

# Building Civil Society Ecosystems Through Collaboration

How structured collaboration between grassroots organisations strengthens civil society resilience in Armenia and Moldova



## Project context

The Resilient Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership Region project was funded by the European Union's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and implemented by People in Need (PIN) between 2024 and 2026. Over 24 months, the project directly supported 19 grassroots civil society organisations (CSOs) in Armenia and in Moldova, working to strengthen their role as resilient, inclusive and trusted governance actors.

## COLLABORATION: A strategy for resilience in this context

Civil society organisations in the Eastern Partnership region operate under sustained pressure. The CIVICUS Monitor's People Power Under Attack report (2025) rates civic space across the region as deteriorating: between 2019 and 2025, the proportion of the region's population living in countries with open or narrowed civic space collapsed from 58.3% to just 26.5%.<sup>1</sup> In both Armenia and Moldova, CSOs face documented challenges including financial instability, disinformation campaigns, and restricted access to funding from domestic sources.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, civil society in both countries has demonstrated consistent resilience, but these gains remain fragile, and CSOs in both countries continue to face the structural isolation and resource constraints that limit their collective influence.

Against this backdrop, the project tested a clear proposition: that structured, facilitated collaboration opportunities between CSOs can increase their reach, influence and sustainability beyond what any single organisation could achieve alone. This case study documents two complementary approaches to building that collaboration, drawing on implementation experience between 2024 and 2026.

## APPROACH 1

### COLLABORATION LABS: From individual organisations to joint action

The Collaboration Lab model was built on a simple premise: that civil society organisations become more effective not only by developing internally, but by deepening their connections with each other.

Implemented as intensive 2.5-day participatory events in both Armenia and Moldova between May and June 2025, the Labs brought together CSOs that had completed earlier capacity strengthening activities under the project. Using participatory facilitation methods, they created structured space for organisations to explore common priorities, identify complementarities and design joint initiatives, without predetermining which partnerships would form or what they would look like.

#### How it worked

The process moved through three phases: structured dialogue to surface shared priorities, including speed networking sessions and World Café discussions; collaborative design sessions in which organisations self-organised around shared values and areas of expertise, developing joint project concepts; and peer coaching to help teams refine roles, clarify responsibilities and develop workable collaboration plans.

The Labs were directly linked to a follow-on sub-grants scheme. Newly formed collaboration teams of two or three organisations could apply for funding to implement the initiatives they had developed during the event under the project's sub-grants scheme, designed specifically to support CSO-led joint learning initiatives and advocacy planning. This created an opportunity to test collaborative working in practice through jointly managed projects.

**19**

CSO participating

**37**

 CSO participants across both  
countries

**8**

 collaborative groups formed  
and awarded funding

### Results in Moldova

In Moldova, the Collaboration Lab brought together 19 participants from 10 CSOs and created the conditions for four collaborative groups to form by the end of the event: two groups of two organisations and two groups of three. Each group developed a joint project proposal to apply for a sub-grant funding, moving directly from facilitated dialogue to collaborative project design within the 2.5-day event.

The partnerships that formed addressed youth civic participation, environmental stewardship, digital inclusion, prevention of gender-based violence and active ageing. Through their joint initiatives, participating organisations collectively engaged local authorities, schools, social services and community members, and produced practical resources to strengthen citizen access to information and participation.

Beyond the immediate outputs, the process created foundations for continued cooperation between organisations that had previously operated independently, demonstrating how facilitated collaboration can extend both the reach and sustainability of civil society action.

*"2.5 days of intensive collaboration exploration, where ideas were transformed into concrete plans and strong partnerships were forged."*

CSO participant, Moldova Collaboration Lab

*"Collaboration Lab was an inspiring environment and a safe space where we could build partnerships, invest in our development and embrace constructive challenges that continuously encourage us to grow and evolve."*

CSO participant, Moldova Collaboration Lab

### Results in Armenia

In Armenia, 18 participants from nine CSOs attended the Lab, where four cross-organisational partnerships that combined local knowledge, advocacy capacity and thematic expertise, were formed. Resulting initiatives contributed to evidence-based advocacy on environmental health, youth volunteering and biodiversity conservation, and strengthened community-led approaches to civic engagement.

Through joint research, consultations with communities and public institutions, and coordinated policy dialogue, participating CSOs increased their collective influence on local and national decision-making. The collaborations also strengthened connections between organisations working across different regions, contributing to networks better able to translate citizen priorities into policy engagement.

*"The Lab created a space where we could finally see what other organisations were doing and find where our work overlaps. That understanding is what made real collaboration possible."*

CSO participant, Armenia Collaboration Lab

*"Before this event I had never thought about applying for a grant jointly with another organisation. Now we have a team and a plan."*

CSO participant, Armenia Collaboration Lab

## APPROACH 2

### CROSS-BORDER NETWORKING: Building regional civil society connections

The Collaboration Labs strengthened cooperation within countries. The Regional Networking and Cooperation Event tested a complementary model: could structured exchange between CSOs across national borders produce the same kind of trust, solidarity and practical cooperation? This is an important question on all fronts. For many participants, this was their first structured cross-country exchange — a gap the event was specifically designed to address.

Held in Yerevan in November 2025, the event brought together 19 CSOs from Armenia and Moldova. Its design was informed by a pre-event needs assessment that surfaced participants' priorities: connecting with peers from other countries, exchanging methods and approaches, developing joint project ideas and exploring longer-term partnership opportunities.

#### Design and methodology

The event was intentionally designed around the understanding that meaningful collaboration does not emerge automatically but requires structured opportunities for relationship-building, mutual learning and joint exploration of partnership opportunities. A combination of Speed Networking, World Café, Open Space Technology and a collaborative clustering methodology enabled participants to progressively deepen their understanding of each other's work, identify complementary strengths and cluster around shared thematic interests.

The process concluded with discussions within each collaboration cluster to further operationalise their shared vision, identify potential areas for joint action and agree on next steps for future cooperation.

**19**  
CSO participating

**2**  
countries

**4**  
cross-border collaboration  
groups formed

#### Key findings from the event

A consistent finding across participant evaluations was the value of shared recognition: despite operating in different national contexts, CSOs from Armenia and Moldova identified significant common challenges. These included financial sustainability, staff retention, cooperation with public authorities, disinformation and increasing political polarisation.

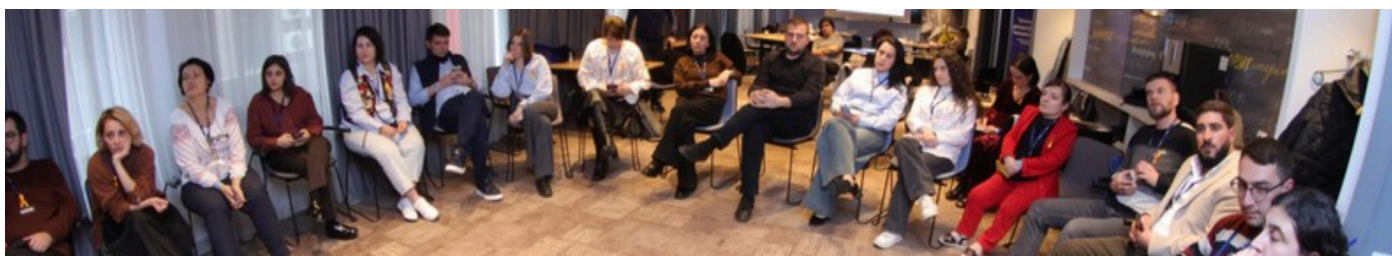
As previously highlighted, for many participants, this was their first structured cross-country exchange. The event reduced feelings of isolation, strengthened regional solidarity and demonstrated the potential for peer learning across borders.

#### Thematic collaboration groups

The event moved beyond networking to generate concrete pathways for future cooperation. Through facilitated sessions, participants formed four thematic cross-border collaboration groups:

Thematic Group	Focus
Youth	Joint development of youth civic participation programmes and coordinated pursuit of future funding.
Elections and Disinformation	Experience sharing and coordinated approaches to strengthening democratic participation and countering disinformation.
Inclusion	Joint work on employment, social services and inclusion of refugees and persons with disabilities.
Environment	Collaboration on environmental advocacy, public awareness and pollution-related challenges in both countries.

Following the event, participants have met in pursuit of joint projects, to maintain regular communication and continue sharing expertise across borders. Evaluation findings from both Armenian and Moldovan participants highlighted the value of participatory methodologies in enabling meaningful dialogue and fostering trust among organisations that had not previously worked together.



# What we learned across these two approaches

## Principles for civil society ecosystem strengthening

Taken together, the Collaboration Labs and Regional Networking Event point to a coherent model for strengthening civil society ecosystems that is worth documenting and replicating. Three principles underpin both approaches.

- 1. Structure creates the conditions for trust.** Neither collaboration nor solidarity emerges automatically from bringing organisations together. Facilitated design, participatory methods and a clear process arc are what enable organisations to move from meeting to working together. Across both Labs, a majority (close to 80%) of participants left feeling fully prepared to collaborate on a joint project — a result that reflects the quality of the process, not just the willingness of participants.
- 2. Linking dialogue to resources matters.** The connection between the Collaboration Labs and the sub-grants scheme was not incidental. It converted collaboration concepts into tested partnerships and gave organisations a concrete reason to invest in the relationship. Four teams in Armenia and four in Moldova moved directly from Lab participation into joint project development. In Armenia, that development resulted in outcomes reaching ministerial level, and in Moldova, formation of an interregional partnership and a signed memorandum of cooperation.
- 3. Shared challenges are a basis for solidarity.** The CSOs found common ground exploring the day-to-day realities/ challenges of civil society work, as relates to sustainability, public engagement, organisational resilience and influencing change. This common ground proved to be a powerful foundation for trust and future cooperation, both within countries and across borders.

## Implications for donors and implementing partners

Supporting civil society ecosystems requires investment in the connective tissue between organisations, not only in individual organisational development. PIN considers facilitated collaboration, peer learning structures, and flexible follow-on funding mechanisms as important elements of capacity strengthening. Across both Labs, a significant majority of participants left feeling fully prepared to collaborate, and teams in Armenia achieved concrete policy outcomes at national level within a single grant cycle. In Moldova, they formed an interregional partnership and signed a memorandum of cooperation. For PIN, replicating this model requires a combination of structured participatory methodology, skilled local facilitation, and linked follow-on funding.



## About People in Need

**People in Need (PIN) is a Czech international non-governmental organisation working in relief and development in more than 20 countries. PIN's Civil Society and Inclusive Governance (CSIG) pillar strengthens civil society actors, information integrity and inclusive governance systems to enable people and communities to meaningfully influence decisions that affect their lives.**

<sup>1</sup> CIVICUS Monitor, *People Power Under Attack 2025: Europe and Central Asia*. [monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings\\_2025/europeandcentralasia/](https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2025/europeandcentralasia/)

<sup>2</sup> CSO Meter / ECNL, *'Civil society in the Eastern Partnership is Europe's strategic partner: this is how funders can support it'*, February 2025. [csometer.info/updates/civil-society-eastern-partnership-europes-strategic-partner-how-funders-can-support-it](https://csometer.info/updates/civil-society-eastern-partnership-europes-strategic-partner-how-funders-can-support-it)