SUPPORT IN AN AGE OF RELAPSE: ASSISTING SECURITY, JUSTICE AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IN RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

JAÏR VAN DER LIJN

SUMMARY

● Civil society organizations (CSOs), human rights defenders, media outlets and minority groups are increasingly facing government restrictions, as their civic and political space and funding are squeezed. This paper looks at restrictive environments and the roles that CSOs and the international and funding partners that support them can continue to play in the field of security, justice and inclusive governance, despite the challenges they face. It describes the challenges such externally funded, often smaller CSOs face in conducting lobbying, advocacy, dialogue and other activities, and the coping mechanisms they have used. It makes recommendations for international and funding partners on how to proceed in such restrictive environments, based mainly on the experiences of CSO representatives themselves.

For a long time, the end of the cold war seemed to have turned the table in favour of improved security, justice and more inclusive governance for more people. Some even hailed the end of history. However, cracks started to appear at the start of the millennium.[1] Indicators on security, justice and inclusive governance initially improved and 2010 saw the lowest number of armed conflicts since 1976. The number of armed conflicts subsequently rose, however, and is currently roughly plateauing at levels higher than in any year since 1945.[2] In 2024, global freedom indicators deteriorated for the 19th consecutive year, and an increasing number of countries are moving away from 'free' to become 'partly free' or 'unfree'.[3]

The Covid-19 pandemic constituted a marked moment in the reversal of political and civic space. Subsequently, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, there were new military coups and representative government was undermined, while the security situation is deteriorating further in Mali and Niger. Whereas political and civic space was already limited in Burundi, the situation has also deteriorated in places such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. The 2025 CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report notes that we are living in a world: 'plagued by crises, including of human rights and democratic values, and one where an embattled civil society faces a growing crisis of resourcing'. Nonetheless, it also notes that: 'despite increasing restrictions on civic space, civil society continues to work hard to hold the line. In volatile times, civil society still manages to achieve important victories through strategic advocacy, mobilisation, litigation and international solidarity'.[4]

After the end of the cold war, development cooperation moved beyond the merely technical—poverty reduction and strengthening basic services such as healthcare and education, and infrastructure—and took a more political

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[1] Fukuyama, F., *The End of History and The Last Man* (The Free Press: New York, NY, 1992).

[2] Davies, S., Engström, G., Pettersson, T. and Öberg, M., 'Organized violence 1989–2023, and the prevalence of organized crime groups', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 61, no. 4 (July 2024), pp. 673–93.

[3] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights* (Freedom House: Washington, DC, 2025).

[4] Firmin, A., Pousadela, I. M. and Tiwana, M., *2025 State of Civil Society Report* (CIVICUS: Johannesburg, 2025).

approach, involving support for state building, democratization, the rule of law, good governance and civil society. In recent years, however, in various instances, it has proved increasingly difficult to continue this more political role.

For the purpose of this paper, 'restrictive environments' are characterized by shrinking political and civic space for local civil society organizations (CSOs), human rights defenders, media outlets and minority groups,[5] as well as a rejection by the government of more political forms of bilateral or multi-lateral security, justice and inclusive governance assistance that is based on principles such as good governance, accountability, human rights, inclusivity, democracy and the rule of law.[6]

Research on restrictive environments has focused mainly on three areas: (*a*) the post-11 September 2001 'war on terror' and the counterterrorism measures that followed globally; (*b*) the securitization of development cooperation and the increased linkage of aid to the geopolitical and security interests of international and funding partners; and (*c*) the more general backlash directed at civil society, which began in the 2000s.[7]

This paper looks at restrictive environments and the roles that CSOs and the international and funding partners that support them can continue to play in the field of security, justice and inclusive governance, despite the challenges they face in three different typical contexts. It describes the challenges such externally funded, often smaller CSOs face in conducting lobbying, advocacy, dialogue and other activities, and the coping mechanisms they have used. It makes recommendations for international and funding partners on how to proceed in such restrictive environments, based mainly on the experiences of CSO representatives themselves.

Given the sensitivity of the subject and particularly the associated safety and security risks, CSO representatives active in restrictive environments tend to be reluctant to share their experiences. They fear their modus operandi or their names and backgrounds might be disclosed, which could have serious repercussions for the safety and security of their staff and families, as well as for their projects and organizations. For this paper, it was therefore important to build trust over time before CSO representatives were comfort-

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[5] Political space is defined by Lev Luis Grinberg as 'a social construct, a field of symbolic representation of social forces, that shrinks or expands in the political arena. Politics is a specific sphere of power relations that is distinct from civil society and the state, a dynamic arena of contestation and containment of social conflicts within constantly changing opportunities. Political space is differentiated from social forces and state institutions, but is nevertheless framed and determined by them, and the capacity of actors to open it up depends on a certain balance of power between state institutions and civil society, and between dominant and dominated social groups'. See Grinberg, L. L., 'Resistance, politics and violence: The catch of the Palestinian struggle', *Current Sociology*, vol. 61, no. 2 (Mar. 2013), pp. 206–225. Civic space is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as 'the set of legal, policy, institutional and practical conditions necessary for non-governmental actors to access information, express themselves, associate, organise and participate in public life'. See OECD, *The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space: Strengthening Alignment with International Standards and Guidance* (OECD: Paris, 2022).

[6] The definition of restrictive environments often depends on the context, see e.g., Claessen, A. and Lange, P. de, 'Lessons for supporting policy influencing in restrictive environments', *Development in Practice*, vol. 26, no. 5 (2016), pp. 544–54; and Greenfield, D., *Advocacy in Restricted Spaces: A Toolkit for Civil Society Organizations* (Lifeline for Embattled Civil Society Organizations, June 2020). They often focus particularly on the first aspect of the definition used in this paper.

[7] Borgh, C. van der and Terwindt, C., 'Shrinking operational space of NGOs: A framework of analysis', *Development in Practice*, vol. 22, no. 8 (2012), pp. 1065–81.

able enough to open up. In the context of this paper, national peers conducted a total of 34 interviews: 12 in Afghanistan, 7 in the DRC, 5 interviews and 1 focus group meeting in Niger, and 10 in South Sudan. In addition, a focus group meeting was organized in February 2025 in which CSO representatives shared their experiences among peers. While the interviewees were often reluctant to be critical or share experiences and approaches, workshop participants felt more secure and were therefore more open. For safeguarding purposes, however, this paper refrains from any form of attribution, including references to the country backgrounds of interviewees and focus group participants. However, the sources have been retained by the author.

I. Three contexts

Restrictive environments are not uniform. There are particular variations in political and civic space, levels of violence, room for CSOs to operate in the fields of security, justice and inclusive governance, and levels of engagement by international and funding partners. This paper looks at three different contexts that represent a typology of environments that CSOs face in Afghanistan, Burundi, the DRC, Mali, Niger and South Sudan.

Transition contexts

Many countries transitioning from civil war to post-war contexts, such as the DRC and South Sudan, face challenges to their political and civic space. Governments are often relatively newly established and still have a wartime mindset, in part as they often have a liberator mentality and are still being challenged by non-state armed groups. They often also have a low tolerance for alternative views from CSOs, while corruption is frequently an additional challenge, which can lead to the intimidation of CSOs. Ongoing armed conflict can mean that not only governments, but also non-state armed groups are responsible. CSOs must therefore walk a tightrope in contested regions, or 'grey zones', where both state and non-state armed actors are active. Leaning too closely to one party can lead to repercussions from the other side. CSOs are able to make themselves heard, are often vocal and can operate throughout the fields of security, justice and inclusive governance, but face serious challenges to their operations. Governments acknowledge the presence of CSOs. They may, at times, incorporate them into their efforts if that serves government interests, if CSOs have funding or if they can act as an implementer of activities. Governments may also set up alternative CSOs, so-called government-organized non-governmental organizations. This is the context in which international and funding partners have the most leverage over governments. Although partner funding is decreasing in line with global trends and donor fatigue, there is still external interest in supporting CSOs. The need to deal with the consequences of an armed conflict that is in part still ongoing means that funding partner attention is focused on humanitarian assistance. Security, justice and inclusive governance are a lesser focus.[8]

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[8] Focus group meeting, 20 Feb. 2025.

Military junta contexts

Military takeovers are often justified as a response to rebellions or other armed challenges to the state. The Sahelian countries, such as Mali and Niger, face ongoing politically and religiously driven insurgencies, as well as challenges from criminal organizations. Therefore, as in transition contexts, CSOs need to balance interactions with state and non-state armed actors in the 'grey zones'. For what they label security reasons, juntas limit CSO activities and deny them access to military areas of operation. Outside these areas, juntas also restrict political and civic space and freedom of expression, increase administrative control and arrest CSO leaders. Restrictions are more extensive in junta contexts than in transition contexts, and there is also less hope as political and civic space are increasingly restricted. Juntas legitimize their restrictions on civic space as part of the fight against non-state armed groups and of counterterrorism measures. Despite the stricter control on political and civic space, CSOs can still operate in the field of security, justice and inclusive governance. Nonetheless, funding is more limited, in part because partners have withdrawn or limited their funding following coups, but also because juntas determine that some international or funding partners are off-limits. Consequently, new partnerships are difficult to establish and some beneficiary groups become more vulnerable. Given that the junta may have wide support for combating rebellions or other armed challenges to the state, if not the support of the majority of the population, this leaves the CSO community divided. There is mistrust between the government and those CSOs that are not allied with it. The latter are considered supporters of western governments, which are regarded as public enemies in the quest for sovereignty as decreed by military juntas. These CSOs are also considered potential supporters of terrorist or non-state armed groups. Those CSOs which support the government participate in consultation forums in which they share their expertise with state agencies.[9]

Closed-off contexts

It is in countries such as Afghanistan and Burundi that the political and civic space has shrunk the most, and the government has more or less unchallenged control over it. Although CSOs can still undertake activities, these are severely limited. Given the strength of the government, its control over its territory and its dominance over civil society, governmental violence against CSOs is mostly psychological. CSOs self-censor and do not dare to challenge the government, as the results could be fatal. The government sees CSOs primarily as implementors. CSOs actively try to maintain a good relationship with the government, even if this has been reduced to a fully transactional one. If they want to undertake activities of their own, they need the complete agreement of the government. Issues such as national security are off-limits, but projects on justice and inclusive governance might be accepted if reframed along the lines of government priorities. As many partners have decreased their funding to countries with closed-off contexts, funding is even more scarce than in other contexts. The CSO community is clearly divided between those which have opted to continue operations

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[9] Focus group meeting, 20 Feb. 2025.

despite all the challenges and those which have decided, and are able, to leave and operate from abroad. In some cases, the relationship between the CSOs that stay and those in the diaspora allows for collaboration, as the latter can speak for the former. In other cases, the diaspora mistrusts those who remain and sees them as government collaborators.[10]

II. Challenges for civil society organizations

In all three contexts, while the intensity may vary, many of the challenges that CSOs face are similar and can be clustered into five groups: legal and administrative restrictions, operational and access restrictions, threats to safety and security, defamation and stigmatization, and funding challenges.

Legal and administrative restrictions

Restrictive governments use repressive rules and regulations to monitor, control, delay, discourage, frustrate, criminalize or shut down CSO activities that are disliked or mistrusted. Such interference may be based on law, but may also be applied on an ad hoc basis.[11] In a transition context, for example, the absence of a regulatory law is used to prohibit activities.

Consequently, the administrative load for CSOs in restrictive environments is substantial, cumbersome and time-consuming. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and CSOs must register and acquire documentation from the state, such as certificates of operation, and these often need to be renewed on an annual basis. In addition, even at the project level, registrations and clearances frequently need to be obtained from the proposal to the evaluation phase. In some cases, such organizational, project and budget reporting is demanded on a monthly basis.

Throughout these processes, national ministries—such as the ministries of economic or internal affairs—and local level administrations need to be involved and to be convinced that activities fall within government priorities. They are able to interfere and require adjustments as they deem necessary. Costs and budgets increase due to the increased administrative burden and related personnel costs, as well as government fees for the required documentation. An extra budget is often needed to cover the costs of the government officials who are required to participate in or monitor events. Alongside increased operational costs, the paperwork and government procedures require additional time, and consequently prolong and slow down operational processes.

Refusal to follow procedures or being suspected of carrying out activities against the government can result in administrative or fiscal penalties, the freezing of assets and funds or even their confiscation. Resulting criminal proceedings affect CSO work or implementation. The criminalization of activities can lead to investigations and ultimately to prosecution. In many cases, it is not 'the rule of law' that is upheld, but a regime's 'rule by law'. This 'instrumentalization of law' is the application and reinterpretation of traditional rules in such a way that is an abuse of existing supervisory and

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[10] Focus group meeting, 20 Feb. 2025.
[11] Borgh and Terwindt (note 7), pp. 1065–81.

accountability mechanisms. This can result in 'lawfare', which is the use of legal systems and principles to damage or delegitimize an opponent, to deter individuals from asserting their legal rights or to waste their time and money.[12] A common example is Russia's 2012 Law on Foreign Agents, which, although especially restrictive, is not exceptional. Since the first of its kind, the US Foreign Agents Registration Act, was enacted in 1938, more than 60 countries have passed similar laws.[13]

Operational and access restrictions

If political and civic space are limited, the space for CSOs to work in the field of security, justice and inclusive governance is also restricted. Restrictive governments limit the space for advocacy and dialogue on these issues and either restrict access for or try to co-opt those CSOs that continue to work in this area.[14] To ensure that CSO activities take place only within government priorities and objectives, governments place operational restrictions on CSOs' freedom of assembly, access to communities, ability to withdraw funds from banks and freedom of movement. In military junta contexts, for example, for security reasons, seasonal movement restrictions have been introduced in some areas on the use of motorbikes and different types of cars. Government committees monitor that CSOs and NGOs follow government priorities. To ensure CSO compliance, security personnel conduct surveillance of organizations and monitor activity implementation. Participation by government officials is often required for events to proceed, and their expenses need to be covered. Like legal and administrative restrictions, failure to respect operational restrictions can lead to the freezing of bank accounts or even the closure of an organization, as demonstrated by the closure of Action Pour le Bien Être (APBE), the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) in Niger.[15] In effect, these restrictions limit broader project implementation, as they reduce the ability of CSOs to meet community needs. Moreover, they do not allow CSOs to demonstrate to the government the usefulness of their advocacy and bridging roles with the population.

Threats to safety and security

CSO actors also face threats to their physical security. In transition and military junta contexts, in the grey zones between state and non-state armed group control, they risk threats from both sides, as victims of kidnapping for ransom, as 'collateral damage' or as a target based on perceptions of consorting with the enemy. In all restrictive environment contexts, outside these grey zones, government authorities physically intimidate, threaten or even harm CSO actors with impunity, with the aim of preventing, repressing or

[12] Gloppen, S., *Conceptualizing Lawfare: A Typology & Theoretical Framework*, Centre on Law & Social Transformation Paper no. 6–7, Bergen, 2018.

[13] Bromley, P., Schofer, E. and Longhofer, W., 'Contentions over world culture: The rise of legal restrictions on foreign funding to NGOs, 1994–2015', *Social Forces*, vol. 99, no. 1 (2020), pp. 281–304.

[14] Borgh and Terwindt (note 7), pp. 1065–81.

[15] Radio France Internationale, 'Niger junta expels Red Cross without explanation', 6 Feb. 2025.

halting certain activities.[16] These threats can be direct, to persuade a CSO to refrain from a particular activity, such as a security actor in a transition context telling a CSO actor not to demonstrate as they 'will face live ammunition'.[17] There can also be more indirect threats against a CSO's activities, such as intimidating and harassing staff or raiding offices. Threats might also be mainly online, through hacking and doxxing. Ultimately, safety and security are physically endangered when the authorities arrest, detain or kidnap, torture or, at the extreme end, are responsible for the killing or disappearance of staff.

Defamation and stigmatization

The authorities, non-state armed groups and—especially in highly polarized settings—even civil society actors use genuine criticisms and fabricated accusations to create mistrust of certain CSOs within communities.[18] Such accusations may turn into smear campaigns, notably through social media. Particularly in conflict environments, associating CSOs with the 'other side' or with 'terrorists' is a powerful tool for delegitimizing and silencing them. As CSOs often depend on western funding, they are also regularly stigmatized as 'foreign agents' representing the interests and agendas of foreign actors. At a time of geopolitical shifts, being perceived as a representative of 'western agendas' can be counterproductive and held against CSOs. Such mistrust reduces the impact of projects and is used to justify administrative and operational restrictions on CSO activities. It can contribute to division among civil society actors and challenge the creation of common positions and agendas. It also weakens the role civil society can play in countering authoritarianism.

Funding challenges

Alongside the general global trend for reductions in partner funding, additional financial challenges to funding sustainability can result from internal government funding restrictions, or from external restrictions linked to international sanctions or restrictions on funding and travel. These are additional to the increased costs of operating in restrictive environments due to the increased administrative workload, additional charges for documentation, and the need for security provision or for government officials' participation in or monitoring of events (see above).

Internal funding restrictions might be generic, such as foreign agents legislation that limits the ability of CSOs to receive international funding either partially or completely.[19] It can also be more targeted, as in Niger where French funding in particular has been made off-limits.[20]

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[16] Borgh and Terwindt (note 7), pp. 1065–81.

[17] Transition context civil society representative, 18 Feb. 2025.

[18] Borgh and Terwindt (note 7), pp. 1065–81.

[19] Kirova, I., 'Foreign agent laws in the authoritarian playbook', *New Eastern Europe*, 19 Sep. 2024.

[20] Banchereau, M., 'Niger junta bans French aid group amid tensions with France', Associated Press, 13 Nov. 2024.

International and funding partners add additional restrictions to the performance of CSOs, further compounding the effects of the already restricted environment. Partners are more reluctant to fund projects in restrictive environments, given the uncertainty of project impact or due to international sanctions. Particularly in military junta and closed-off contexts, when sanctions or embargoes are in place or the de facto authorities are not recognized, this may present practical dilemmas, such as whether officials participating in a workshop should not be provided with lunch even though other participants are.[21]

These funding challenges threaten CSO operational continuity and put staff job security at risk.

III. Civil society organization coping strategies

CSOs are not passive actors without agency. In restrictive environments, they are often highly active. The extent of their civic space is not just the result of government policies and restrictions; they are able to avoid or address restrictions, and to claim or create civic space.[22] If CSOs decide to continue to operate in a restrictive environment, there are various coping strategies they can use. The most common are discussed below. Several have also been described in the literature.[23]

Relating to the government

Staying within the law

CSOs do not have to lie low or keep their heads down. However, ensuring that the government has no reason to increase existing restrictions or harassment that further limits their activities is generally a primary concern. This makes it important to follow the rules, where possible and legitimate, such as notifying the authorities about activities beforehand, including them as participants in implementation and documenting results to maximize transparency. These are active ways to signal that activities are taking place within the law. At the same time, however, compliance is not always enough, and sometimes the need for compliance means that activities cannot take place. This is the case in a military junta context, for example, where an obligation to have military escorts during activities would challenge CSOs' independence and perceived neutrality.[24] There is also a risk attached to compliance, as good behaviour is not always rewarded and sometimes increases the risk of dissolution, closure or other penalties.

Building rapport, trust and relationships with the government

There is a continuous need to communicate and engage in dialogue with the authorities to explain aims and increase understanding of projects and activities, to negotiate what is possible and what is not, to build trust and to

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[21] Closed-off context civil society representative, 18 Feb. 2025.

[22] Cornwall, A., *Making Spaces, Changing Places: Situating Participation in Development*, Working Paper, no. 170 (Institute of Development Studies: Brighton, East Sussex, 2002).

[23] van Tuijl, P., 'Promoting rights while offsetting risks: An overview of NGOs in a disabled environment', Civicus, [n.d.]; and Greenfield (note 6).

[24] Military junta context civil society representative, 25 Sep. 2025.

convince officials and the military that CSO efforts are also beneficial to them. The better a CSO's relationship with the government, the more comfortable the government will be with the implementation of the CSO's actions. With or without project funding, it is important to maintain connections with the authorities to avoid losing their consent. Integrating the government into activities helps to reduce suspicion. A more integrated and legitimate CSO is likely to face fewer challenges.

To achieve this, CSOs adopt various strategies. They carry on a continuous dialogue with the government on issues of security, justice and inclusive governance, not only behind closed doors for the purposes of advocacy, but also by organizing open roundtables to educate government officials and the public at large. In addition, providing capacity building and training activities for the authorities on certain topics can help to reduce mistrust. This allows CSOs to explain their own activities, but is also appreciated by the authorities as they benefit directly. Alternatively, in some military junta contexts, CSOs have invited the authorities to monitor activities in the field and to receive first-hand feedback from communities, and traditional and informal leaders.[25]

Developing personal relations and building rapport with people inside the administration is key. Knowing counterparts inside the government with good will is important for the continuation of activities. Often, this can be a contact who used to work in the CSO sector, but has since joined the government. Building on family, kin or friendship relations can also provide space that would otherwise be closed. If such relations do not exist, establishing them is important. A CSO representative from a closed-off context shared how he invested in connecting with the authorities. He first visited an official's office and requested an appointment, without much success. However, he continued to show up and wait patiently until after a while, the official became curious and finally decided to see him. Building the relationship took many more visits.[26]

Consequently, in restrictive environments, handing over projects from one implementing partner to another, for example after a retender process, can be difficult, and demands a sophisticated process of handover. Otherwise, the new project implementer will not know what the previous organization has done before, and will need to build bridges and trust with the government all over again.

Understand government priorities and incorporate these

CSOs stress that it is important to understand government priorities, and to integrate these into activities. For this purpose, CSOs ask the authorities to share what kind of activities are useful to them, and subsequently assess where it might be possible to align these with their own project ideas. It is also important to tailor activities to what is allowed and desired by the authorities. Where the authorities seek popular legitimacy, centring actions around the expressed priorities of communities and traditional or informal leaders can be very useful (see below).

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[25] Military junta context civil society representative, 18 Feb. 2025.
[26] Greenfield (note 6).

This means that original project ideas can still continue, but may need to be reframed or the language on such activities rephrased to make them more palatable to the authorities. Sensitive terms may need to be avoided. In various locations, it may be preferable to use terms such as 'mixed gender family' or 'vulnerable groups' over 'women' and 'excluded communities'.[27]

Operational coping

Advocacy based on facts and neutrality

In restrictive environments, particularly in transition and military junta contexts, CSOs are vulnerable to government restrictions, defamation and stigmatization, or they may be caught in the grey zone between the state and non-state armed groups. Under these circumstances, it is important that they rely on facts that cannot be disputed, and that they are seen as non-partisan or neutral. Otherwise, they risk being seen as either 'consorting with the enemy' or part of the opposition, which may have further negative consequences. Obviously, this is no easy task in conflict contexts, given the intensity of disagreement at the community level. Research and community consultations often provide a better shared understanding as a basis for advocacy.

Increasing community level engagement

Local communities are generally the constituencies of CSO activities. Particularly in restrictive environments, engaging with communities, and traditional and informal leaders on activities is important in order to maximize ownership. Community involvement not only improves programme quality, but also gives communities, and traditional and informal leaders larger stakes in the CSO's activities. CSOs aspire to find more community level allies by building trust with communities, and traditional and informal leaders, and integrating them further into the design, planning and implementation of activities. In advocacy, for example, this means that CSOs support communities to advocate for themselves or together with CSOs, rather than CSOs advocating on behalf of communities. Such community-led advocacy and bottom-up approaches have greater legitimacy and are more difficult for governments to shut down, making CSOs less vulnerable to government restrictions. At the same time, however, particularly in conflict settings, transition or military junta contexts, this is no easy task as the conflict has often been absorbed by the communities and is often inter-communal. Moreover, such a community-led approach often requires CSOs to strengthen their accountability to populations.

Engaging in strategic communication and strengthening credibility

As CSOs in restrictive environments can be subject to stigmatization and smear campaigns, it is important that their actions maintain or preferably strengthen their credibility. Their activities depend on positive community perceptions and openness. For this reason, it is important for CSOs and NGOs to project good governance principles and avoid nepotism. Participants were clear that CSO workers need to live modestly and not drive unnecessarily

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[27] Focus group meeting, 18–20 Feb. 2025.

large cars.[28] In addition, CSOs need to communicate their current and planned activities—what these are and why they are doing them—not only to government officials, but also to the wider public on social and other media. To this end, collaborating with community 'allies' and influential voices is important, as it can strengthen the focus on local priorities

Putting safety first

Particularly in restrictive and conflict environments, CSOs need to pay attention to the risks they face, to be prepared for government action and to make activities conflict-sensitive. For this reason, it is important to have a proper safety and security policy, to continuously engage in threat and conflict analysis, to monitor hate speech and early warnings carefully and to develop a contingency plan in order to be prepared. To this end, it is important to work closely with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as a monitoring body. In terms of projects, adherence to the principle of do-no-harm is important.[29] Ultimately, if the security situation becomes untenable, CSO staff may have to evacuate or leave the country.

Networking operations

CSOs are weaker when they are alone and isolated. Collaboration is therefore important. In part, they can advocate through intermediaries and involve influential allies in projects, such as traditional, community or religious leaders. Working with institutional allies, such as former CSO community members or members of parliament, also helps to influence policies. In addition, working in a networked fashion reduces risks for CSOs, as it is more difficult to single out one organization if others are just as vocal. In some transition contexts, for example, when CSOs want to raise an issue that is sensitive in their own location, they can ask members of the network located in a different part of the country to bring it up.[30] In closed-off contexts, where advocating for certain issues inside the country is off-limits due to government restrictions, CSOs can sometimes collaborate with diasporas. Even in such contexts, however, applying a networked approach can sometimes work. For example, in one closed-off context, by refusing in a networked manner to implement an ethnic recruitment law, the whole civil society community was able to resist the government. The government relented because otherwise the healthcare and education sectors in the country would have lost a large proportion of their funding.[31]

Strategic coping

Increasing organizational flexibility and resilience

In restrictive environments, CSOs frequently need to adjust to continuously changing circumstances. Rules and security situations, for example, change regularly. This means that CSOs need to adjust their operations at short

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[28] Focus group meeting, 18–20 Feb. 2025.

[29] Anderson, M. B., *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War* (Lynne Riener: Boulder, Co., 1999).

[30] Transition context civil society representative, 20 Feb. 2025.

[31] Closed-off context civil society representative, 20 Feb. 2025; and Closed-off context civil society representative, 24 June 2025.

notice, and to plan activities according to the situation on ground and the level of government acceptance. This requires endless creativity, flexibility and adaptability in programming. When project planning, CSOs often build in extra time for project implementation. Setting up self-sustaining projects that do not require external funding is an approach that can help shelter projects against changing circumstances.

In the long run, programme diversification is important to strengthen organizational resilience and to ensure the continuity of operations. A too narrow focus on security, justice and inclusive governance might lead to government restrictions that result in closure. When organizations diversify, staff still have employment and they can integrate a security, justice and inclusive governance focus into other activities, such as work on service delivery.

Increase funding stability, diversity and flexibility

International funding is not guaranteed, so CSOs have sought to diversify their funding streams, which helps to avoid being cut off from finances if funding partners decide to withdraw due to government policies. CSOs have also increased their organizational capacity for resource mobilization, sought alternative international and funding partners, raised funds in consortia and networks to increase financial opportunities and pursued financing through intermediaries to avoid government and international restrictions. Moreover, they have attempted to raise funds from local sources through community-based resource mobilization, such as from membership contributions and local businesses. Lastly, they have sought more flexibility for the funds already raised, by including additional or unforeseen costs in budget proposals, and by signing strategic agreements with partners, setting-up ex ante-funding mechanisms and integrating resource mobilization into project budgets.

Dialogue with partners

International and funding partners are not necessarily familiar with the challenges faced by or the coping strategies available to CSOs in restrictive environments, with regard to their project implementation, and safety and security. They often do not realize that the challenges listed above mean that activities generally take more time and require adaptability to be realized, and therefore require higher and more flexible budgets. For this reason, it is important for CSOs to explain, in all honesty, to the partners financing such activities, the context and circumstances in which they are operating. This requires investment in dialogue with international and funding partners.

IV. Recommendations for international and funding partners

International and funding partners that aim to contribute to justice, security and inclusive governance in restrictive environments are limited in their options, as restrictive governments by definition limit the more political forms of international and bilateral security, justice and inclusive governance assistance. Although CSOs are limited by the closure of political and civic space, they have coping mechanisms that allow them to continue their activities. Mindful of the special demands that restrictive environments place on assistance to CSOs, international and funding partners that seek

to start or to continue to provide such support should keep the following recommendations in mind.

Understanding and awareness

Increase understanding of local contexts

It is important for international and funding partners to maximize their understanding of the situation in which CSOs in restrictive environments find themselves. Projects often take longer and are more costly as a result of government restrictions and insecurity. International funding partners therefore need to engage in dialogue with and listen closely to CSOs, about their needs and challenges. For this reason, it would be good for partners to visit the beneficiaries of projects, wherever possible.

Understand the safety and security needs of CSOs

Related to the above, but important to discuss separately, is the need for funding partners to be sensitive to the safety and security needs of CSOs and civil society actors, including human rights defenders. The concept of do no harm is integral to this. What might seem almost irrelevant or be easily overlooked in a safe location could be a matter of life or death in a restrictive environment. As a consequence, international and funding partners can easily push CSO staff over important boundaries just to get a project implemented, as these depend on international support. It is therefore important for international and funding partners to consistently put security first, and to support the development, maintenance or updating of—and training on—safety and security policies, threat and conflict analysis, hate speech monitoring, early warning systems and contingency plans.

What to collaborate on

Support more community level activities

In line with CSO coping mechanisms that increase community level engagement, international and funding partners need to support more locally created and owned initiatives and the concept of locally led development. Top-down paths through the government to working on security, justice and inclusive governance issues have been closed off. In addition, by working at as grassroots a level as possible by engaging with communities and traditional or informal leaders, CSOs that choose to continue their efforts are better protected and ownership of their results is maximized. Moreover, this continues to sow seeds that can be reaped once government opens up again.

Invest in CSO strategic communication

In order to counter stigmatization and smear campaigns, international and funding partners need to help CSOs to engage in strategic communication. This requires training and capacity building, as well as increased communication budgets.

Stimulate cross country learning

This research has found that, while intensity may vary, many of the challenges that CSOs face are similar across different countries and the various restrictive

environment contexts. As CSOs face similar challenges, they can also learn from each other about how to cope with them, for example by organizing cross-country workshops.

How to collaborate

Increase the flexibility of funding and other regulations and follow locally suggested approaches

Given the challenging and widely varying circumstances on the ground, it is important that funding partners are open to contextualized, bottom-up and localized solutions for dealing with the challenges at hand. They need to put more trust than usual in localized solutions. International and funding partners also need to be more flexible than in other contexts, during both proposal development and project implementation, to allow CSO partners to adjust better to ever-changing developments on the ground. Government restrictions mean that CSOs need more time and bigger budgets to achieve results that would be much cheaper and quicker to achieve in non-restrictive environments. In some cases, activities are more costly than before because some of the costs of government participants need to be covered. In other cases, the costs of women's participation have increased because they need to be accompanied by a chaperone. This means that a form of adaptive programming and a more flexible application of budget and reporting regulations will be required.

Engage in long-term strategies for financing and programming

Conducting activities in restrictive environments takes time and strategic patience. Community-led advocacy requires long-term capacity building of local advocacy networks to help CSOs work more closely with communities and traditional and informal leaders. In addition, capacity needs to be built with the authorities on how to engage with CSOs. To do this successfully, CSOs require adequate human resources policies and stable salaries to increase staff loyalty and prevent high staff turnover. These are long-term processes that cannot be dealt with within a single short-term project cycle. Long-term, preferably core funding is therefore required.

Fund network or platform organizations and intermediaries

Direct funding for CSOs working on security, justice and inclusive governance is often impossible, due to either government or funding partner regulations. Funding broader platform organizations or intermediaries can be a workaround. It is also a way for funding partners effectively to ask intermediaries, as contract holders, to assume financial and political risk for them in relation to the activities.

Fund more integrated projects

Partners could fund more integrated projects or programmes to enable CSOs to increase their organizational flexibility and resilience, and allow them to package projects on justice, security and inclusive governance in broader projects.

Stand up for CSOs, while making support for CSOs part of a nexus approach

Partners need to condemn hate speech against CSOs, advocate for their continued operation and make this part of broader support within a 'nexus approach' that integrates humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peacebuilding. They must follow the advice of local CSOs on the best approaches to this, since local CSOs know what is most useful for them. At the same time, like sovereign countries, international and funding partners also have boundaries that they cannot cross. An open conversation about these, the limitations on support and the terms and conditions of assistance—on an equal footing in an integrated approach—would mean that wider support to restrictive governments can be linked to granting civic and political space. International and funding partners could combine any international support to restrictive governments with support for activities that stimulate dialogue between governments and CSOs, and strengthen the latter's resilience. If the restrictive government and international and funding partners cannot find common ground, and the latter need to end the collaboration, they should consider leaving their activities and contacts in hibernation, ready to be revived when it is possible.

SIPRI RESEARCH POLICY PAPER

SUPPORT IN AN AGE OF RELAPSE: ASSISTING SECURITY, JUSTICE AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IN RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

JAÏR VAN DER LIJN

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Jaïr van der Lijn is a Senior Researcher and Director of the SIPRI Peace Operations and Conflict Management Programme.

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