28 in November 2023.

IMAGES BY IFEX



Environmental matters

Access to information can sometimes be seen as an issue specific to journalists. IFEX has been exploring ways to better expand people’s understanding of its importance to other groups and other movements.

Climate change is a great example of an issue where access to reliable information is the backbone of advocacy. Without reliable information, climate advocates and impacted communities are unable to substantively engage on these issues on a level footing with their adversaries.

Here are a few of the ways we highlighted the importance of access to information to the broader issue of environment democracy in 2023:

► **Submission to the UN:** IFEX curated members’ issues and concerns into a [submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment](#), which profiled IFEX members’ work to new audiences, and helped underpin the connection between human rights, the environment, and access to information.

► **Providing context and content:**

[Backgrounder](#) : IFEX wrote an article breaking down how polluters are weaponising disinformation to mislead the public, and ways that information empowers those most impacted, including Indigenous peoples.

[MENA Regional Brief](#) : In the wake of numerous climate disasters in North Africa, IFEX wrote a piece highlighting the need for reliable access to information to combat climate misinformation.

► **Focus on COP28:** During the 2023 UN climate change conference, held in the United Arab Emirates, IFEX used our communications platforms to promote the importance of accurate and reliable environmental information and amplify member messaging. We also facilitated a connection between members the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) and CRIN to help navigate the local politics of bringing young people as advocates to the event.



Sam Gregory,
Executive Director
of witness.org

I worry that we're in a really fast rush, even on legislation on the existing problems. There are a few places to attack existing harms questions right now. The first is at the technical standards level, setting the terms that may then create collateral damage. The second is norm-setting, in the EU right now as well as the US. The third is at the national level, where there is a lot of work happening. I don't think the voices of the global majority are strong enough in some of those spaces. The steps that a network like IFEX can take to reinforce that are really critical.

From a report on the outcomes of IFEX's Generative AI Cafecito ("Hey, ChatGPT? We've got questions!") held on 5 December 2023 with special guest Sam Gregory of Witness.

Keeping up with the tech

As tools and technologies change, we do too.

While technology continues to provide new tools for members to use in their own work tracking, advocating and campaigning against threats, it is also making the spread of mis- and disinformation easier for malicious actors.

Over a third of IFEX members participated in a virtual Zoom Cafecito in December to share questions and concerns about the real and potential impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) on our work, and our worlds.

We brought experts from member the Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC) and ally organisation Witness to share their perspectives and respond to questions generated in break-out rooms.

These discussions helped deepen participants' perspectives and knowledge of how the technology may impact their work and provided ideas of what they need to pay attention to moving forward.

While the creative potential of GenAI was discussed, there was a strong focus on the dangers: questions and concerns about its impacts on equity and inclusion, as well as on creatives, jobs, and the work and credibility of human rights organisations. We shared back the highlights in a [report](#) [🔗](#) with a distinctly 'human' touch.

Having safe and informal spaces like this to engage with new issues as they emerge allows members to benefit from each other's expertise and experiences. It allows us to look forward to new threats and opportunities, and identify areas for exchange or potential future collaboration.

Beyond shutdowns

Creativity cuts both ways. We apply it to our communications channels, and others use it in their tactics to shut them down. IFEX issued two regional briefs in 2023 featuring examples of the role reliable access to information plays in Latin America and some of the complex barriers communications channels and their users are subjected to. This is a part of IFEX's ongoing work to demonstrate the interconnected nature of free expression and information rights to all human rights.

[Gonzalo Santi operating a solar-powered radio in Sharamentsa, an Achuar community in the southern Ecuadorian Amazon Rainforest. Each morning he establishes communications with other Achuar communities who are defending their ancestral land and opposing oil exploration within the territory.](#)

► [The importance of Indigenous community radio](#) [↗](#). In Latin America, community radio stations provide a critical free flow of information in the rural areas that are predominantly indigenous, Afro or mestizo. This population is severely and disproportionately impacted when radio stations are arbitrarily closed, as local radio plays a vital role in connecting these communities with trustworthy information, ringing the alarm in times of need, and creating social movements.

► [How internet shutdowns impact information flows](#) [↗](#). In Latin America, tactics including but beyond blanket shutdowns are being deployed to limit access to the internet, and therefore limit the public's access to information. Explaining how this has happened in Colombia, Cuba, and Venezuela, especially during times of protest, demonstrates how barriers to information most dramatically impact populations historically discriminated against.



PHOTO BY TANG CHHIN SOTHY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



SHAPING OUR ENVIRONMENT

In 2023, IFEX implemented 84 initiatives to enable civil society and protect civic space as it relates to FoE&I, of which 65% included elements of equity and inclusion

A healthy civic space relies on the right to freedom of expression and information. The ability to make informed decisions, to protest, criticise authorities, and exist in opposition – safely – are all integral to full participation and the potential to affect change. This year, IFEX really hit our stride integrating the connections between FoE&I and civic space into all our communications and advocacy work. We see countless overlaps between our strategic goals, and the ways that our work on one area continues to support the others.

Bringing the lens of civic space to our work is helping us highlight the broader landscape that supports or hinders FoE&I rights, and to defend our members when they're under attack. In short: Successfully defending the right of civil society organisations to exist, occupy space, and stand up for what's right, supports our broader efforts to advance free expression and information around the world.

SHOWCASING THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIC SPACE

In order to defend civic space, we need to highlight what it means, what it does, and how it impacts citizens, democracies, and our broader human rights. CSOs – increasingly under threat – play an essential role in maintaining a healthy and robust civic space, and we looked for opportunities to underscore their importance.

UN submission: The impact of impunity on civic space

Impunity doesn't only allow perpetrators to go unpunished, it contributes to a broader deterioration of civic space and civil society.

When the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association put out a call for inputs to support his thematic report for the 53rd session of the Human Rights Council, in 2023, he highlighted the lack of accountability for serious human rights violations against activists linked to their association, as well as in the context of peaceful protests. IFEX responded.

Our submission drew on IFEX members' work and experiences to describe the culture of impunity that exists and the civil society efforts to advance accountability. We highlighted concrete examples of how civil society has stepped up to fill accountability gaps where states have failed. We included references to the disproportionate impacts of violations of free assembly on those from historically marginalised communities including LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities.

From IFEX's UN submission

“ [Accountability] includes the empowerment of victims and affected communities by giving them a platform and opportunity to speak out about abuses of State power, acknowledging the truth of the violations that have been committed, re-emphasising human dignity and respect for human rights, and seeking restorative and forward-thinking solutions – all of which require an enabling environment. As such, it is vital that States not only uphold their obligations to ensure accountability, through national and international investigatory and legal frameworks, they must also make efforts to protect and preserve offline and online spaces where people are free to assemble and associate, safely.”

We were gratified to see that the Special Rapporteur's final report, tabled in June 2023, highlighted key issues raised by IFEX and members.

Applying international pressure to domestic restrictions: Cambodia

Cambodia’s civic space is rated as ‘repressed’ by the CIVICUS Monitor, and the country was added to its watchlist in February 2023 due to a rapid decline in civic freedoms. Between threats to press freedom, problematic new legislation, and the harassment of journalists, individuals are increasingly uncomfortable exercising their right to freedom of expression in public. This year, we continued our work with the Cambodian Centre for Independent Media (CCIM) to apply international pressure to push back on these threats to civic space.

Having identified that an international spotlight is an effective way to bring about change at home, CCIM has been encouraging countries supportive of free expression to pressure the Cambodian government into respecting people’s free expression and information rights.

As part of these efforts, they took part in several lobbying trips over the course of 2023, meeting with key stakeholders in the US, Switzerland, and Germany,

including USAID, UN Special Procedures, Reporters Without Borders, and Transparency International. They were able to provide critical, first-hand updates on the restrictive realities CSOs working in Cambodia face, as well as the growing threats to civic space and independent media and journalism, particularly citing the country’s elections in July 2023.

Bringing Cambodian voices together, they organised a Digital Rights Working Group consisting of 21 development partners and 15 civil society groups to lobby with key diplomats on various resolutions at the 54th Human Rights Council in Geneva. It’s still active, and CCIM is the network’s representative.

For CCIM, like so many other IFEX members, finding international pressure points to leverage is an important tactic to maintain influence and defend their right to exist, so they can continue to carry out their important work.

[Cambodian environmentalists Thun Ratha, Long Kunthea, and Phuon Keoraksme](#)y marched in chains on 6 October 2023 to protest a travel ban that would stop them from receiving a prestigious award in Sweden.



PHOTO BY TANG CHHIN SOTHY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

More voices reaching more people: Kyrgyzstan

The deterioration of free expression rights in Kyrgyzstan has parallels to a problematic trend we are seeing in a number of countries: governments introducing and weaponising new legal frameworks against their critics. A draft law introduced by the government in 2022 was such an example: easily manipulatable to target journalists, and centralising greater powers in the presidency, giving Sadyr Japarov the power to overturn court rulings. The loss of legal protection would put journalists at even greater risk, and render them less able to hold their government accountable.

IFEX Kyrgyz members have been expanding their reach to bring the reality of challenges facing journalists to the global stage. In 2023, we built on our previous work with Public Association “Journalists” (PAJ) – an initiative that facilitated knowledge sharing between Kyrgyz journalists and activists – by showcasing some of the country’s challenges at the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society (CoDWGEPCS).

Inclusion for the win

PAJ’s participation in the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society is just one example of IFEX’s ongoing work to facilitate amplifying local voices and support their participation in spaces where they may not otherwise have access. Based on positive feedback from members, international allies, and stakeholders, this is something we will continue to work on with other members in the coming years.



PHOTO BY VYACHESLAV OSELEDKO/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

A protester holds a placard reading ‘Don’t scare everyone!’ at a rally for freedom of speech and freedom for political prisoners in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on 25 November 2022.

In consultation with members the Media Policy Institute (MPI) and PAJ, IFEX provided feedback on the CoD WGEPCS analysis of the country’s draft law. PAJ’s Executive Director joined IFEX to present at the group’s meeting in June, and collaborated with the member on the preparation of their remarks to ensure that their first-hand perspective on the laws and their impact were clearly centred on the global stage.

Working from exile: Belarus

This year, the exiled Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) continued to be on the receiving end of government attacks, including being designated an “extremist organisation” – the first human rights organisation in the country to receive this designation.

IFEX continued its work with BAJ to support their work from exile. We worked with the European Federation of Journalists to organise an in-person strategy convening with the Belarus Coordination Group (that includes several IFEX members and allies) to keep the situation in the spotlight over the long-term and refine our collective campaigning and advocacy tactics in the

Advocating for justice – it’s a marathon

IFEX featured the work of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) in a [Q&A](#) [↗](#) we published on the anniversary of the country’s August 2020 elections and the ensuing brutal crackdown on civic space. It was an opportunity to help promote broader, international engagement with BAJ’s 2023 global campaign – a Solidarity Marathon on behalf of imprisoned journalists. The Secretariat was able to participate in the campaign when we met for a face-to-face meeting in Toronto, Canada in November 2023.



“We would like to applaud the IFEX team for profound advocacy efforts in Canada and globally.”

**ANDREI BASTUNETS,
BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS**

current challenging context. We also worked closely with BAJ to support them in liaising with Canadian officials, including organising an exchange with the Canadian Ambassador in Poland, and submitting a brief to the Canadian parliament.

This kind of support is not only critical for members, but also to ensure that justice and accountability can continue to be found even in areas where organisations aren’t allowed to operate. Drawing attention to the plight of exiled CSOs is part of a broader effort to highlight the need for strong civic space.

DEFENDING ALL OUR RIGHTS

Safeguarding individuals, organisations, institutions and the space we need to occupy to defend our rights is not only an objective in itself, it is one that yields additional benefits to the broader free expression goals of IFEX and network members.

Monitoring civic space in elections: Guatemala

In the month leading up to Guatemala’s 2023 general election, IFEX-ALC partnered with other regional organisations on an international monitoring mission. With direct monitors on the ground, they were able to document the dangerous and destructive impacts of civic space closures on women journalists, Indigenous journalists and human rights defenders, who are consistently among those most impacted by a lack of safety in speaking out. Many of these individuals have been criminalised or threatened, and as a consequence have fled the country.



In May 2023, eight international organisations supported by two regional networks advocating for freedom of expression and the press visited Guatemala ahead of the general elections. The mission revealed the stigmatisation, criminalisation, and judicial harassment of journalists and communicators.

Interviews were held with journalists in Guatemala as well as some living in exile. Representatives visited José Rubén Zamora, veteran journalist and owner of the country's oldest newspaper, *El Periódico*, in prison, where he has been detained since 2022. They also met with local authorities, civil society organisations, and UN OHCHR representatives.

The mission's [final report](#) included several recommendations for the state to improve journalists' freedoms and protections, and create conditions for a healthy civic space.

This kind of international collaboration and pressure is a valuable tactic for shedding light on the situation, but sustained follow up is essential to ensure it remains in the spotlight after the elections.

Mission participants have since continued their outreach with both the outgoing and the incoming government authorities, and with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression.

This particular initiative has inspired planning for a similar monitoring mission in El Salvador ahead of its election in early 2024, and will likely continue to act as a model for future missions as more than half the world's population heads to the polls this year.

“Without a free and independent press there can be no free and fair elections, and without free and fair elections there can be no true democracy.”

STATEMENT ON THE LAUNCH OF
THE GUATEMALA MISSION REPORT

Advocating from the ground up: Venezuela

Over the past several years, Venezuela has seen a continued closure of its civic space. This has featured the criminalisation of journalists and human rights defenders, the closure of media outlets, and heavy repression of protest.

Venezuelan member Espacio Público recognises that an important way to roll back – or at least contain – threats to civic space is to mobilise communities and support their participation in social movements. With financial support from IFEX, they ran a series of workshops to train community organisations and leaders on their rights to free expression, freedom of assembly, and civic space. While project leaders received training in coordinating human rights education, the workshops with grassroots communities focussed on the right to freedom of association and peaceful protest, and the sessions with university teachers and students centred on their rights to freedom of expression, helping to reach a multi-generational and diverse audience.

How to kill a bill

In January 2023, the Venezuelan government introduced a bill granting unprecedented powers to the Executive Branch – powers that could be directly weaponised against government critics and civil society. In response, IFEX-ALC signed a [joint statement](#) with other regional networks identifying the critical role of CSOs as the remaining guarantors and protectors of human rights of communities in the current humanitarian crisis. IFEX then coordinated with local members Espacio Público and IPYS-Venezuela to bring their concerns to the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society. We supplemented their input, focussing on the government's failure to provide transparency or civil society consultation on the proposed legislation, and reinforcing the value of civic space as it relates to free expression and information rights. The opportunity for members to directly voice their concerns, needs, and requests to multiple donor governments, intergovernmental actors and other civil society organisations resulted in the Working Group issuing a call to action requesting the Venezuelan government drop the highly problematic legislation.

Espacio Público is helping move the conversation beyond specific attacks on journalists or free expression, to emphasise the broader need for civil society and civic space to uphold the right to free expression. This contributes to building a broader and more sustainable movement that can advocate for its own rights.

Pushing for safe elections: Liberia

Elections are a heightened time of tension in Liberia. Recognising growing political conflict in the region, and anticipating the flashpoint that the October 2023 election would pose, IFEX member the Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP) led an initiative to safeguard free expression and media safety during the electoral process.

With financial support from IFEX, CEMESP built on the country's recently adopted national framework for a nonviolent election process, to convene stakeholders and address the needs of the upcoming election. They held two roundtable convenings, which brought government and civil society representatives together to commit to the nonviolent election framework, and discuss and reaffirm the need for the protection of journalists and safe elections in Liberia.

The project contributed to CEMESP's work with political stakeholders on shaping and protecting civic space in Liberia and also provided the organisation with the funding support and a project model to generate new fundraising strategies and establish a firmer foundation for the future.

This successful initiative also stands as a strong example of how the impact from supporting specific initiatives can extend beyond the timeframe of the projects themselves, supporting and sustaining organisations more broadly.

Civic space on the global stage: Bahrain

Having been directly targeted countless times, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) is all too familiar with the dangers of speaking up against the country's regime. The organisation's former president, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, has been imprisoned since 2011 for his role organising peaceful protests. The risks extend to those who defend the defenders: some members of BCHR and Al-Khawaja's family have had to work from outside the country to protect their safety.

With limited ability to operate inside Bahrain, BCHR has been focusing on applying international pressure on the country to highlight the lack of civic space. In 2023, a key opportunity to do so would be when Bahrain had its Universal Periodic Review at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. It is absolutely critical – and a significant part

of IFEX's work, year-round – to ensure that those with lived experiences are able to share their stories on the international stage, and with stakeholders and decision-makers they may not otherwise have access to. With IFEX's support BCHR presented to permanent OHCHR missions at a pre-session, where they raised issues impacting civil society in Bahrain.

Their inputs resulted in a number of key recommendations being put forward by member states, including around the criminalisation and imprisonment of journalists and human rights defenders, the abuse of spyware against dissidents, and how legislation is being weaponized in ways that often disproportionately impact women.

[Bahraini activist Maryam al-Khawaja poses for a photograph near Heathrow airport on 15 September 2023. She was not permitted to board a flight from London on her way to return to the Gulf kingdom to support her father, jailed pro-democracy leader Abdulhadi al-Khawaja.](#)



PHOTO BY DANIEL LEAL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



PROTECTING ADVOCATES

In 2023, IFEX implemented 94 initiatives to foster a safer environment for those exercising their right to FoE&I, of which 55% included elements of equity and inclusion

It is becoming more dangerous for organisations to speak out for rights and for justice. We have direct experience of this within the network, from organisations and individual staff who have been explicitly targeted for their work. There have been gendered and sexualized aspects to many of these attacks, exacerbating the impact on and the dangers to women and vulnerable communities.

Despite these ongoing challenges, members in the network continued to find ways to support one another and move forward in 2023. We've been collaborating to monitor and spotlight the threats and violations, as well as to identify new tactics to hold perpetrators to account.

PUSHING FOR JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY

The IFEX network has significant experience tackling impunity, advocating for accountability and justice as a key pillar of our work for over a decade. Experience – plus innovation, always. This year, we explored new venues to apply pressure, and worked with members to ensure that the pressure stays on.

Improved monitoring for better results: Argentina

Effective advocacy relies on good data. In Argentina, Foro de Periodismo Argentino (FOPEA) has played an important role monitoring free expression violations and threats and attacks on journalists through its correspondents' network, and publish their reports annually. However, accessing real-time data throughout the year was more difficult.

With financial support from IFEX, FOPEA updated its system for continual monitoring, tracking, and reporting on violations. The new process provides clear guidance on how their correspondents can identify incidents, ensure clear and standardised data entry, and publish independently.

Members of the Argentinian Association of Photojournalists perform a “camarazo” (raising their photo gear) in front of the Congress in Buenos Aires on 22 February 2019, two days after photojournalists Bernadino Avila and Juan Pablo Barrientos were arrested while covering a demonstration.



PHOTO BY JUAN MABROMATA / AFP

As a part of the project, FOPEA ran an in-person training and provided an updated monitoring manual for all of its correspondents. The training included a focus on gender indicators for attacks against women and LGBTQIA+ journalists, to ensure that a gender perspective is integrated from the beginning of any case monitoring.

By allowing for real-time processing and publishing, the new system directly complements previous work FOPEA has done with its legal network, integrating a legal perspective into the monitoring process right from the start. It all amounts to a substantial upgrade to monitoring and advocacy on free expression in Argentina, by ensuring real-time access to reliable data that can be used to advocate for change.

Demonstrators protest President Dina Boluarte during a joint press conference in Lima, Peru held by representatives of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and its Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, Pedro Vaca, following an observation visit to the country.



PHOTO BY KLEBER VASQUEZ/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES

Regional advocacy to protect local journalists: Peru

We've mentioned the impact of applying external pressure a few times in this report: it is a tactic IFEX and members are familiar with, especially when local governments refuse to listen.

When the Peruvian government put forward a new protocol for journalists during protests, this raised some flags for the IFEX-ALC network – sparked not only by the potential negative impact on their peers in Peru, but because any decrease in rights and freedoms in the region can have a ripple effect on neighbouring countries.

That's why they sent a joint letter, drafted in close consultation with Peruvian members, to the government's interior ministry, noting the new protocol's misalignment with international standards on freedom of expression, and calling for improved protocols, developed through a transparent and consultative process, that would provide protections for journalists covering protests.

Fighting for women's right to free expression

IFEX is committed to sharing and amplifying women's stories and voices year-round, showcasing their work. We also draw attention to the gendered components of free expression violations and attacks, and how this is detracting from women's ability to safely participate in and contribute to civic space – which impoverishes civic space for everyone.

“Digital violence [against women] needs a particular response. The protective measures we use need to be different.”

CATALINA MORENO AROCHA, FUNDACIÓN KARISMA

Each International Women’s Day, on 8 March, IFEX joins others to acknowledge the work and importance of women around the world exercising and defending the right to freedom of expression and information, and to report on some of the challenges they face accessing these rights. We marked this day in 2023 with a series of special issue Regional Briefs:

- ▶ **Africa:** The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights passes a resolution pushing member states to address issues of online violence against women.
- ▶ **Americas:** Colombia introduces a bill allowing political actors to be held responsible for acts of violence online against women journalists.
- ▶ **Middle East and North Africa:** 7amleh explains how gender based violence is pushing women out of online spaces in Palestine.
- ▶ **Europe and Central Asia:** Sexual harassment of women online is criminalised in North Macedonia, but work remains to end the harassment of women journalists.
- ▶ **Asia Pacific:** The Digital Rights Foundation promotes women’s digital rights in Pakistan through helplines and e-magazines.

“Over 80% of women journalists in North Macedonia have faced online harassment... Almost half of women journalists did not report their online harassment. Common to all victims is that they simply do not trust the institutions.”

BOJANA JOVANOVSKA,
AUTHOR, FROM NORMALISATION TO SELF-CENSORSHIP



PHOTO BY LEON BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

Kenyan content creator Elsa Majimbo’s satirical videos went viral during COVID-19, but with her success came gendered online threats and harassment. Resolution 522, recently adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, may push States to address these issues.

Building a safer civic space online: Pakistan

The Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) has been a powerhouse, working to build the capacity of human rights defenders in Pakistan with hands-on training of open-source tools for community members facing online threats and abuse in the country. Their projects bring a gendered perspective to digital rights, including recommendations to end online and tech-facilitated gender-based violence and close the gender digital divide.

In 2023, DRF hosted over 50 workshops with human rights defenders throughout Pakistan and provided 1,500 community members with technical tools and institutional support.

In October 2023, with IFEX’s support, they held an online regional consultation with CSOs and digital rights actors across Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The gathering resulted in the formation of a regional bloc, with the objectives of strengthening solidarity and support of civil society groups in the region and building alliances and initiating regional advocacy efforts on digital space issues. The next regional bloc convening will take place in 2024.



PHOTO BY LEON BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

CAMPAIGNING FOR CHANGE

We know that creating a world safe for those speaking out is a never-ending challenge and a long-term commitment. Affecting true systemic change isn't the result of a single campaign or initiative. It's the result of ongoing efforts by a wealth of stakeholders to apply ongoing pressure over months, years, or even decades. We're working to find ways to continue to strengthen our work with members and allies, to maximise our impact and effectiveness to sustain this work for the long haul.

Putting the Vienna Call to Action... into action

As part of our work with the International Civil Society Coalition on the Safety of Journalists, IFEX helped facilitate and signed onto the 2022 Vienna Call to Action, which outlined key ways that governments and oversight bodies can improve protections for journalists, address gender based violence on women journalists, end impunity, and support digital safety and security.

A demonstration by CSOs organised by the International Press Institute during a meeting in Vienna marking the 10th anniversary of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. Participants are holding images of some of the journalists murdered in the decade since the Plan was established in 2012.

In 2023, IFEX, members, and allies engaged in the Coalition continued working together to amplify the Call to Action's requests, and to advocate for their implementation. From joint meetings with diplomatic missions, to interventions with intergovernmental bodies, and communications initiatives to support broader public awareness raising, the Call to Action is serving as a clear focal point for our joint advocacy efforts.

Our ongoing work engaging with these kinds of coalitions and advocating with international actors and spaces is another way we are ensuring that IFEX members' voices and needs reach the stakeholders that are able to affect positive change.

Paving the way for the safety of women journalists: West Africa

Violence against journalists disproportionately impacts women, and addressing broader gender-based discrimination is going to take time. It is critical to continue laying the foundation for improving laws, public discourse, and the policies and practices that shape how these issues are handled when they occur, to prevent them from happening again.

With funding support from IFEX, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) produced a series of reports documenting the experiences and threats female journalists in six countries face in the course of their work. When possible, MFWA also worked with local partners, one example being their collaboration with IFEX member the International Press Centre (IPC) on the report *The Safety of Female Journalists in Nigeria*.

Their reports clearly demonstrate the need for stronger protections for women journalists, and made concrete recommendations for what employers, governments, and peer groups can do to support their safety. To present their findings, MFWA held a series of virtual convenings, where they welcomed representatives from national regulatory bodies to participate in the conversations. They were also able to publish multiple stories in each country's local media, to help push this issue into the public discourse, and reiterate the need for change.

Building strong regional networks, ensuring clear information and data to evidence the problem, and building strong advocacy plans, are all part of addressing the dangerous climate for women journalists.

The safety of women journalists: Member voices and global watchdogs

While international consultations are critical to ensuring that global watchdogs and oversight bodies have the information they need to push for accountability from states, it can be challenging for members working on the ground to find the time or resources required to participate. When the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) called for submissions for their report on the safety of women journalists, IFEX was able to respond in a way that amplified the voice and impact of CSOs.

IFEX's submission highlighted members' concerns with the emerging patterns of online gender-based violence facing women journalists. We emphasised the importance of the OHCHR in combatting and responding to digital threats in the absence of state action, and made recommendations calling for greater action from tech companies and states to improve online safety and protections for women journalists. We also noted the intersectional challenges and discriminations facing women, LGBTQIA+ journalists and others with racial, ethnic, and other historically marginalised identities, which were highlighted in the final report from the UN Secretary-General.

PHOTO BY YANICK FOLLY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Angela Kpeidja, a journalist with Benin's national television station, is one of two women journalists who took to social media in 2020 to denounce sexual harassment where they work. Their posts went viral, provoking a country-wide debate.

Joining forces for a united front

Joint statements help amplify the voices of individuals and organisations and build a unified front demanding change. While sometimes IFEX leads on these statements, often we serve as a signatory and a resource, helping to circulate these initiatives from members among their peers and allies, to maximise their impact.

In 2023, IFEX published and promoted 120 joint statements from members.

Here are some of the joint statements that IFEX supported this year in two key regions: Europe & Central Asia, and Middle East & North Africa. All IFEX network joint statements can be found [here](#) on ifex.org.

EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA

- 1. Armenia** [↗](#) Armenian law must prohibit internet shutdowns, not enshrine them (AccessNow)
- 2. Belarus** [↗](#) Mark the Day of Solidarity with Political Prisoners (ARTICLE19)
- Belarus** [↗](#) Drop charges against human rights defenders (Index on Censorship)
- 3. EU** [↗](#) Improve proposed SLAPP legislation (European Federation of Journalists)
- 4. Germany** [↗](#) Anti-SLAPP campaigners stand in solidarity with Russian dissident authors (Index on Censorship)
- 5. Kyrgyzstan** [↗](#) Stop abusing legislation to target independent media (MPI, PAJ)



- Kyrgyzstan** [↗](#) Withdraw the lawsuit against the Kloop Media Public Foundation and cease the targeting and criminalisation of media (IFEX)
- 6. Malta** [↗](#) Implement law reform on the 6th anniversary of Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder (Committee to Protect Journalists)
- Malta** [↗](#) Provide police protection to threatened writer and activist Robert Aquilina (PEN International)
- 7. Russia** [↗](#) Hold Russia accountable for rights abuses in Ukraine (PEN America)
- 8. Turkey** [↗](#) Condemn violent attack on journalist Sinan Aygül (International Press Institute)

MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

9. Bahrain: [🔗](#)

Letter to the US President and Prime Minister of Denmark, on imprisoned activist Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja (GCHR)

Bahrain: [🔗](#)

Release Dr. Abduljalil Al-Singace after two years of hunger strike (BIRD).

Bahrain & Saudi

Arabia: [🔗](#) Disclose human rights clauses amid concerns over sportswashing (BIRD).

Bahrain: [🔗](#)

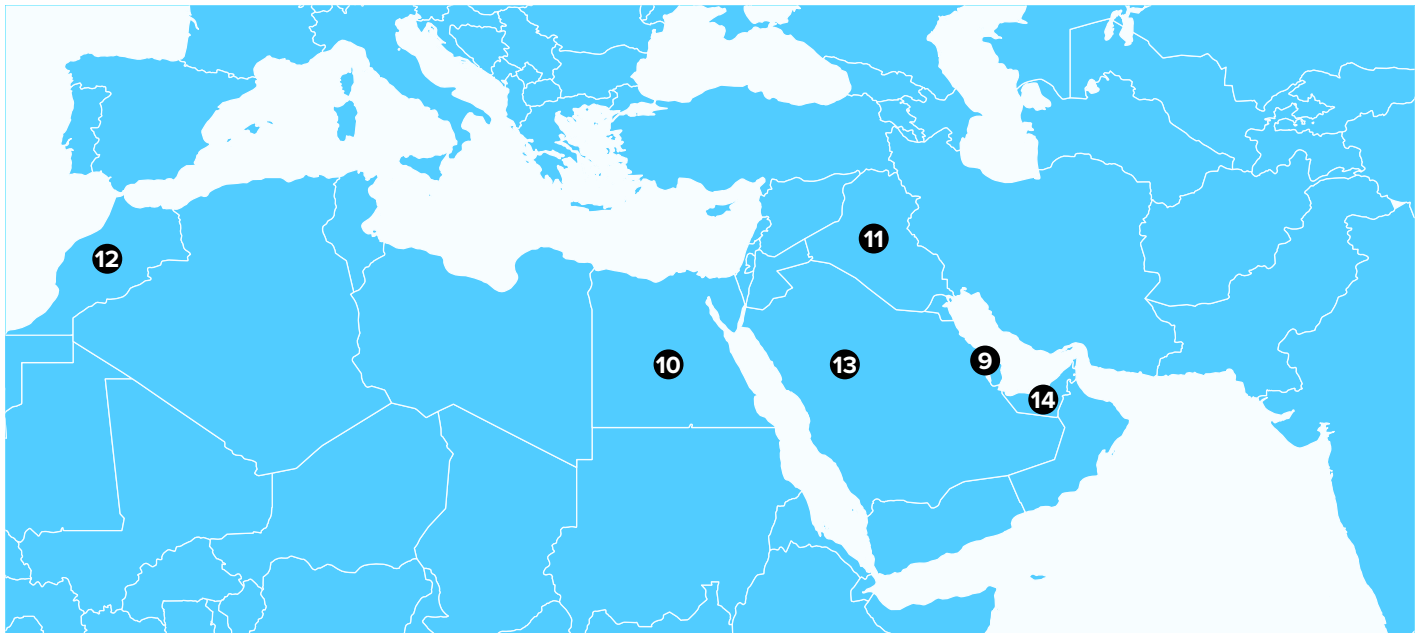
Ensure human rights defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja adequate medical treatment (GCHR)

10. Egypt: [🔗](#)

Condemn the prosecution of three women journalists (AFTE)

Egypt: [🔗](#) Appeal the imprisonment of activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah (CIHRS)

Egypt: [🔗](#) Rights groups condemn latest blocking of news websites (AFTE)

**11. Iraq:** [🔗](#)

Expose government crackdown against digital content creators (SMEX)

12. Morocco: [🔗](#)

End the persecution of journalist Taoufik Bouachrine (GCHR)

13. Saudi Arabia: [🔗](#)

Microsoft should suspend its plans for a data centre (HRW)

Saudi Arabia: Endorse dissidents' call for democracy and human rights (Freedom Forward)

Saudi Arabia: [🔗](#)

Call for release of two Saudi Wikipedians detained since 2020 (GCHR)

Saudi Arabia: [🔗](#)

Internet Governance Forum must reverse decision to make Saudi Arabia its next host (AccessNow)

14. United Arab

Emirates: [🔗](#) Call out the country's human rights records leading up to COP28 (EDAC)

United Arab Emirates: [🔗](#) COP28 must not be derailed by greenwashing efforts (Freedom Forward)

United Arab

Emirates: [🔗](#) Release all those unjustly imprisoned before COP28 (GCHR)

United Arab Emirates: [🔗](#) Condemning the unjust prosecution of dozens of Emiratis in the UAE (GCHR)

Looking ahead



IFEX

Every day we witness a global context rife with tripwires for freedom of expression and information rights, the price being exacted upon civil society, and the unpredictability of the state of the world. But we balance against that the record of our resistance, the expertise and experience of the IFEX network, and the unwavering commitment of members.

A big year lies before us. The final year of a Strategic Plan brings with it a unique opportunity and a challenge. The challenge is to take a beat to reflect – honestly, and through meaningful collaboration – on our work, to evaluate what we have achieved, to identify the skills and strengths we have built, as a network, as well as where we need to grow, and how we can do better. The opportunity: to bring that thinking to build a plan for the next five years that is strategic, ambitious, and achievable.

2024 also brings another welcome opportunity. It's been five long years since the whole IFEX network has met in person. We are looking forward to reconvening in Berlin, in April – to come together,

learn together, laugh together... and get it together! Over two days committed to inclusive, authentic engagement (and no panels!) we will reconnect, provide creative spaces for learning, stoke our energy, build new relationships, and foster a stronger sense of community among our network of over 100 organisations, as well as with allies and donors.

And of course, the work of completing the commitments made in our 2020-2024 Strategic Plan continues! Throughout 2024 we will continue to explore creative relationships and collaborations while maintaining the long-term connections we've developed over the years. We will support members' efforts while co-developing new ways of thinking and working, always conscious of the inherent stress, vulnerability, and isolation that so many face in the delivery of this critical work.

In short: We will be taking on these challenges with an energized network of members who will continue to benefit from the wealth of expertise, experience, insight, and creativity of their colleagues and allies.

IFEX Dispatches from 2023

A NETWORK THAT WORKS

PHOTO CREDITS

COVER: MEMBERS OF THE ARGENTINIAN ASSOCIATION OF PHOTOJOURNALISTS PERFORM A "CAMARAZO" (RAISING THEIR PHOTO GEAR) IN FRONT OF THE CONGRESS IN BUENOS AIRES ON 22 FEBRUARY 2019. PHOTO BY JUAN MABROMATA / AFP

NETWORK BUILDING: A PARTICIPANT TAKES PART IN "SKOPJE PRIDE", THE PRIDE PARADE IN SUPPORT OF THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY IN DOWNTOWN SKOPJE ON 24 JUNE 2023. PHOTO BY ROBERT ATANASOVSKI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ACCESS TO INFORMATION: A WOMAN HOLDS A CARD IDENTIFYING HER AS A MEMBER OF THE PRESS DURING A PROTEST BY TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS AGAINST THE CRACKDOWN ON RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS IN TUNISIA ON 6 FEBRUARY 2023. PHOTO BY HASAN MRAD/DEFODI IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

CIVIC SPACE: INDIGENOUS PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT TRIBES TAKE PART IN A MARCH TO DEMAND BETTER PROTECTION OF THEIR LANDS AND RIGHTS AND TO PROTEST AGAINST BRAZIL'S PRESIDENT JAIR BOLSONARO AND LAND DEMARCATION IN BRASILIA, BRAZIL, ON 6 APRIL 2022. PHOTO BY MATEUS BONOMI/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGE

SAFETY & JUSTICE: CAMBODIANS FROM ETHNIC MINORITIES MARCH ALONG A STREET DURING THE 62ND ANNIVERSARY OF HUMAN RIGHTS DAY IN PHNOM PENH ON 10 DECEMBER 2010. TANG CHHIN SOTHY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



THE GLOBAL NETWORK PROMOTING AND DEFENDING FREE EXPRESSION