

POLICY BRIEF

EU Cooperation with Civil Society in the Global South

Stronger Climate Action and More Ambitious NDCs

Lalit Chennamaneni

Executive Summary

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a vital role in shaping and implementing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement by enhancing inclusivity, accountability, and local relevance. The European Union (EU), while a major actor in climate policy and finance, must significantly strengthen its engagement with CSOs in the Global South. Current EU frameworks often fall short in supporting subnational actors, integrating CSOs into foreign policy instruments, and ensuring accessible climate finance.

This paper identifies three priority areas for reform. First, the EU should promote ‘glocalisation’ by formally incorporating subnational actors into NDC governance and funding them directly. Second, internal reforms are needed to institutionalise civil society participation in EU instruments such as the Global Gateway and Just Energy Transition Partnerships, ensuring transparency and influence. Third, the EU must increase and reform climate finance mechanisms to prioritise grassroots, Indigenous, women- and youth-led CSOs, while addressing systemic barriers to access.

The upcoming third generation of NDCs and COP30 present a key opportunity. The EU must act decisively to integrate civil society into the core of its climate diplomacy. Without empowered CSOs, the EU’s climate ambitions risk lacking legitimacy, equity, and effectiveness, undermining global climate goals as well as the EU’s credibility.

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1 Introduction

Civil society plays a critical role in the development, implementation, and monitoring of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the Paris Agreement's key mechanism for increasing ambition through voluntary national targets.

By bringing grassroots perspectives, technical expertise, and accountability into climate policymaking, civil society helps ensure NDCs are socially responsive, scientifically robust, and locally grounded. The EU – an influential actor in international climate politics – has acknowledged this role. Through consultations, dialogues, and support mechanisms, it seeks to engage CSOs inside and outside Europe to enhance transparency, public participation, and local relevance. Without such engagement, NDCs risk lacking legitimacy, equity, and long-term effectiveness.

Yet current NDCs fall woefully short,¹ and the EU's engagement with CSOs in the Global South, in particular, needs strengthening. A more coordinated effort is essential to amplify global ambition, reflecting the Global Climate Action Agenda set by Brazil's COP30 Presidency.² This paper outlines recommendations in three key areas – sub-national action, internal reforms, and climate finance – to strengthen the role of CSOs in climate action and the NDCs.

2 EU engagement with civil society in the Global South

The EU plays a significant role in shaping international climate policy and supporting the development and implementation of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in the Global South. It bears a central historical responsibility for the climate crisis. At the same time, it positions itself as a global climate leader with the stated goal of becoming the 'first climate-neutral continent' by 2050. As the world's largest provider of climate finance, the EU and its Member States mobilised €28.9 billion in support of developing countries in 2022.³ The EU's NDCs are themselves political benchmarks globally, with discussions on the 2035 target underway.

Yet a global gap remains – both in ambition and implementation. According to the UNFCCC's Synthesis Report (2023)⁴, current NDCs put the world on track for 2.5–2.9°C of warming by 2100 – far above the 1.5°C limit. CSOs are essential to closing these gaps. For decades, they have pushed for higher ambition, monitored accountability, and contributed policy expertise. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (2023)⁵ affirms the role of civil society in inclusive governance and system-wide transformation.

¹ Chennamaneni, L., Lydén, P., 2024, [Life after the Global Stocktake: Six Steps from Diagnosis to Third Generation NDCs](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

² André Aranha Correa do Lago, COP30 President Designate, 2025, [Fourth Letter from the Presidency](#) (accessed 20 June 2025).

³ Climate Action Network Europe, 2024, [Assessing International Climate Finance by the EU and Member States: Key Insights for Shaping the New Climate Finance Goal](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

⁴ UNFCCC, 2024, [Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement: Synthesis Report by the Secretariat](#) (accessed: 01 June 2025).

⁵ IPCC, 2023, [AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023](#) (accessed: 01 June 2025).

The EU and its Member States have acknowledged the importance of non-EU CSOs in climate foreign policy, engaging with them through both formal and informal dialogues.⁶ Major EU foreign-policy instruments also reflect this. For instance, in Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JET-Ps), the EU has emphasised civil society consultation¹ and the Global Gateway initiative includes channels to seek CSO participation. At Member-State level, Germany has supported NDC development via the International Climate Initiative (IKI) and is a founding member and co-host of the NDC Partnership, aimed at aligning Paris Agreement implementation with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda.⁷

However, meaningful CSO engagement in climate and NDC processes remains inconsistent. Analyses show stakeholder consultation – especially with women, Indigenous groups, and local communities – has often been inadequate.⁸ CSOs face legal, resource-related, and political barriers. To foster inclusive and effective NDC processes, support that extends beyond state institutions has proven essential in enabling civil society actors to engage meaningfully across various dimensions of climate action – from policy input to communication and stakeholder coordination.⁹ Challenges persist with the EU’s climate foreign policy, particularly regarding quantity and quality of funding, coherence and diplomatic ambition¹⁰, and a pivot toward domestic economic interests. A stronger focus on competitiveness and transactionality runs the risk of sidelining CSOs in favour of businesses and governments.

Effective CSO support in climate diplomacy is linked to institutional frameworks that provide funding, early engagement, and transparent mechanisms for influence. Empowering civil society in the Global South is not only a matter of procedural justice but a practical requirement for achieving ambitious and legitimate climate outcomes.

3 Recommendations

The effectiveness and legitimacy of the EU’s international climate cooperation and its partnerships depend on the meaningful participation of CSOs. Three areas in particular need to be strengthened further – the involvement of sub-national actors, the integration of CSOs in the governance of foreign policy instruments, and financial support.

3.1 Glocalisation and sub-national action

Achieving the objectives of the Paris Agreement requires ambitious national commitments but they must be rooted in local realities. The translation of global climate action into the local level (and vice versa) – or ‘glocalisation’ – is a key leveller in closing the ambition and implementation gap of NDCs. Subnational actors, including regional governments, cities, and local communities, are pivotal in translating NDCs into concrete and context-specific mitigation and adaptation measures.¹¹

⁶ European Commission, 2025, [Cooperation on climate action with non-EU countries](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

⁷ German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), 2025, [NDC Partnership](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

⁸ Climate Action Network Europe, 2024, [Assessing International Climate Finance by the EU and Member States: Key Insights for Shaping the New Climate Finance Goal](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

⁹ CARE Danmark, SLYCAN Trust, 2020, [Civil Society Engagement in the NDC Process](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

¹⁰ Kahlen, L., et al. (New Climate Institute), 2023, [Climate Audit of the European Union’s Foreign Policy](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

¹¹ World Resources Institute, 2025, [Next Generation NDCs: Taking a Leap Forward in Climate Action](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

However, existing European climate cooperation frameworks have only partially recognised and supported this potential.

The EU should explicitly **incorporate globalisation principles into its climate finance and diplomatic frameworks**, including NDICI–Global Europe – the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, which is the EU’s main funding tool for external action – and the Global Gateway. This entails ensuring that regional and municipal authorities as well as civil society actors, Indigenous people and others in partner countries are recognised as formal stakeholders in climate (and NDC-related) planning and implementation, and have direct access to EU support.

The EU Commission has stressed its resolve to work closely with local authorities in implementing development projects, and the Commission’s Civil Society and Local Authorities Dialogue Platform provide such a space.¹² What is more, cooperation with initiatives such as the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy have demonstrated that supporting local governments leads to improved climate action and enhanced accountability. However, such initiatives largely focus on a relatively narrow set of civil society actors’ instrumentality in implementing European objectives; they often remain underfunded, inaccessible and fragmented. A scaled-up, integrated EU support mechanism focused on truly empowering subnational climate leadership – particularly in urbanising Global South contexts – would bridge international ambitions with national priorities and local realities.

The EU should **promote the development of multi-level governance structures** in partner countries that systematically engage subnational authorities in NDC design, monitoring, and implementation. This includes technical assistance for decentralised planning, institutional reforms to clarify competencies, and support for subnational climate data collection. Evidence from Chile, South Africa, and India indicates that vertical coordination between national and subnational governments enhances policy coherence and local ownership of climate targets. The EU can play a catalytic role by integrating multi-level governance frameworks as part of its bilateral climate cooperation and investment packages.

The EU should expand platforms that **enable peer-to-peer exchange, trilateral cooperation, and regional knowledge transfer** among subnational actors. This can be achieved through EU-funded regional hubs, city twinning initiatives, and partnerships that connect Global South municipalities with EU cities engaged in climate transformation. Such platforms are essential for building institutional capacity, replicating successful approaches (e.g. nature-based solutions, climate-smart infrastructure), and ensuring the adaptive governance needed for context-specific implementation of NDCs.

3.2 Internal reforms of EU instruments

A key element of the question of how the EU can improve its support for civil society in the Global South to strengthen climate action is the impact of civil society on the foreign policy tools the EU deploys to do so. The design, impact and implementation of its instruments does not happen in a vacuum. It must be informed and shaped by those most affected by it. Therefore, the EU should formally **strengthen the institutionalisation of civil society engagement** as an essential component of all (climate) diplomacy policymaking processes. Multi-stakeholder consultations, for instance, are a key component of inclusive and transparent climate policymaking, contributing to broader buy-in and more effective implementation. The EU has committed to involving diverse actors – civil society, industry, academia – in its foreign climate policy through mechanisms such as

¹² European Commission, Directorate-General for International Partnerships, 2023, [Global Gateway: Commission launches Civil Society and Local Authorities Dialogue Platform](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

public consultations, stakeholder dialogues, and advisory groups. Initiatives Euroclima exemplify this approach. However, the EU's multi-stakeholder engagement could be more systematically applied to its external climate diplomacy. To enhance its impact, the EU should institutionalise early and continuous stakeholder involvement, improve communication, allocate adequate time for consultations, and provide clear feedback on how stakeholder input shapes policy decisions. These steps would strengthen legitimacy and effectiveness in both domestic and international climate governance.¹³

The EU should establish participatory frameworks at the programme and policy level, enabling structured dialogue with CSOs from partner countries, including Indigenous, women-led, and youth organisations. This includes a **structural review and reform of its flagship foreign investment and transition instruments**, particularly the Global Gateway and JET-Ps. Both have been criticised for lacking transparency, prioritising EU strategic interests over partner-country and local needs, and bypassing civil society and subnational actors in decision-making processes. In JET-P formation processes with African countries for instance, the International Partners Group, of which the EU is a member, has shown insufficient interest in engaging civil society. Instead, all phases, from planning, design to implementation, should ensure the procedural dimension of the 'just'-part of JET-Ps for all civil society stakeholders. This includes leveraging their rich expertise and promoting open dialogues and debate to expand – not shrink – civil spaces. This includes, in particular, the voices of those most affected by development interventions, such as frontline communities and Indigenous people. They are essential to adequately assess local needs and to design solutions appropriately.¹⁴ Likewise, the Global Gateway initiative by the EU was unilaterally introduced in 2021, with civil society in recipient countries excluded from decision-making and accountability. The initiative aims to mobilise up to 300€ billion between 2021 and 2027, primarily focusing on infrastructure development with the stated goal of tackling 'the most pressing global challenges, from fighting climate change, to improving health systems, and boosting competitiveness and security of global supply chains.'¹⁵ Although the EU Commission created the Global Gateway Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform, it lacks any meaningful power over the selection and design of projects. The EU should democratise the advisory platform and ensure that civil society organisations as well as the European Parliament have access to relevant and disaggregated project data, meeting minutes, and selection criteria. They should be empowered to play an active role in all parts of the initiative's operations and be embedded in a coherent cooperation strategy with the Global South to ensure equitable partnerships.¹⁶

Without such reforms, these instruments risk undermining the climate justice principles at the heart of the Paris Agreement and the EU's own credibility as a climate leader. Currently, there is limited opportunity for CSOs – particularly from the Global South – to inform EU foreign policy decisions that affect their regions. Enhancing transparency and enabling civil society participation would significantly strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU action.

3.3 Increased and better financing

The EU can play a pivotal role in **reforming international climate finance governance to improve access for CSOs from the Global South**. As a major contributor to multilateral climate funds – such

¹³ Kahlen, L., et al. (New Climate Institute), 2023, [Climate Audit of the European Union's Foreign Policy](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

¹⁴ Wemanya, A. (Power Shift Africa), Opfer, K. (Germanwatch), 2022, [Principles for Just Energy Transition Partnerships in the African Energy Context](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

¹⁵ European Commission, 2025, [Global Gateway](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

¹⁶ Eurodad, Counter Balance, Oxfam, 2024, [Who profits from the Global Gateway?](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

as the Green Climate Fund (GCF), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the Adaptation Fund – the EU holds significant influence over the design of funding modalities and governance rules. Current international climate finance mechanisms remain overly complex, favour intermediary actors, and exclude many grassroots organisations from meaningful participation. The EU should use its voting power to advocate for simplified direct access modalities, such as those piloted under the GCF’s Enhanced Direct Access approach, and push for transparent eligibility criteria, lower co-financing requirements, and multi-year flexible funding windows. Additionally, the EU and its Member States should use their position at the OECD Development Assistance Committee to influence standards and modalities under which development assistance and climate finance is distributed. This includes, inter alia, a push for reduced bureaucracy in accessing funding, more frequent multi-year support for climate funding, as well as a larger share of funding to be distributed without intermediaries directly to CSOs and small-scale actors.¹⁷ The EU should develop and operationalise climate finance mechanisms specifically targeted at CSOs in low- and middle-income countries. This could include earmarked grants under NDICI–Global Europe or a standalone facility within the EU’s international climate finance architecture. Funding should prioritise grassroots, Indigenous, women- and youth-led organisations that are typically underrepresented in current mechanisms.

The EU should **increase its overall climate finance commitments** with a balance between mitigation and adaptation. The provision of adequate financial resources is in line with the EU’s historical responsibility, and it is necessary for countries to implement their current NDCs and to raise ambition in the next generation of NDCs. The deeply disappointing new climate finance goal (NCQG) saw bitter agreement on \$300 billion annually for developing countries’ climate action by 2035 with developed countries in the lead as part of a larger drive to mobilise 1.3 trillion in international climate finance over the same period. This is far below what is required for global climate action and has further eroded trust in the EU and the multilateral system.

Instead, there is a worrying trend in Member States and on the EU level to decrease funding for climate finance and development assistance more broadly or to redirect funding away from climate issues. This is a fatal signal for global climate action, undermines the ability of especially smaller CSOs to operate and must be reversed. At a minimum, the EU and its Member States must rapidly increase the provision of public climate finance and do so as an addition to the commitment of 0.7 percentage of gross national income as development assistance. The European Investment Bank, in particular, should increase the share of concessional finance beyond the current 2 percent. The EU and its Member States must also set out a clear pathway on how to achieve the NCQG at the earliest.¹⁸

The EU should call for increased adaptation finance – currently only 34% of total EU climate finance – with a focus on community-based resilience projects. Strengthening readiness and capacity-building programmes for CSOs should be a core pillar of this reform. These measures would align EU external action with climate justice principles, enhance the legitimacy of climate finance institutions, and empower local actors in shaping effective NDC implementation and their linkage with respective National Adaptation Plans. Greater adaptation funding, channelled through inclusive, community-based approaches, would directly support the Paris Agreement’s equity principles and strengthen local implementation capacity. Aligning financial commitments with evolving needs – particularly for loss and damage, locally led adaptation, and just transitions – will require transparent reporting, needs-based allocation, and the use of new fiscal instruments, including grants rather than loans.

¹⁷ CONCORD, 2024, [Whose Interests Does Official Development Assistance Truly Serve?](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

¹⁸ Climate Action Network Europe, 2024, [Assessing International Climate Finance by the EU and Member States: Key Insights for Shaping the New Climate Finance Goal](#) (accessed 01 June 2025).

4 Conclusion

If the European Union is serious about its role as a global climate leader, it must ensure that civil society – particularly from the Global South – is not sidelined but empowered as a central partner in the climate transition. As outlined in this paper, civil society actors are indispensable to achieving the Paris Agreement's goals: they provide legitimacy, hold governments accountable, represent the most affected communities, and bring grounded knowledge to climate solutions. Yet, EU support for CSOs in international climate cooperation remains fragmented, overly technocratic, and insufficiently inclusive. To close the global ambition and implementation gaps, the EU must mainstream globalisation in its diplomacy and development programming, reform its foreign policy instruments to ensure that its climate finance is accessible, predictable, and responsive to the needs of frontline actors. The third generation of NDCs and COP30 offer a critical moment to recalibrate and institutionalise these reforms. The EU must act decisively to create enabling environments where civil society thrives – not only in principle, but in practice. Doing so is not only a matter of justice, but of necessity: without an empowered, well-resourced civil society, there can be no credible path to a just, ambitious, and inclusive global climate transition.

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