

Key Takeaways from *Reclaiming Civic Space: Resistance, Resilience and Resources*

Recommendations for donors

- In addition to supporting coalition building within the human rights ecosystem, it is key to collaborate with new allies in development, public health, the private sector, etc. to support efforts to address closing space.
- Funding the frontline is important. Many manifestations of the crackdown are very localized, and support needs to penetrate to the subnational local level. In addition, the local level may present unique opportunities for CSOs to reclaim civic space. For example, the disorganized political context in the Philippines means the rule of law is easily undermined but it also means that there are spaces for engagement with local government. Amid the national support for extrajudicial killings, some CSOs are working with local leaders to create alternative responses that draw from a public health/human rights framework.
- Providing sustained general support over time is key to promote resilience and adaptability.
 - In response to multifaceted and evolving threats, there is a need for creative experimentation. Donors can support flexibility on the ground by providing flexible funding and allowing activists room to fail. This includes providing core funding but also means looking beyond the staffed NGO model. In contexts where this model is no longer viable, there may still be effective ways to get money to the ground. *Note that when funding informal actors and movements, it is important to consider that these don't provide the same working protections and benefits as professional NGOs which may have implications for resilience.*
 - General support is needed to address psychosocial, security and other needs.
 - Funding short term projects to respond to specific threats mean that expertise and momentum can be lost if funding has moved on when similar threats return later. One alternative is to promote support that encourages capacity building and allows organizations to reserve a certain amount of their funding for unanticipated threats and future crisis.
 - The work in response to the Nigerian NGO bill is a clear example of why short-term funding alone is not adequate. The repressive bill seeking to limit freedom of expression was first introduced in 2014 and failed, thanks mainly to civil society pushback, in part funded through 6-10 month grants. This victory was short lived as two years later the bill was reintroduced. To maximize effectiveness of the response from civil society against such sustained and repeated attacks, it was key to build on the expertise, background, and relationships formed during opposition to the 2014 bill.
 - Strengthening second line leadership is crucial to promote a CSO's adaptability, particularly in contexts when leadership face increased threats.
- The context of closing space provides an opportunity for donors to rethink the indicators they use to determine funding priorities.
 - In Southeast Asia, for example, rising income levels have triggered donor withdrawal which results in less funding for CSOs. Additionally, donor withdrawal undermines some of the prescriptive norms around international participation as governments lose financial incentives to engage with criminalized or marginalized populations. Rising income levels also mean governments have greater fiscal space to finance attacks against civil society and consolidate power.

The Question of Legitimacy

Building the legitimacy of CSOs is important to promote resilience. At the same time, amid a rise in attacks on the legitimacy of CSOs, donors and activists themselves need to avoid adopting criteria from toxic narratives and falling into the trap of only legitimizing certain sectors of civil society.

- Many CSOs have cultivated broad based grassroots constituencies and it is important to identify and support them.
- Accountability is key to building legitimacy. Donors should look beyond big actors in capitals to support nimble local groups who are accountable to the populations they speak on behalf of. Donors can also encourage greater accountability as opposed to “accounts-ability” in groups they support.
- At the same time, funders should avoid driving a very simplistic idea of what legitimacy looks like. The nature of the focused technical work of some CSOs or the sensitive issue areas they address mean they will never have grassroots support. This does not mean these organizations do not play a valuable role. In such cases, funders can seek to support collaboration and permeability among organizations while trying to avoid making funding decisions that create hierarchies.
- Successful pushback to challenges to civic space in Nigeria, particularly around the social media bill, provides an example of taking a division of labor approach. A mix of NGO and other actors, including individual bloggers, have been able to identify where their strengths lie and retain their own institutional identities and copyright on work while collaborating closely in a way that strengthens civil society. More technical organizations supply data and analysis to independent bloggers who are able to frame information in an accessible way and mobilize their many followers. When these bloggers face repression from the government as a result, other civil society organizations step in to provide free legal aid and other services.
- One key narrative used to attack the legitimacy of CSOs is to highlight their foreign funding, even while the same actors who promote this message are themselves frequently chasing foreign capital. While it is always advisable to diversify funding sources, it is important to be realistic about the limitations of local funding. An important question is how/if big brand names in the human rights world can share expertise and social trust to assist smaller organizations seeking to diversify funding.
- Activists are experimenting with new platforms and messaging to counter toxic narratives and promote legitimacy. This includes experimenting with humor, alternative language, and collaboration with new actors from private sector, social media, art world etc. Codeswitching can be helpful, particularly in the short term, but investment in a strategic long-term approach to change norms and encourage people to embrace the essence of human rights concepts is needed.

Final thought: Donors are increasingly focusing on what NGOs are doing to combat closing space. While repressive regimes are not going to clean themselves up and NGOs are indeed key actors in pushing back, solely burdening NGOs with this task may not always be helpful. It is worth remembering that NGOs are not the culprit. Donors should actively consider how they can be part of reclaiming civic space and be wary of buying into toxic narratives that require NGOs to continuously be on the defensive around questions of legitimacy etc.