

# Solidarity Playbook



# UnidOSC

How research, advocacy and capacity-building have been used to defend the space for civil society in Mexico



International  
Civil Society Centre

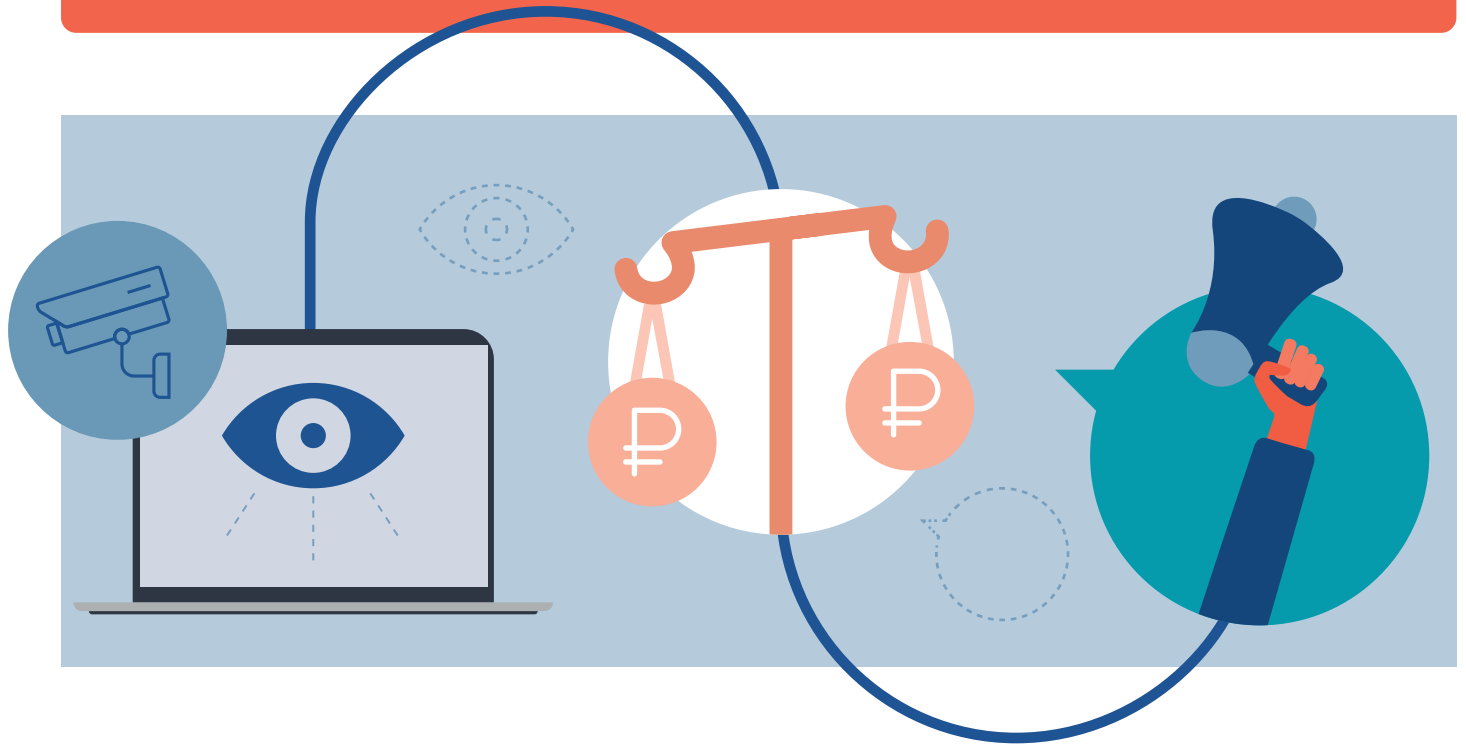
[solidarityaction.network](http://solidarityaction.network)

**UnidOSC** is a coalition of organisations formed in Mexico in 2015. It seeks to foster coordination among civil society organisations (CSOs) on the defense of rights inherent to the freedom of association, and on the construction of an enabling environment for civil society.

## Overview

UnidOSC is a coalition comprised of CSOs, foundations, academics and activists interested in protecting the operational space for civil society through **proactive strategic proposals** designed to advance the sector, and **diverse responses to new risks** and challenges that arise. The coalition has provided an **identity for the collective effort** to defend and champion civic space in Mexico and in the region.





## What launched the coalition?

In 2015, a group of academics and activists raised concerns about the growing restrictions being faced in Mexico and the region and embarked on a **research project** with the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), looking into the legal and public policy restrictions that impacted civil society in Mexico. They presented the study to peers to generate interest amongst networks, organisations and funders in the country, to determine what follow-up actions could be taken.

They found that restrictions were growing including:

- **Open, visible restrictions** such as the harassment of institutions or attacks on activists (as would be demonstrated in 2016 by the government's controversial use of surveillance software to spy on CSOs).
- More **subtle restrictions** that derived from unjust laws, such as tax and financial restrictions, which limit the work of civil society. One practice that was seen as particularly problematic at the time was the discretionary usage of federal subsidies and their unequal distribution towards organisations aligned with government interests or to GONGOs.

Alongside a network of interested parties, they launched a **public policy and advocacy campaign** in 2016. This campaign sought to reform and 'harmonise' several federal laws related to the regulation of civil society. Despite receiving support from a cross-section of senators, ultimately, the campaign faced significant objections from the ministries of finance and internal affairs and was not successful in bringing about reform. However, the experience did **lead to the consolidation of UnidOSC, a coalition for civil society**, which represents a more permanent space for advocacy.

The research and subsequent advocacy campaign had shown that there was the capacity for joint advocacy at the national level. But it also highlighted the need to further strengthen the capacities of civil society to participate and advocate at the **local and regional levels**, and to create a **unified voice** advocating for civic space.

# Who are the members?

The initial strategy was to integrate **'umbrella' organisations** as members, which could serve as representatives of other organisations in their home states.

The coalition also sought to include organisations with some **experience of advocacy work**, especially regarding civil society rights, alongside seeking **diversity** in terms of the causes represented across civil society. Thus far, membership includes:

- Community foundations
- Groups focused on grassroots development
- Grant-makers
- Groups working on public policy analysis
- Women's rights organisations

- Environmental groups
- Migration and human rights organisations
- Children's rights groups
- Indigenous rights organisations
- Academic institutions focused on CSO studies, and groups specialising in citizen participation.

There is also a balance in terms of **regional representation**. This is important, given that there are clear differences in terms of the local context in the north and south of the country where civil society is varied, with different priorities in the regions. The north is more linked to organisations in the US and to private funding, whilst the south relies more on international funds, and organisations there more resemble groups in Central America.

# How does it work?

The decision was made early on not to formally constitute the coalition, and so it has **no legal existence**. In this way, it is **less vulnerable to attack**. It can be critical and can be open to dialogue with anyone, as no tax or legal pressures can be leveraged against it. Although this does limit the coalition's fundraising options, some members are able to act as **fiscal sponsors**, and thus the coalition follows transparent and accountable practices and can receive funds.

A structure was needed to coordinate engagement and action, and so an **assembly of members** was created. Within this, there is:

- An **elected committee that oversees and guides** the strategy of the group. Members elect organisations with the experience and capacity that would guarantee accountability and transparency. These elected committee members are from Mexico's three main cities, lending a regional balance to the group.
- **Sub-committees** were developed to refine and diversify strategies, focusing on advocacy, communication, and outreach and engagement with other sectors such as the media, academia, funders and the private sector.

An **annual assembly** takes place in Mexico City, where members are updated on the new challenges and opportunities related to civil society and civic space. Members can participate in the design of strategies and propose ideas or initiatives at the local, national and international level.

The main **requisite for membership** – and therefore the ability to participate either as an individual or as a non-profit organisation independent from any government – is a **clear commitment to human rights**, and especially the freedom of association and the construction of an enabling environment for civil society. Organisations whose positions run counter to recognised human rights are not accepted as members, and in this way, the coalition counterbalances the growing ranks of conservative civil society.

# Coalition in action

The coalition has three main strategies that it employs in the defense of civil society:

- **Research** into how civil society is restricted, and the design of alternative measures.
- **Advocacy** on both national and international policy.
- **Capacity-building** to strengthen CSOs' abilities to advocate for their rights and for civic space. This is carried out locally in any of Mexico's 32 states, nationally, and regionally.

## Strategies for engagement with the government

- With previous federal governments the coalition sought direct meetings with the executive branch. They built a **permanent working group** with the Ministry of finance that operated for two years.
- The coalition has **lobbied all parties that are open to dialogue and to a commitment on CSOs' rights**. For example in 2016, the campaign on harmonising CSO laws was signed by 14 senators from four different parties.
- **When dialogue with the government has proved impossible, the coalition adopts other strategies**. In 2018 they fought the introduction of a measure that was set to reduce administrative burdens on a minority of CSOs – it was limited to those who could afford the services of private firms for certification – thereby creating an elite set of CSOs with advantages over smaller organisations. The **coalition turned to the media, and a manifesto was published in the main newspapers**, signed by over 500 organisations rejecting the measure. The message was replicated in local newspapers across the country. This media coverage managed to create uncertainty over the measure in the government, and it was eventually revoked two years later.
- The current President has **closed all dialogue with CSOs**, and so the coalition has again adopted alternative strategies. For example, there is currently a **tax reform** under consideration, which will have a negative impact on CSOs' self-generated funds. The coalition plans to **turn to the judiciary**. With the support of opposition senators, they will first **present an 'unconstitutionality motion' to the courts**. A second strategy, if the law is imposed, would involve **preparing a collective demand to the courts on behalf of up to 30 organisations**. This would create a legal precedent, which could force Congress to revise new dispositions in favour of CSOs. Pro bono support from legal firms is crucial for this strategy.

UnidOSC has applied these three core strategies of research, advocacy and capacity building at varying times at the local, national and international level. These strategies are often blended, as they have **proven to be more effective when combined**.

Examples of these strategies in action include:

## Local

- Initial advocacy efforts for legal reform at the national level did not succeed in 2016, so coalition members took the research and technical expertise that had been created and used it to **support similar initiatives at state level with local allies**.
- Closely related legislation is now under consideration in the states of Nuevo León and Chihuahua, and there is a high possibility the reforms will be adopted this year.

## National

- In 2017/18 the coalition sought to assess the financial restrictions that were affecting civil society, that were derived in part from

international policy, including **FATF regulations** and international banking policy and practice. Representatives from UnidOSC **engaged with the international NPO Coalition on FATF**, and conducted the first ever self-assessment for the region in Argentina and Mexico, presenting the initiative at a G20 side-event in Buenos Aires in 2018.

- They also sought to **open up dialogue with international banking corporations**, in efforts to diminish financial restrictions.

## Regional and international

- The coalition is **scaling up their original research** in partnership with ICNL and GAFILAT (FATF's regional office) to look at the restrictions present in 17 countries in Latin America.
- When the research has been completed, they will then **train local colleagues to use the information to advocate for reform**, thereby building the capacity of civil society in the region to lobby for a more enabling financial environment.



# Outcomes

- ✓ **Expertise and capacity:** Although the initial campaign has not yet succeeded in reforming national CSO legislation in Mexico, the work formed the base of even more advanced legislation that has since been presented at state-level. If those reforms are adopted, it would create a precedent that could lay the ground for future national reforms. UnidOSC's work has helped to create a **feedback and solidarity loop** whereby regional, national, and local advocacy initiatives can strengthen one another.
- ✓ **Access:** Members have benefited from the coalition in terms of **access and direct participation**, including access to research, the exchange of learning, and an opening up of dialogue with multiple different authorities and stakeholders that influence the regulatory framework for CSOs.

## CHALLENGES

### Galvanising a diverse range of CSOs

Some invited organisations have expressed an interest in the coalition, but have not committed to participate actively, mainly because CSO rights are frequently seen as second in importance to CSOs' own causes. The coalition is working to expand membership for broader scope and diversity, but this remains a challenge.

### Competing priorities

It can be challenging to incorporate the multiple priorities of so many different types of CSOs. To mitigate this, the Committee tries to identify the different needs of the membership and translate them into initiatives that can be of benefit to most organisations, or for those that are most vulnerable. Some regulations affect all CSOs and cross-sector solidarity is needed to tackle these.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Technical assistance as solidarity

UnidOSC has benefited greatly from technical assistance from international groups experts in civic space such as [ICNL](#), [ECNL](#), [Human Security Collective](#), the WINGS network and others. These groups have provided technical assistance either relating to legal aspects of the enabling environment, or by sharing good practice from other countries such as strategies for digital security, or inviting UnidOSC representatives to spaces and platforms for exchange and learning. This kind of solidarity has been invaluable, and should expand.

### ICSO gap

It has been difficult for the coalition to engage with more international civil society organisations (ICSOs). Whilst there might be the desire to engage on civic space at an international or secretariat level, those concerns are not necessarily shared by colleagues in ICSOs' country offices, as their focus is often more on the cause related to their specific mission. UnidOSC has formed good relationships with some ICSOs who participate as full members, as they see the close connection between the protection of civic space on the one hand, and the work that they are mandated to do on the other. However, that link is not always clear. Some ICSOs have, however, acted as allies to the coalition, if not as full members, for example by supporting with the dissemination of research.

Solidarity Playbook

# UnidOSC

Sarah Pugh and Deborah Doane

November 2020



International  
Civil Society Centre

In partnership with



Sweden

Sverige



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG  
INTERNATIONAL  
DEMOCRACY PROGRAMME



FORD  
FOUNDATION