



By organising regionally, an innovative network of Latin American civil society organisations is successfully expanding the right to freedom of expression and access to information in the region.

CIVIL SOCIETY'S REGIONAL NETWORK FOR ADVANCING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION



SUMMARY

The Regional Alliance for the Freedom of Expression and Information (the Alliance), an innovative civil society network, has had a major role in promoting freedom of expression and the right to information regionally. The Alliance coordinates the efforts of 23 civil society organisations (CSOs) from 19 American countries and carries out extensive advocacy work at the regional level.¹ This network's experience, achievements and lessons learned could be useful to CSOs in Sub-Saharan and South Asian countries aiming to advance freedom of expression and access to information in their own regions.

CIVIL SOCIETY'S CHALLENGE IN PUSHING FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

The right to freedom of expression and access to information are fundamental elements of countries' democratic development. In spite of their importance, developing regions still face challenges in fulfilling these rights. In 2010, only 17% of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, 57% in South Asia, and 65% in Latin America had a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). In the same year, none of the South Asian, only 10% of the Sub-Saharan African countries, and 49% of the Latin American countries were rated by Freedom House as enjoying freedom of expression.²

Civil society plays a fundamental role in pushing for the acknowledgement and advancement of these rights in developing countries. However, lack of coordinated advocacy work and cooperation undermines civil society's capacity to push for greater transparency and freedom of expression, particularly at the regional level. The Alliance was created as a regional mechanism to promote such coordination and cooperation.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Forming a regional network can be a useful mechanism for coordinating the efforts of individual civil society organisations of various countries.

Advocacy actions at the regional and country level can be more effective if they are undertaken by a regional network representing a large number of individual organisations, one that is seen as a credible and trustworthy actor.

¹ Twenty one organizations are from Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean, while two are from North America.

² K. Deutsch Karlekar. 2011. [Press Freedom in 2010: Signs of Change Amid Repression](#) and R. Vleugels. 2001. [Fringe Special: Overview of all FOI laws](#), The Netherlands.



FROM SMALL-SCALE NETWORK TO REGIONAL PRESENCE

Origins

The Alliance was created in October 2005 at the initiative of the [Trust for the Americas](#), affiliated with the [Organization of American States](#) (OAS). Initially formed by six Central American CSOs, the Alliance grew considerably over the years; today it is a network of 23 CSOs from 19 American countries whose mission is to defend and promote the advancement of freedom of expression and information in the region.³

As a regional network, the Alliance enhances the impact of individual CSOs because of its ability to articulate the various members' expertise to create a regional agenda; to integrate the efforts undertaken by each member nationally with advocacy work at the regional and international level; and to share lessons learned about successes and challenges.

Expansion and Management

From 2005 to 2009, the founding organisation, Trust for the Americas, promoted the Alliance's work regionally and recruited new members. Thanks to the network's growth, in 2009 an Executive Secretariat was created to manage and coordinate the Alliance's work. The Secretariat has no physical location and its representative may reside in any country in the region, though there is a permanent office in Uruguay that deals with administrative issues. Currently, the Secretariat is composed of an Executive Secretary and a Project Coordinator. External consultants are hired to assist with different projects and there are also currently seven volunteers. To further institutionalize its work, the Alliance created four Committees formed by member organisations: Executive; Admission and Membership; Ethics; and a thematic committee to discuss issues related to freedom of expression and access to information.

Given contextual differences in member countries as well as organizational differences, the Secretariat plays an important role in building bridges across the diversity of its membership. In particular, it is seen as an effective mechanism for achieving equal participation and leadership of all members, articulating members' efforts and contributions, planning and coordinating activities, acting as the Alliance's representative

before international and other partner organisations, and ensuring the smooth functioning of the Alliance.

Since its creation, funding has come from different donors such, as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Open Society Institute, World Bank, National Endowment for Democracy and the U.S. Department of State.

ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Alliance intervenes in a variety of ways to make freedom of expression and information a reality in the region, and has achieved clear successes.

Technical Support and Training

The Alliance arranges for member organisations with strong expertise to provide technical support and training to both other members and to non-member stakeholders, such as policymakers, journalists and lawyers.

Achievements: In support of individual countries' efforts to pass Freedom of Information Acts (FOIAs), the Alliance helped create advocacy groups in Colombia, Guatemala and Nicaragua; developed regional advocacy strategies in Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Paraguay; and provided technical support for the drafting of FOIAs in Colombia (2010), El Salvador (2008-2010), Honduras (2006), Nicaragua (2007) and Paraguay (2009).

Advocacy Work

At the country level, the Alliance supports its members' advocacy strategies to advance freedom of expression and information within their own borders. At the international level, it advances these issues before international agencies, such as the OAS and its bodies.

Achievements: The Alliance has carried out successful advocacy activities involving more than 600 people in at least 11 Latin American countries.⁴ In 2010, for example, the Alliance sent a [letter](#) to the Ecuadorian President and a Minister to prevent the enactment of a regulation undermining freedom of expression and association. The Alliance's local member, [Fundamedios](#), used the letter to open dialogue with the President and stop the regulation from being enacted.

³ A full list of members can be found [here](#).

⁴ Find out more about the Alliance's advocacy on their [website](#).



Drafting the Regional Standard for Access to Information

In 2010, the Alliance took part in the drafting and promotion of the OAS's [Inter-American Model Law on Access to Information](#) and its [Implementation Guide](#). These documents set the minimum standards that States in the region should meet in terms of acknowledging and fulfilling the right to information, and provide insights on how countries can best implement them. The Executive Secretary participated in the group of experts that drafted the Model Law, representing the Alliance's members. During the discussion process, the Alliance highlighted, among other issues, the crucial role that civil society plays in implementing FOIAs and the need to provide capacity building to citizens and public officials to eradicate the 'culture of secrecy' that prevails in the region.

Source: [Regional Alliance. 2011. Regional Alliance's Activities 2010-2011](#). Argentina.

Strategic Litigation

The Alliance presents and adheres to Amicus Brief on emblematic national and regional cases related to freedom of expression and information. In those cases, the Alliance is not a party to a lawsuit, but files briefs in support of advancing these rights. An Amicus Brief aims to create precedents and judicial rulings that favour freedom of expression and information.



Figure 1: VI Meeting of the Alliance. In San Salvador, June 2011
Source: The Alliance

Achievements: In 2010-2011, the Alliance presented Amicus Briefs before the Supreme Courts of [Argentina](#) and [Paraguay](#), and the [Inter-American Court of Human Rights](#) (IACHR). The

Alliance also adhered to an Amicus Curiae on Official Advertising presented to the Mexican Supreme Court (see text box). The Amicus helped introduce these issues in the agenda of national governments and international organisations, capitalising on the support of their members to receive a lot of media attention.

Applied Research

Periodically, the Alliance conducts applied research to feed its advocacy work. Member organisations participate in these publications by offering their analysis and assessment of freedom of expression and information in their countries. The collective effort put into these publications have made them a reference in the region.

Achievements: Some of these publications – including [Best Practices Report with Regards to Access to Public Information](#) and the [Regional Report of the State of Access to Information](#) – have been presented before the OAS as part of the Alliance's advocacy work. As a result, the OAS's Secretary General committed to create a performance system to support Latin American countries in implementing freedom of expression and access to information laws.⁵

Indigenous Communities' Right to Information in Mexico: Radio La Voladora's

In July 2011, the Alliance adhered to an [Amicus Curiae](#) presented by Fundar, one of its members, and Article XIX to the Mexican Supreme Court of Justice on a case in which the Ministry of Health denied awarding official advertising contracts to La Voladora, a radio that broadcasts to an indigenous community, arguing that it did not have a large enough outreach. The Amicus pointed out that denying official advertising to the radio station undermined indigenous communities' right to information and expression. Ultimately the Mexican Supreme Court of Justice ruled in favour of La Voladora. It is worth noting the fundamental role the Alliance's Secretariat played in circulating the Amicus among all members and in obtaining their support. The Secretariat also publicised the case extensively on its website and in international networks such as the [Freedom of Information Advocates Network](#) (FOIANet)

Source: Regional Alliance. "[The Regional Alliance adheres to an Amicus Curiae in a Case of Official Advertising in Mexico](#)", Press Release, 2011.

⁵"[OAS Secretary General Meets with Members of the Regional Alliance for Freedom of Expression and Information](#)", OAS, Press Release, October 24th, 2011

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

ENABLING THE ALLIANCE'S SUCCESS



What were some of the underlying enabling and contextual factors that underpinned the Alliance's success?

The Alliance developed a strong working relationship with the OAS and its bodies ([General Secretariat](#), Inter-American [Court](#) and [Commission](#) of Human Rights, the [Rapporteur for the Freedom of Expression](#), among others), and is seen as a trustworthy, legitimate and knowledgeable actor articulating civil society's efforts in the region.

The Alliance built linkages with other international and regional networks such as [Human Rights Watch](#), [Freedom House](#), [World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters](#) (AMARC), [Article 19](#), [FOIANET](#), and [Transparency International \(TI\)](#), among others. These linkages and collaborative work give the Alliance a regional and international presence, thus, making it a key credible, regional-level representative.

The Alliance has been capable of articulating and coordinating the work of many American organisations, creating a regional agenda based on issues that members are experiencing at the local level, and acting as their representative before national governments and international organisations.

The institutionalisation process that the Alliance underwent, creating a Secretariat and four working Committees, helped consolidate its work, scope and activities. In particular, the Secretariat has had a fundamental role in creating a regional agenda based on members' local realities, coordinating the Alliance's activities and work, and maintaining a balance among all members, mediating their diversity to ensure all have equal participation and leadership opportunities.



Figure 2: Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), José Miguel Insulza, meeting members of the Alliance in October 2011
Source: Organisation of American States

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Forming a regional network can be a useful mechanism for coordinating and scaling-up the efforts of individual civil society organisations of various countries. The experience of the Alliance shows that working in a network adds weight, strength, visibility and legitimacy to efforts and activities that otherwise would be undertaken by individual - and probably uncoordinated - organisations.
- 2 Advocacy at both the regional and country level can be more successful if it is undertaken or supported by a regional network representing a large number of individual organisations, one that is seen as a credible actor by regional partners and agencies.
- 3 For a regional network to work well, it is important that there is a leadership mechanism in place that deals with the differences among members and coordinates their activities. The Secretariat has played that role, articulating members' contributions and making sure that all have equal leadership, participation, and voice. Member organisations should also cooperate actively and devote time and effort to support the network's activities.

CONTACT THE AUTHORS

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