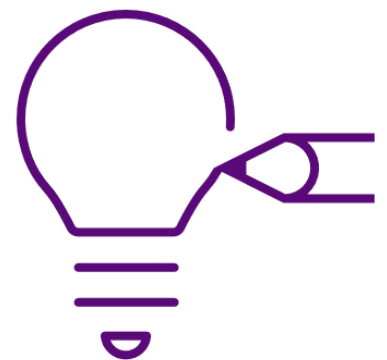


Writing about the Enabling Environment for Civil Society in the EU SEE

Welcome to the “**Writing about Enabling Environment for Civil Society in EU SEE Platforms: A Practical Guide**”.

This handbook is designed to assist EU SEE Network Facilitators and Network Members in compiling country focus reports, snapshots, early warning mechanism events with consistency, accuracy, and professionalism.

Its purpose is to help writers communicate a clear, jargon-free message on the **enabling environment for civil society**, ensuring that content is accurate, reflects the true events taking place, and accurately represents the views of the activists and organisations involved.



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Identifying Power Dynamics

Power dynamics play a crucial role in shaping the enabling environment for civil society. Our reporting should always describe events accurately, objectively, and uncover and explain the power dynamics at play in each incident. To help us do this, consider the following questions where applicable:

1) Who is responsible for this action?

- Identify the actors or entities responsible for any restrictions, abuses, violations or improvements.
- **Example:** “The local government imposed new regulations limiting the sources of financial support for NGOs” or “In an annual national chiefs’ council held on 10 January 2025, the President of the council of chiefs referred to civil society as “evil society” and stated that civil society organisations should not be given clearance to enter rural areas as they promote foreign culture and political fragmentation.”

2) Who are the affected parties?

- Determine as precisely as possible who is impacted by these actions and how they are affected.
- **Example:** “Human rights activists have been targeted by these new regulations, facing increased scrutiny and restrictions.”

3) What were the affected parties doing?

- Understand the activities, campaigns, or criticisms that led to the actions against them or improvements in the enabling environment.
- **Example:** “The activists were campaigning against illegal logging practices in the region.”

1) Reactions and Recommendations

- Analyse how local civil society groups, the public, and international organizations have responded to the situation. What forms of support, condemnation, or advocacy have emerged?
- Based on these reactions, what recommendations can be made to governments, CSOs, media, and international bodies to address the situation and prevent further harm?
- **Example:** “Several local CSOs and international NGOs have condemned the Chief’s statement, requesting a public retraction and apology from the chief and government.”

2) How is the broader context relevant?

- Consider the economic, political, and social context in which these actions are taking place.
- **Example:** “The new regulations come amid a broader crackdown on dissent following recent political unrest.”

General Principles

- **Clarity:** Use clear and concise language to convey information effectively.
- **Accuracy:** Provide and verify all data and sources to maintain credibility.
- **Objectivity:** Present information impartially, avoiding bias.

Language, Tone, and Narrative standpoint

1. Neutral and professional language: Avoid emotive language and individual opinions. Instead, use a neutral and professional tone.

2. Third-person narrative: Avoid subjective language and personal opinions but use third-person pronouns (e.g., “they,” “them”, “it is observed”) instead of first-person pronouns (e.g., “I,” “me”, “we”).

3. Active voice: Prefer active voice over passive voice for clearer and more concise writing.

- **Example 1: Passive:** “The new law was implemented by the Government.” **Active:** “The Government implemented the new restrictive law.”
- **Example 2: Passive:** “A group of protesters was beaten by police during the demonstration.” **Active:** “Police beat a group of protesters during the demonstration.” This approach ensures that the perpetrator of the abuse or violation is noted.

4. Inclusive Language: Use inclusive, respectful, and gender-neutral language wherever possible. This is especially important in languages where gendered terms are common and may unintentionally exclude or misrepresent certain groups. For example:

- **Use gender-neutral titles and roles:** *Chairperson* instead of *Chairman*, *Spokesperson* instead of *Spokesman*)
- **Use standardised and inclusive identity terms:** *LGBTQIA+* (not just *LGBT*), *persons with disabilities* (not “the disabled”), etc.
- **Use “conflict-sensitive” language** e.g. avoid replicating exclusionary or violent narratives such as using “terrorists” for rebels or those accused of committing terrorist acts, avoid stereotypes and harmful language.

Accuracy and Verification

1. Substantiate claims: Do not make bold statements without substantiation. Support statements with credible sources and specific examples providing dates, names, locations, and specific details.

- **Example:** “Police have cracked down on protests.” **Corrected:** “On January 22, police cracked down on protests in Harare, arresting 15 demonstrators.”

2. Use Primary Sources Whenever Possible: Prefer primary sources—such as original documents, official statements, or firsthand accounts—over secondary sources to ensure accuracy and credibility. However, where citing primary sources may pose security risks or

involve confidential internal information, it is acceptable to use reliable secondary sources or anonymised data, provided the information is clearly contextualised.

- **Example:** Cite the original research study or government report when safe and appropriate, rather than a news article summarising it.

3. Check the most recent outcomes: When reporting on incidents, investigate the most recent outcomes and any potential changes.

- **Example:** If you are writing about an activist arrested a week earlier, check if the person is still detained or if there is any development in the case.

Citation and Referencing

1. Hyperlinks: Use in-text hyperlinks embedded in key words or phrases rather than full citation styles (e.g., author-date formats).

- Link directly to specific documents or pages, not general homepages.
- Highlight only a few relevant words, not entire sentences.

Example: “According to the Amnesty International [report](#), the number of human rights violations has increased significantly.”

2. Avoid self-citation: Limit self-citation and prioritize referencing external sources. However, in cases where there are no available secondary sources, you may cite your own organization or information that was reported to you directly.

Terminology and Definitions

1. Official terms: Use official terms and titles for laws and regulations.

- **Example:** Use “Freedom of Information Act” instead of “Information law.”

2. Use conceptualisations adopted by EU SEE: Consistently use EU SEE terminology such as civil society, enabling environment, civil society organisations.

- **Example:** Use “civil society” instead of “associations” or “non-governmental organizations,” unless citing these terms from an official document.
- **Example:** Use “deterioration of the enabling environment” instead of “shrinking space” as the term “shrinking space” is overly reductive.
- **Example:** Trade unions are (normally) part of civil society, so avoid formulations such as ‘CSOs and trade unions’ in favour of “CSOs, including trade unions.”

3. Abbreviations and Acronyms: Provide the full name first and place the acronym in parentheses immediately after it on the first use in the passage. Use the acronym thereafter.

- **Example:** “The Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)...,” thereafter just use CSOs.

AI Usage

1. Editing over Research: Use AI tools primarily for editing tasks such as grammar, formatting, and structure. Avoid using AI for research on sensitive topics—always rely on credible, verifiable sources for factual content.

2. Privacy and Security: Exercise caution when using AI for sensitive reports. Do not input confidential or identifying information into AI platforms. Be aware of potential data sharing risks.

3. Verify information: Always fact-check and verify information, especially when using secondary sources or AI-generated content. Check the accuracy of AI-generated information.

- **Example:** Instead of relying solely on news outlets, verify information through primary sources, such as official government reports, court rulings, official press statements or academic studies.

Plagiarism

1. Original work: Ensure that all work is original and properly attributed. Paraphrase or quote original sources instead of copying and pasting text without attribution. Use hyperlinks to credit original authors and sources.

Visual Elements

1. **Charts and Graphs:** Ensure all your visuals are clearly labelled and include legends where necessary. Use colours and styles that are easy to distinguish.
2. **Tables:** When using tables, include headings for all columns and rows.
3. **Infographics:** When using infographics to simplify complex information, ensure they are visually appealing and informative.

Odds and Ends

Finally, here are a few small points to remember when writing content on the Enabling Environment for Civil society for the EU SEE platform:

- **British English:** Use British rather than US English for all English publications (e.g., organisation instead of organization; labour instead of labor).
- **Date format:** Always use day-month-year to indicate the date of an event (e.g., 20 June 2017). Avoid expressions like “last Friday” which will not make sense for readers in the future.
- **Quotation marks:** Use double quotation marks “like this” in all cases, except for “a ‘quotation’ within a quotation.”
- **Short words:** If you can use a short word instead of a long word, always use the short word. Some examples are: use “about” rather than “approximately,” “after” rather than “following,” “let” rather than “permit,” “but” rather than “however,” “use” rather than “utilise,” “make” rather than “manufacture,” “set up” rather than

"establish," "enough" rather than "sufficient," "show" rather than "demonstrate," and so on.

Ethical Considerations

Conflict of Interest: Identify and manage potential conflicts of interest to maintain the integrity of your reporting.

Respect for Privacy: Protect the identities and personal information of individuals involved in your reports, especially in sensitive contexts.

Avoiding Harm: Ensure that your reporting does not cause harm to individuals or groups and be mindful of the potential consequences of your work.

Informed Consent: Obtain informed consent from participants before collecting data or conducting interviews, ensuring they understand the purpose and use of the information.