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Is the Coronavirus Catalyzing New Civic Collaborations for Open Government?

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Summary

From Africa to Latin America to Europe, the coronavirus pandemic has generated a surge in public demand for government transparency and accountability. To *seize this window for reform*, elite and grassroots civic actors concerned with open governance must overcome the cleavage that has long existed between them.

Thus far, the pandemic has catalyzed some new civic collaborations, *but not at the scale or depth needed* to seize that window. In general, civil society groups report feeling more isolated during the pandemic. In some places, the urgency of tackling open government issues during the pandemic has helped overcome that isolation *by deepening partnerships among existing networks*. But in other places, those partnerships have *yet to take shape, and new alliances are less likely to form* without the benefit of face-to-face interactions. Even the partnerships that have crystallized or deepened do not appear to be changing the fundamental roles of elite and grassroots civic actors. It is possible that this shift may happen over time. Or it may be that the pandemic alone is not enough to dislodge structural barriers to deeper cooperation.

The pandemic has dramatically changed the operations of elite and grassroots actors alike. The impact of those changes on collaboration between the two depends on preexisting levels of technological capacity. In places with *limited connectivity, the pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide*, adversely affecting grassroots actors. Meanwhile, in places with *good connectivity*, technology is enabling broader (though shallower) participation, laying the groundwork for *more elite-grassroots collaboration*.

Although many civil society groups are *struggling financially* during the pandemic, those effects are mitigated to some degree by continuing donor interest in the open government sector. This is encouraging, as coalition building requires dedicated, flexible resources.

Finally, it is a more *dangerous time* to be working on open government issues in general, and grassroots actors bear disproportionate risks in doing so. This underscores the need for more vertical alliances to mitigate civic space threats.

Moving forward, practitioners need to capitalize on public momentum around open governance by cultivating *new elite-grassroots partnerships* built on mutual respect. These partnerships will benefit from continued learning about which pandemic-era *operational adaptations* should be sustained (such as blended modes of in-person and online work) and how to mitigate the costs of doing so. Donors should drive timely *investment* toward coalition building in places where it is missing, alongside more direct support to grassroots actors.

Context

In a research study published in January 2020, Abigail Bellows identified a divide between elite and grassroots actors in the anticorruption field and outlined strategies for overcoming that divide.[1] That study found that the growing legal and technical sophistication of professionalized anticorruption nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has made these organizations better watchdogs yet has simultaneously increased their distance from citizens affected by corruption. Without strong ties to grassroots communities, elite actors struggle to gain traction for their recommendations, while grassroot campaigners face difficulty translating protest energy into policy impact. Bellows argued that fostering vertical connectivity to bridge the elite-grassroots divide—whether through formal partnerships or behind-the-scenes coordination—can help both types of actors to more fully reap the strategic benefits of their distinct capabilities.

As the pandemic has unfolded, many practitioners began asking whether the pandemic is reshaping elite-grassroots dynamics on the ground. We decided to investigate this question. This paper's focus is on civil society actors within the open government field—a branch of the democracy and governance sector that promotes transparency, accountability, and civic participation. This includes but is not limited to: advocating for and utilizing access to information laws; identifying and combating corruption in its various manifestations; speaking out against restrictions on free speech, assembly, and association; and promoting direct citizen engagement to influence public policy.

For open government advocates worldwide, the pandemic has lent a greater sense of relevance and urgency to their work. They are engaging in new activities to ensure responsible use of COVID-19 relief funds, while adapting their work in other sectors, such as criminal justice or natural resource management, to the new context. The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is the largest global platform for government and civil society collaborations around these themes, and OGP's ongoing Open Response and Open Recovery campaign catalogues many of these efforts.[2]

In addition to its assessment of the question regarding elite-grassroots dynamics in the domain of civic activism on open governance, this paper contributes to early assessments of the anticipated impacts of COVID-19 on democracy and governance. For example, this research documents some ways in which civic space restrictions are becoming harsher during the pandemic, as explored in Carnegie Endowment for International Peace research from April 2020 ("How Will the Coronavirus Reshape Democracy and Governance Globally?") and elaborated upon by the Varieties of Democracy Institute.[3]

Methodology

Research Process

From August to October 2020, we spoke with approximately 125 civil society leaders, all working broadly within the open government field. The leaders hailed from nearly twenty different countries across sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, North Africa, and South and Central Asia. As a group, they represented a diverse mix of professionalized NGOs, grassroots groups, and hybrid organizations.

Initial participants were identified through existing researcher networks, including a number of members, partners, and affiliate hubs in the Open Gov Hub global network, and an open call for input.[4] Those who expressed enthusiasm for the project hosted online focus groups with partner organizations. These discussions were then supplemented by interviews and desk research.

Refining the Elite-Grassroots Framework

Like any heuristic, the distinction between "elite" and "grassroots" civic actors attempts to capture a much more complex and varied landscape. As such, researchers noted in the data collection process that the categories reflected two ends of a spectrum rather than a neat binary. Civil society participants were presented with the following three definitions when asked to self-categorize themselves.

- "Elite" organizations are professionalized NGOs, run by paid staff, with a high degree of technical policy expertise, and are typically based in the capital city.

- "Grassroots" groups are community-based, driven by volunteers, often working through informal networks, and possessing strong local roots, including outside the capital.

- "Hybrid" organizations reflect a mix of the two.

The notion that a distinction exists between elite and grassroots civic actors broadly resonated with the practitioners. Still, the manner in which respondents engaged with these terms was revealing, and their comments helped researchers to nuance the paradigm.

- The term "elite" was seen by many to have a pejorative connotation, which was not intended. To navigate this, the researchers emphasized other features of this category, such as the technical and national focus of elite NGOs or their capital-based locations, aspects with which respondents were more comfortable. Other respondents originally thought that "elite" referred to foreign NGOs operating in-country, rather than encompassing local organizations as intended—a point that researchers clarified.

- The term "grassroots" proved ambiguous. Some respondents took it to mean "local" or "subnational," including both informal civic associations and municipal-level expert groups. Others understood grassroots to be a description of the organization type— community-based, informal, volunteer-driven, movement-oriented—whether operating subnationally or nationally. The researchers allowed for both of these interpretations and requested clarification from respondents as needed.

These different definitions reflect the different frames of reference that participants brought to the conversation. For example, in places in which geography is quite salient—such as Paraguay, where civil society is heavily concentrated in the capital—the national/subnational distinction is the most relevant cleavage in civil society, and respondents used it as a shorthand when discussing civic collaboration. In other settings, the differences between types of civic actors are more stark. For instance, in Ukraine, elite actors observed an absence of nonpartisan people-powered groups to serve as partners, as many community-based organizations are tied to political parties. As a result, collaboration tends to occur between technical experts, regardless of whether they are operating at the national or municipal levels.

In addition, many participants enthusiastically identified as hybrids, perhaps because they saw this category as the best of both worlds. In reality, hybrids can face their own suite of challenges, as they seek to perform two very different functions, with different stakeholders, and may end up doing neither well.

Finally, this framework utilizes the terms "horizontal" and "vertical" partnerships, the former being peer-to-peer partnerships, and the latter being partnerships that bring together civil society actors at the elite and grassroots levels.

The Opportunity: Pandemic Fuels Public Interest in Government Transparency

The coronavirus pandemic has produced two simultaneous trends: an increase in *corruption*, as the scale and breadth of pandemic-related theft soars, as well as an increase in *anticorruption* energy,

ranging from diffuse public outrage to targeted civil society advocacy.[5] The intersection of these two trends presents a historic opportunity for reform—an opportunity for practitioners to leverage heightened public awareness to fix long overdue policy gaps.

These trends are playing out in the work of frontline advocates around the world. "Our work is suddenly more urgent," explained a staff member of the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM), which works in Southern Africa.[6] A representative of the Paraguayan NGO reAcción noted that citizens are now realizing that money at high risk of being stolen is the same limited pool of money desperately needed for healthcare and cash transfers to needy families. One transparency-focused organization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) captured these linkages by producing masks that read: "COVID = Corruption *and* Corruption = COVID."

The spark in public engagement seems even to be manifest in places like Brazil, where years of governance scandals had generated public fatigue. According to staff from the Brazil chapter of Transparency International (TI), "People had gotten so numb that sometimes corruption wouldn't even make the headlines anymore. But during the pandemic, there was a spark of sensitivity again. It touches on health, on life and death, and enrages people so much to see that in the midst of this crisis, there are people stealing from hospitals."[7]

This heightened public attention to corruption is benefiting both elite and grassroots organizations. A staffer from the Constitution and Reform Education Consortium (CRECO) in Kenya commented: "Now the grassroots organizations are recognized by the common citizens, in addition to the national CSOs [civil society organizations], because of their pandemic response work at local level."[8] Meanwhile, elite organizations have stepped up their role as "translators of technical corruption issues into the common vernacular," as one Zimbabwean civil society leader noted.[9] Some elite organizations have seized the swell in momentum to launch new public-facing initiatives. For instance, the think tank FUNDE (Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo) in El Salvador created new avenues via Facebook and WhatsApp to collect complaints and comments about public services. As one FUNDE staffer shared, "Overall, we have a lot more personal engagement with users and are receiving more requests [for help or to report violations] through different channels. We have maximized our operations to respond to the big increase in demand for information."[10]

The salience of corruption in the current crisis presents an important—and likely brief—window of opportunity for reform. Public frustration with scandals could motivate major government reform to strengthen transparency and anticorruption standards. For instance, the revelations of the gruesome role corruption had played in exacerbating the coronavirus pandemic in Ecuador increased demand for the reform of local procurement systems—and a local NGO, Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo, partnered with the Center for International Private Enterprise to launch a new project aimed at

capitalizing on that demand.[11] Similarly, fertile ground exists for new standards to be set in the disbursement of emergency funding from large financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund—standards that could have lasting impact on responses to future natural disasters, civic conflict, and other crises.[12]

To effectively seize this window for reform, however, civil society must overcome long-standing cleavages between elite and grassroots actors. If fragmentation remains, elite-driven policy solutions will remain disconnected from grassroots-driven public momentum. Both elements are needed to maximize the pandemic opening for reform.

Pandemic Partnerships: Mostly More of the Same

Thus far, the pandemic has catalyzed some new civic partnerships, but not at the scale or depth needed to fully take advantage of the current opportunity for reform.

Concerns About Isolation

The pandemic has generated an overall sense of isolation among many civil society leaders. A Nigerian civic leader noted that although "online is becoming mainstream," it does not provide the "richer engagement and deeper discussion" possible in person.[13] Patterns of informality and relationality have been difficult to sustain online. A grassroots actor in Ukraine said that civil society was more "in sync" when groups were able to meet in person and lamented the loss of "soft connections between people."[14] A representative of the San Salvador chapter of Legal Hackers organization lamented, "It's not feasible or sustainable to have elite and grassroots groups partner only online. The pandemic is really harming the development of our CSO ecosystem."[15]

These challenges are reflected in the open government sector. One staff member of Pact in Ukraine observed that "connections are becoming weaker between anticorruption CSOs. Many groups are trying to act alone. We are seeing little exchange between national and regional organizations, and fewer campaigns that include subnational work—in spite of a lot of demand for anticorruption work right now. This is partly because of COVID-19—people are feeling isolated in their region and feeling they are fighting alone."[16] This sense of separation can deter activists from speaking out. One Kenyan NGO leader explained, "There was already little two-way collaboration between grassroots and elite actors, but now the situation is even worse. COVID-19 has led to a dramatic reduction in collaboration, causing many NGOs to work independently without engaging with others. This has contributed to massive corruption—the creation of 'COVID-19 millionaires'—who are enabled by the absence of active follow up from civil society groups."[17]

Sporadic Deepening of Existing Networks

That sense of isolation has been mitigated in some cases by the urgency of tackling open government topics, which has led to a deepening of cooperation among familiar partners (see box 1). According to some interviewees, the swirl of competing priorities in the open government agenda has been replaced by a collective focus on one common enemy—the coronavirus. The director of a hybrid organization in Paraguay called reAcción explained, "The pandemic prompted alignment around a concrete objective. It narrowed the focus and increased the urgency," producing new forms of cooperation.[18] Congolese civic leaders made similar observations, noting that the pandemic is producing synergies between CSOs who were forced to pool their resources in order to develop creative, low-budget means of disseminating health messages and holding the government to account. In South Africa, cooperation has crystallized via a new pandemic-focused coalition with a mix of movement actors, elites, and academics, while in El Salvador, elite and grassroots partners are forming a new consortium to build a common agenda on transparency and digital government.

Box 1: Pandemic Adaptations: New Horizontal Alliances

Account4COVID is a new regional, cross-country network that formed in April 2020 when eight hybrid and elite NGOs came together to promote greater accountability, civic inclusion, and transparency of the coronavirus spending across Africa.[19] Members recently received funding to support partners in several countries and continue building a support network across the continent. Account4COVID provides a good example of a new horizontal coalition (between mostly elite, specialized NGOs with preexisting relationships) that is exchanging lessons on how to best perform COVID-19 oversight work in the region. Although no grassroots groups are part of the core network, the presence of hybrid organizations enhances the coalition's ability to grapple with the shared challenge of how to maintain community-level engagement in the face of pandemic limitations on fieldwork and face-to-face interaction with marginalized communities.

In addition, some elite organizations have launched subnational partnerships with existing grassroots partners, especially to track COVID-19-related procurement (see box 2). For example, Integrity Watch Afghanistan's Provincial Integrity Networks are becoming more robust as they seek information on coronavirus expenditures by the government. The International Budget Partnership—whose Strengthening Public Accountability for Results and Knowledge (SPARK) initiative links budget-focused NGOs with community organizations and social movements—has deepened its work with

current partners in seven countries, including Ghana, Indonesia, and South Africa. As the initiative reported, "The COVID-19 crisis has validated SPARK's approach to working with large, broad-based civic organizations and social movements. . . . Highly organized groups with large, grassroots memberships have the ability to exert positive pressure on governments in ways that other, more professionalized civil society or technical specialists cannot."[20]

Box 2: Pandemic Adaptations: Linking Open Government and Livelihood Needs

One challenge in fostering elite-grassroots relationships during the pandemic has been the acute livelihood needs arising from the 2020 economic crisis, which can make it hard to build momentum around open government issues. One Zimbabwean civic leader observed, "COVID-19 brought an increase in poverty levels to unprecedented highs, especially for women. They would say, 'It's fine that you're talking about social accountability, but we don't have food on the table!'"[21] Similarly, a Paraguayan NGO reported that consultation with grassroots partners had been constrained due to the level of chaos and desperation of many people navigating the economic hardship of the pandemic.

In response, some open government NGOs are working to mitigate these livelihood needs in order to build trust and link with grassroots partners. FUNDE in El Salvador facilitated conversations with the government to support the economic needs in a community whose pineapple harvest was imperiled by the pandemic.[22] Other groups have formed cross-sectoral partnerships in order to gain access at the local level. For instance, in Zimbabwe, lockdown-era government regulations allowed livelihood-focused groups into the districts but not advocacy organizations. So some governance groups partnered with groups that distributed face masks and food to piggyback on direct relief efforts and link them with conversations about rights and civic engagement. This helped rebut accusations, perpetuated by local officials and security personnel, that governance CSOs were not offering assistance when communities were most in need but instead "only talking about rights."[23] Despite the fact that some livelihood organizations partnered with governance groups, others shunned them to avoid increased scrutiny from local government officials.

Difficulty Starting New Partnerships

Although deeper partnerships are taking root in some locations, in other places those partnerships have yet to form—and are less likely to be initiated given pandemic-era isolation and the difficulty of

cultivating trust without face-to-face interactions. In settings where trust already existed between NGOs, it appears the pandemic provided a catalyst for new or deeper connections, but in places where the civil society field is already fractured and competitive, the pandemic seems to have made those dynamics worse.

These challenges are particularly pronounced when it comes to forming elite-grassroots partnerships, as logistical constraints add to the cultural barriers and power imbalances that already hinder cooperation (see box 3). As Integrity Watch Afghanistan noted, previously, its national NGO would "facilitate the participation" of communities, who were central in both identifying accountability problems and solving them. In contrast, during COVID-19, the NGO finds itself having "to speak on behalf of communities more often."[24]

Box 3: Pandemic Adaptations: Working Through Local Organizations

To overcome the difficulty that capital-based organizations are having identifying new individual community leaders during the pandemic, some are experimenting with working more through youth associations and other existing community organizations. For example, TI-Madagascar is working with local groups as a bridge toward grassroots connections, including via a strong partnership with the Catholic Church.[25]

The difficulty drawing in new actors is echoed in high-level policy discussion. A representative of San Salvador's Legal Hackers explained that during a crisis and with limited technological resources, government officials revert to speaking with the same "big players," including elite NGOs, to shape policy conversations, but excluding the often less-resourced grassroots organizations. "Now online meetings are always behind closed doors with the usual suspects," the representative noted. If these elite organizations are unresponsive to grassroots demands and lose public trust, then the credibility of all civic groups suffers.[26]

Increased Elite Reliance on Local Leaders

In some instances, the pandemic seems to have increased the reliance of elite actors on "last-mile" grassroots organizations, such as for monitoring the distribution of relief supplies. The pandemic has created practical constraints on how much time elite NGOs can spend in the field (if any), limiting their ability to directly observe and engage with local communities. Some NGO staff also reported

that the pandemic has made them aware of their elite privilege vis-à-vis grassroots colleagues (who have generally faced more pandemic-related hardships than elite NGO staff), and the need to "move from 'providing support' to much deeper listening and learning from the communities we seek to serve."[27]

The pandemic has prompted some of these elite organizations to commit to further building the capacity of local communities. For instance, a Nigerian representative of the hybrid organization CODE/Follow the Money Africa noted in a focus group convened by Civic Hive, "The real power to hold the government to account lies in the people and not in an organization. So if our organization shuts down tomorrow, we want communities to still have the consciousness to 'follow the money.'"[28]

In some instances, the pandemic has also prompted greater capacity-building of cascading grassroots networks, as capital-based NGOs seek to sustain grassroots engagement via local volunteer liaisons (who then can train the trainers). The director of the hybrid organization TI-Madagascar explained that early in the pandemic it was hard to reach citizens because many do not use social media or have internet access. But now, they have remote volunteers with online access lined up in fifteen out of twenty-two regions, who "both disseminate messages out to the field, and report back to us what they see in their community."[29] NGO leaders in Zimbabwe and the DRC devised similar strategies in response to the pandemic, identifying one community member with internet access to engage with others in their locality. In Nigeria, BudgIT formed a cohort of over 1,000 "community champions" across the country, who stepped up to do budget tracking and community trainings when NGO staff were no longer able to travel.[30] In addition to addressing the immediate needs of grassroots engagement, this liaison model may have important longer-term benefits for decentralized leadership development.

Transactional or Transformational?

Yet, on the whole, the partnerships that have formed do not appear to be shifting the fundamentals of how elite and grassroots actors typically relate to one another. Rather, power relations appear largely static, in terms of who is setting the agenda, doing the work, and controlling the funding. As a representative from Ukraine's Reanimation Package of Reforms noted, "There is a clear division between the elite and grassroots in Ukraine. But the problem is not that the division exists, because the two types of organizations play different roles. The problem is with a lack of communication between these two groups . . . and the lack of joint decisionmaking on advocacy campaigns."[31]

Most often, subnational actors continue to be treated as vendors, collecting monitoring information that is passed up to national actors, with little scope for shaping project priorities. Meanwhile, civic movements are often distrustful or disconnected from policy NGOs and may fail to turn civic grievances into lasting impact beyond the ouster of current politicians. Policy NGOs, in turn, seem to be largely relying on old tactics of publishing reports and holding press conferences, rather than more creative, artistic, and interactive methods of harnessing the unprecedented public momentum on open government issues. It is possible that some devolution of autonomy or capacity to the local level—as necessitated by the logistical constraints of the pandemic—will be a step in the direction of more egalitarian partnerships in the future. But the pandemic does not, as of yet, appear to be driving such an evolution.

Divergent Impacts of Pandemic Working Conditions

Virtually all civil society leaders interviewed have had to suspend in-person activities and shift to remote work for most of 2020. These working conditions have mixed consequences for civic collaboration depending on preexisting levels of technological capacity at both the organizational and societal levels. In areas with limited technological infrastructure, the pandemic has increased exclusion of grassroots voices, although alternative modes of engagement, like community radio, have partially mitigated these exclusionary effects.

Technology Enables Wider but Shallower Participation

In places with robust internet penetration and where organizations were already tech-savvy, the pandemic appears to have had little impact on collaboration or even facilitated more connectivity between capital-based NGOs and subnational community groups. Many of those reporting *little change* to their operations already had the infrastructure in place to transition smoothly to digital operations. For instance, a representative of a civic tech criminal justice reform organization called Gavel in Nigeria commented, "Because we've been tech oriented from day one, we have been able to adapt. I imagine if we were a traditional NGO, it would have been much harder."[32]

Others noted that shifting activities online allowed for a much *wider* range of participation. A Ukrainian policy NGO reported, "We started doing online events, and we got really different people in the room. Now if we have an event on money in politics, we'll have fifty [to] sixty people attend, including politicians—which just didn't happen with in-person events."[33] Another Ukrainian NGO

leader argued that rather than trying to "save the status quo" during the pandemic, civil society should embrace the move online as allowing for more exchange between capital-based and subnational groups, without the burden and added expense of travel (see box 4).

Yet respondents also noted the difficulty in facilitating meaningful two-way interaction online. Some argued that one-directional events are easier to hold online, while interactive training and community consultations are more difficult. Zimbabwean groups reflected that what they had gained in *breadth* by shifting to virtual community engagements they had lost in *depth*, as the quality of these interactions became more superficial. Nonetheless, the expansion in opportunities for elite-grassroots interaction—particularly in places with strong connectivity—could lay the groundwork for collaboration in the future.

Box 4: Pandemic Adaptations: Alternative Modes of Communication

To reach grassroots constituencies during the pandemic, some organizations are expanding their modes of communication. CODE/the Follow the Money initiative in Nigeria launched twelve radio shows across the country during the pandemic.[34] The pandemic-era Asivikelane program in South Africa, sponsored by the International Budget Partnership (IBP), now employs a combination of WhatsApp, community radio, SMS, print media, and social media.[35] A staffer from a policy and research think tank in Zimbabwe shared that they would have normally collected citizen input on Parliament bills in person, but instead live streamed programs over national radio stations.[36] Another Zimbabwean NGO, which works at the grassroots level across the country, found that it could reach 20,000 people via community radio compared to the fifty typically reached in one in-person event. One of the group's representatives noted that the pandemic "was a blessing in disguise and aided our advocacy."[37] Some groups even found creative means of fostering rapport across geographies. For example, the International Renaissance Foundation in Ukraine mailed attendees in online conferences souvenir and snack boxes containing products from small businesses suffering financial losses during the lockdown. Participants opened specific compartments simultaneously during the online event and enjoyed the same snacks during virtual coffee breaks, which helped foster a "sense of belonging and presence," a staff member reported. "We have received amazing feedback since starting this practice in mid-April."[38]

Technology Can Reinforce Grassroots Exclusion

In places where internet connectivity is limited or prohibitively expensive, the pandemic appears to have exacerbated the digital divide and is likely hindering partnership with grassroots actors. An NGO leader in the DRC reflected, "We organized webinars on corruption issues, but many people don't have internet access or it is low quality, so our activities had less impact."[39] In Pakistan, an NGO's legal clinic was already accessible in digital form, but because many potential beneficiaries were unsure how to navigate it, the organization suspended the clinic.[40] A Zimbabwean NGO leader commented that WhatsApp was very effective to engage some people, but inadvertently marginalized others, for whom even offering to pay for data was not enough to overcome technological barriers.

Integrity Watch Afghanistan observed that the problem of digital access at the community level has three dimensions: a lack of technological access, a lack of technological literacy (people don't know how to use remote platforms), and a lack of enthusiasm to learn (people are daunted by technology). Furthermore, grassroots leaders are focused elsewhere due to the pandemic. All in all, this has caused disadvantaged groups to become even *more* excluded from NGO activities during the pandemic. Integrity Watch Afghanistan's director explained, "This posed a big challenge to the whole idea of community-based monitoring, which is not just about monitoring the service but [is also about] creating spillover effects that could result in the sustainability of social accountability at local level."[41] NGO leaders in Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe similarly commented that a lack of access to the internet at the grassroots level constrained efforts to track coronavirus relief supplies.

The differential impacts of technology are epitomized in how respondents described the divergent impacts of the same pandemic-era change, such as a parliament shifting its operations online. In Ukraine, the Anti-Corruption Action Center reported that it had become "easier to watchdog the state," as the NGO can now track meetings online rather than juggling between eighteen committees running concurrently in-person.[42] In contrast, an elite NGO in South Africa noted that when regional legislatures went remote, it became harder to do the organization's provincial-level work training local communities to lobby for themselves, as many communities are very rural with no home computer access.

As civic actors look ahead toward a post-pandemic future, some note the benefits of conquering the technological learning curve during the coronavirus pandemic (see box 5). "We have learned a lot to transform our organizations on digital platforms," one Pakistani NGO leader explained, "though we

need more help to digitize our wider communities."[43] An NGO consultant in El Salvador echoed the point, arguing that CSOs know connectivity is a barrier and "need to be ready if there is another crisis, to be able to sustainably work with communities over time."[44]

Even civic actors in places with high internet penetration face challenges in this new remote environment. As the pandemic continues, videoconference fatigue has made it harder to connect outside one's locality, particularly in settings where domestic travel is restricted (see box 6). One Ukrainian subnational civil society leader explained, "Geography has become *more* important during this time. Those in Kyiv are able to get together and network often, but we haven't been able to join due to the pandemic."[45] These dynamics accentuate civil society divides and tend to exclude grassroots actors.

Box 5: Pandemic Adaptations: Shifting Target Demographics

To navigate the difficulty of connecting with grassroots communities during the pandemic, some organizations have shifted their target demographic. For instance, one Pakistani organization has responded to the pandemic by engaging more with student groups, who tend to have greater digital literacy. Meanwhile, Integrity Watch Afghanistan is exploring doing more work in urban settings, given better access there to technology compared to rural communities.[46]

Box 6: Pandemic Adaptations: Adapting Field Work

To navigate the difficulty of connecting with grassroots communities during the pandemic, some elite and hybrid CSOs are adapting their approach to field work. Representatives of PSAM and CRECO in South Africa and Kenya noted that they and their partners now travel with personal protective equipment, have reduced the length of community meetings, and have streamlined activities in order to cut down on time in the field—due to both safety reasons and government restrictions like curfews.[47] An NGO in Zimbabwe shared that they forged partnerships with local government in order to sustain implementation: "Before we held any meetings, we would give the Ministry of Health a chance to impart information on COVID-19, and then after that we would continue with our activities."[48]

Open Government Funding Creates Opportunity for Partnerships

While many civic actors have struggled to accommodate the unexpected expenses of the pandemic era, open government groups appear to face a more promising overall funding landscape. The extent to which they are able to resource their new and preexisting work—and the flexibility granted by funders to adapt as needed—will be important enablers in building new civic partnerships.

Overall Funding Challenges due to the Pandemic

Across the civil society sector, many organizations have faced funding challenges during the pandemic. This includes unanticipated expenses associated with holding events (such as providing masks and hand sanitizer) as well as providing modest financial support to staff and volunteers in need. These new expenses were accompanied in some instances by a drop in financial support from government and private entities and fewer new funding opportunities for anything not directly pandemic-related. Grassroots organizations that rely on individual donations have also faced budget shortfalls as community supporters themselves face financial hardship.

As a result of these financial constraints, some NGOs have had to cut salaries or reduce opportunities for staff to receive supplemental income via fieldwork. Others are exploring alternative budget sources in local government or developing a pay-for-service component to their work.

Expanded Funding for Open Government Activities Given Greater Public Interest

Yet the challenges faced by civic organizations broadly have not been as strongly felt by those within the open government domain, at least in the short term, as a result of the increased demand for their work. "All of the sudden, anticorruption is in vogue," remarked reAcción's director. "We are seeing an increase in funding on this topic, including for work at the grassroots level."[49] In addition to donor funding for projects, such as tracking coronavirus relief funds, some CSOs have harnessed their expanded online presence to pilot new crowdfunding measures, which could increase sustainability and sustain public engagement longer term.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether the influx in funding for openness work will last, especially as aid budgets and endowments are likely shrink in the coming years, but early indicators seem promising.[50] These resources will play a key role in determining whether groups can take on the time-intensive (and often underfunded) work of coalition building. Another valuable step that donors can take is to dedicate resources directly to partnership development, which tends to be neglected amid a focus on programmatic deliverables.

In addition to the *amount* of funding donors provide, the *flexibility* of that funding will also be important. This flexibility will help determine whether donors can support increased partnership development, especially in the fluctuating, prolonged pandemic environment, and the extent to which those partnerships prove resilient amid uncertain political, economic, and operational conditions. Some donors have launched new COVID-19-themed funding streams, while others have offered extensions on existing grants given pandemic restrictions on field activities. reAcción commented that one of its funders allowed it to shift focus areas in order to seize an opening that "was not in any log frame."[51] Other donors allowed funding to be used for novel purposes, such as paying for data to enable remote community meetings. In some cases, elite NGOs are providing grants or subgrants directly to grassroots partners; such support should also be flexible. FUNDE in El Salvador hosted videoconferences for grassroots partners to enable them to hold online workshops and provided mini grants to help partners run digital campaigns on democratic issues.[52] This type of flexibility is essential for practitioners seeking to build new civic partnerships during the pandemic.

Civic Space Vulnerabilities Underscore the Need for Partnership

Globally, attacks on activists and journalists have risen during the pandemic, and some governments are cynically taking advantage of emergency measures to restrict civic freedoms in a variety of ways, from selective and abusive enforcement of pandemic laws to surveillance and more.[53] However, rather than harm all practitioners equally, this research indicates that grassroots actors bear the brunt of pandemic-era civic space restrictions in the open government field.

Shrinking Civic Space for Open Government Practitioners

The stakes are higher than ever for those speaking out against abuses of government power. Several respondents commented on how government crackdowns during the pandemic had impacted their work. Tunisian civil society organizations noted that only humanitarian organizations were allowed to operate during periods of lockdown, while rights-based organizations, as other nonhumanitarian organizations, were restricted from doing so. In the run-up to the July 31, 2020, protests in Zimbabwe, which arose from anticorruption demands, activists and journalists were detained and beaten.[54] One Zimbabwean focus group participant acknowledged, "We started to self-censor because the

threats and risks were real."[55] An organization in El Salvador noted that as their work to oversee large sums of COVID-19-relief funds took shape, "we began to see strands of authoritarianism, and one of our lawyers was wiretapped."[56] The theme was echoed in Ukraine, where a grassroots activist observed that attacks on anticorruption activists had increased during the pandemic—and that many of these attacks were not being investigated.

Remote engagement with partners can be particularly challenging in such a context. As an NGO leader in a politically restrictive environment explained, "In virtual dialogues people will always be more concerned about their privacy and security than during the same engagement in person. They will be less open and a bit more withdrawn."[57] This can dampen attempts to foster candid, interactive forums via remote platforms.

Grassroots Actors Disproportionately Face Civic Space Constraints

In August 2020, Kenyan civic leaders organized protests in multiple cities to decry the alleged theft of coronavirus supplies. In doing so, they were taking substantial risks, given the well-documented incidents of Kenyan police allegedly beating citizens and activists in the early days of the pandemic.[58] According to one grassroots leader who was involved, the mobilization idea was developed by elites, yet they turned to the grassroots groups to execute it, exposing grassroots leaders to disproportionate risk. This activist commented, "Elites are urging the public to go to the streets, but they themselves are not there. Community-based organizations are taking up the challenge—we've gotten beaten, arrested."[59] This imbalance threatens to widen the chasm between elite and grassroots actors in Kenyan civil society.

Small and medium-sized organizations in the transparency and accountability field have long been underprepared to address holistic security concerns, compared to better-resourced NGOs. However, the pandemic seems to have heightened the risks faced by these actors, as the pace and scale of corruption scandals—and the corresponding advocacy response to them—has increased. Integrity Watch Afghanistan's director observed that "corrupt networks at the local level feel their effectiveness is reduced by an empowered civil society. So they have started threatening colleagues in the provinces." Some local officials tried to bribe NGO workers with food aid to compel them to stop speaking out, and "some corrupt networks have even succeeded in finding co-opted NGOs to speak on their behalf."[60] In this way, subnational actors are often the most vulnerable to attack and co-optation attempts amid rising civic space concerns.

Vertical Networks Can Mitigate Civic Space Risks

Overcoming the isolation that local activists face can be an important source of resilience. Linkages with bigger national organizations can lend valuable solidarity, legal support, press coverage, connections with international organizations, and ties to the diplomatic community. These linkages are especially useful in contending with the growing trend of legal and administrative harassment, which can signal a slow death for the work of human rights defenders.

The pandemic is also demonstrating that relationships with grassroots actors can be an important source of legitimacy for capital-based NGOs. In the case of TI-Madagascar, for example, the organization's outspoken support for transparency—from the earliest days of the state of emergency during the pandemic—earned it the label "enemies of the nation" by the president.[61] Soon after, a disinformation campaign against the organization started on Facebook, spreading the false claim that the organization was paid by opposition parties to overthrow the regime. Yet TI-Madagascar's public supporters quickly mobilized and exposed that this claim was the product of a fake account. For the NGO's board, this experience reinforced the power of grassroots relationships during a time of shrinking space.[62] As such, vertical alliances can lend credibility to elite actors while also bolstering grassroots actors facing increased risks during the pandemic.

Long-Term Loss of Public Trust?

In spite of—or perhaps because of—the forceful efforts of civil society groups to hold governments accountable, allegations of pandemic-era corruption have soared. As one activist from Latin America lamented, "It seems that elites bet that we would be so caught up in a national tragedy that they could steal money and nobody would notice because we would all be counting our dead. This is disgusting."[63] Ironically, the flurry of corruption scandals that has accompanied the pandemic—propelled by investigative journalists and civil society advocates—may expose or deter corruption in the short term, but may further damage faith in government in the long term. This could accelerate the rise of authoritarian populists, as seen in Brazil in the aftermath of the Operation Car Wash scandal. To avoid this trajectory, civil society and reformist politicians would need to form broad coalitions in support of rights approaches to cleaning up government. Such approaches could channel public disillusionment toward constructive policy change that furthers democracy.

Conclusion

Implications: Early Shifts in Civil Society Landscape

The elite-grassroots divide is problematic, in part, because it has inhibited civil society's collective ability to seize openings for political and governance reform. The pandemic appears to be a once-in-a-generation opening for reform. Thus, it is urgent for actors to redouble efforts to build civic unity and enhance cooperation in order to capitalize on the opportunities for major reform presented by this crisis.

This research suggests that although the pandemic has deepened some existing partnerships in the open government sector, it has not fundamentally dislodged the traditional dynamics of engagement between elite NGOs and grassroots groups—at least not yet. Nonetheless, the pandemic is starting to impact the civil society landscape, particularly in the four areas highlighted below, which could be early indicators of wider shifts to come.

1. Increased Reliance on Grassroots Participation
The pandemic has caused national NGOs to increasingly rely on local actors to implement program activities and community engagement work, due to travel and curfew constraints. While not originally intended, this shift may nonetheless create new openings for grassroots organizations to assume greater influence and leadership in such vertical engagements in the future.

2. Greater Resonance of Elite Work with the General Public
Across the board, the research points to greater public interest in transparency, accountability, and civic participation work during the pandemic, as the stakes of corruption are visible and high. This benefits both elite and grassroots open government advocates, who are seeing a renewed sense of urgency in their work. The uptick in public interest is likely to disproportionately benefit elite NGOs, who had more distance to overcome in connecting with everyday people, given the technical, jargon-heavy nature of their work.

3. Emergence of More Aspiring Hybrid Organizations

One of the strategies considered in Bellows' previous research for overcoming the disconnect between elite and grassroots civic actors was the cultivation of hybrid organizations, which have in-house capacity for both technical policy work and local community work. The pandemic may produce a swell of aspiring hybrids—both among elite actors who are now harnessing a wider base of public interest, as well as among grassroots actors who were able to build new bridges to policymakers due to remote-work and wish to sustain those relationships. Yet as the number of hybrid organizations grows, it will be important for field actors to reflect on how to preserve a healthy division of labor in the field and maintain specialized roles. Otherwise, overlapping mandates and capabilities among aspiring hybrids could lead to a less efficient and more competitive ecosystem.

4. Accelerated Adaptation and Learning in Operational Approaches

The pandemic has impacted the everyday activities of elite NGOs and grassroots actors alike. In general, researchers see the most changes in program implementation (rather than in strategy). For instance, many elite NGOs have shifted the way they conduct field work (local research, trainings, and community-level consultations). In this and other domains, 2020 has been a year of developing new ways of working, some of which may have a lasting legacy.

Recommendations

The following recommendations build on Bellows' January paper, introducing several additional areas for attention.

For All Practitioners

1. To seize the pandemic window and mitigate civic space threats, practitioners should **cultivate new elite-grassroots ("vertical") partnerships** and aim for those built on mutual respect and co-ownership. The pandemic has not yet triggered more vertical partnerships at scale, but it has underscored the complementary roles that elite, grassroots, and hybrid entities can offer to each other. Initial steps toward building these partnerships include:

   • *Mutual recognition of the benefits of cooperation*: Both sides must recognize what can be gained from the difficult work of partnership. In the words of Hussein Khalid, the executive director of HAKI Africa, who has written about this topic in the Kenyan context:

Widespread Adaptations: The Evolving Work of Open Government Civic Actors

Corruption was a preexisting condition that made the pandemic worse in many countries. As occurred with the Ebola outbreak, low trust in government caused some citizens not to believe initially that the coronavirus was even real and was instead "a government gimmick to attract international funding."[64] Given the profound governance deficits in many countries, to what extent has the content of open government work changed during the pandemic?

With the arrival of the coronavirus, some community-based organizations pivoted toward responding to humanitarian needs. For example, Safai Karamchari Andolan in India temporarily put its engagement with IBP on hold to address the emergency necessities of its members.[65] However, most organizations sustained their open government focus out of a recognition of the essential role played by watchdogs during a humanitarian crisis. As Integrity Watch Afghanistan put it, "If you don't fight corruption, this limits your ability to fight COVID-19."[66]

As such, the pandemic largely appears to have accelerated—rather than dramatically changed—the sector's existing activities. In the e-governance domain, the pandemic has catalyzed more automation of public data about service delivery and opened new dialogues with civil society about digital governance. Groups in Zimbabwe reported wider interest from across civil society on internet access and freedom issues. Similarly, the pandemic has given new momentum to advocates for technology as a means of expanding access to justice in Nigeria and elsewhere.

NGOs in Pakistan and elsewhere have launched new work on emergency procurement or expanded use of existing tools—like ProZorro, a public e-procurement system in Ukraine—in smaller cities. Advocates in Africa drew lessons from the Ebola epidemic to anticipate gaps in government due diligence and mobilized the Follow the Money network across Africa and beyond. Civic actors in the DRC, El Salvador, and Madagascar launched educational campaigns and hotlines where citizens report coronavirus mismanagement, while IBP's partner in Indonesia shifted an existing social audit program online to reach participants in a 20,000-member organization.[67] These adaptations, while not wholly different from the previous work of the sector, demonstrate how open government organizations are capturing the momentum of the pandemic to be relevant in new ways.

"Grassroots groups based in Mombasa can't access budget information from the government in Nairobi, whereas a group like Transparency International could. But the question of whether that information is *useful* is dependent on us [grassroots actors]. We can tell you whether that road was truly constructed. Each actor has their role to play."[68]

- *Scoping the landscape:* Even for organizations that see the benefits of cooperation, the practical realities of brokering such partnerships can prove challenging. Some grassroots actors are tied to political parties, as in Ukraine. Connecting across geography can be difficult, especially during a pandemic. And by definition, informal civic networks are more fluid than their established NGO counterparts in terms of resourcing, leadership, mission, and activities. A movement organized around one specific goal may dissolve when that goal is accomplished, public momentum fizzles, or a charismatic leader moves on, which can undermine coalition building with elite partners.

- *Identifying relevant partners:* Elite organizations report that identifying grassroots partners can be a particular challenge in the open government field. As a representative from TI-Brazil explained, "Finding local groups that care about corruption can be very amorphous and circuitous. It might be that some groups are taking care of a local park and then they encounter a case of corruption, and now they want to partner."[69] Such partnership is welcome, but these volunteer-driven projects often dissolve after a few years and are "followed by long recesses of civic mobilization." Although the "dynamism of start-ups" has value, the lack of continuity among grassroots organization, especially in major cities, also makes it harder to engage in "longer-term transformation processes."[70] Episodic and reactive partnerships provide good fuel for purpose-driven collaborations, but require further resources and support structures to allow cooperation to build over time. In addition, elite anticorruption NGOs should conduct proactive outreach to their elite counterparts in other sectors (health, environment, education) in order to be on the radar of grassroots groups from those sectors who might encounter corruption in the course of their work.

2. Practitioners should **reflect on and incorporate recent innovations** into their modes of working. To do so, practitioners could:

- First, look back and take stock of lessons learned. Reflect on what changes and adaptations have emerged in 2020 that would be helpful to sustain longer term. Document and archive these innovations. Compare these innovations and lessons learned with peers elsewhere.
- Second, make organizational adjustments to embrace those innovations that work. Consid-

er the benefits of combining remote and in-person work. For example, organizations can hold mixed in-person and online trainings. Consider how to mitigate the risks of increasing grassroots exclusion if contemplating a shift to more online work.

- Third, strike a balance moving forward between maintaining strategic direction and cultivating organizational adaptability. It is essential to be flexible enough to respond nimbly as the ongoing health, economic, and governance crises evolve. Yet organizations that are perpetually reactive risk losing sight of their broader strategy and comparative advantage, which could have debilitating impacts longer term.

Additional Recommendations for Elite/National NGOs

1. Continue to invest in enhancing **public understanding** of corruption and oversight risks related to the coronavirus. This will be critical to prolonging the window of opportunity for broad reform that comes with widespread public interest in specialized open government work.

2. Allow a high degree of **flexibility** for grassroots partners who are implementing program activities in adapted ways, including in the terms for subgrants with such partners.

3. Proactively reach out to build **deeper egalitarian partnerships** with grassroots actors long term, while recognizing that these actors may be currently bearing the brunt of pandemic-related operating challenges, including technological hurdles and civic space constraints.

Additional Recommendations for Grassroots/Local Groups

1. Explore how the increased elite reliance on local leaders due to the pandemic can translate into more sustained, **grassroots leadership** in the open government sector, both independently of and in conjunction with elite organizations.

2. Build **horizontal alliances** across subnational or community-based actors. Such networks could enable grassroots groups to engage with elites from a position of strength. Additionally, the pooled resources of these groups may in some instances be able to directly fill the gaps that elite actors would have addressed. Grassroots-to-grassroots networks may also act as a conduit for larger donor funding, thus serving some functions of "intermediary organizations," with lower overhead costs and greater collective ownership.

1. Donors should invest in **coalition building** in places where it has not yet happened. The work of building partnerships tends to be under-resourced, and donors could play a powerful role by providing dedicated and flexible resources for the time and skill-intensive work of partnership development. This could help reverse the inadvertent harm that some donors have caused in perpetuating competition and division among field actors. Donors could even use their support to incentivize elite actors to engage in the formation of respectful, co-equal coalitions with grassroots actors.

2. Channel more resources directly toward **local and community-based actors**. The current distribution of resources across the field, which is tilted toward capital-based technical organizations, makes it hard for grassroots actors entering into partnership with elites to negotiate equitable terms. As the head of HAKI Africa in Kenya observed, "In most situations, the elites have the financial muscle, so they will muzzle the grassroots and take credit for their work."[71] In the context of Ukraine, "organizations based in Kyiv usually underestimate the role of grassroots organizations in advocacy campaigns," according to a representative from the Reanimation Package of Reforms. "Most advocacy campaigns become negotiations between Kyiv-based organizations and political decisionmakers, and there's no room for [ordinary] people or grassroots groups."[72] Bolstering grassroots actors in their own right could enable those that choose to form alliances with elite actors to do so from a position of strength, while lowering the risk of unhelpful contagion effects from established NGOs.

3. Mitigate the **digital divide** and **civic space burdens** that the pandemic has revealed, which fall disproportionately to grassroots actors. Corresponding investments in organizational health might involve building technological capacity, addressing holistic security risks, and facilitating peer exchange on such topics.

4. Encourage grantees to reflect upon their pandemic-era adaptations. Looking ahead, provide the financial flexibility needed for organizations to sustain a culture of **adaptive learning**, even while maintaining their strategic focus.

5. Quickly deploy resources to help seize opportunities for substantial **open government policy wins** based on the needs and momentum surfaced by the pandemic.

The pandemic has uprooted lives and organizations in many ways around the world—and the open government civil society sector is no exception. The upside is that the pandemic has created a win-

dow of opportunity, with increased broad public interest in how to bring about more transparency and accountability to public sector activities, especially coronavirus relief spending and programs. Elite NGOs and grassroots actors alike benefit from this window of opportunity but would be much better positioned to seize it by creating more vertical coalitions with their civil society peers. These broad coalitions would include the diverse skill sets needed to help ensure that the historic pandemic can drive advancements in participatory and accountable governance for years to come.

Appendix

TI-Madagascar

Historically, TI-Madagascar was an elite organization, part of a highly professionalized NGO sector in the capital. With new leadership two years ago, the organization started to shift toward a hybrid model, guided by the notion that "anticorruption isn't just a fight—it's a war, and you have to have an army behind you." Since then, TI-Madagascar has built an army of 800 volunteers from across the country.

Soon after coronavirus hit, TI-Madagascar launched a whistleblower hotline. Citizens called in to report the embezzlement of pandemic-related cash transfers and the organization would analyze the complaints, contact the relevant authorities, and advocate for redress. The hotline proved to be a valuable way of keeping in touch with people, and TI-Madagascar plans to keep it going post-pandemic. The unexpected level of citizen engagement with the hotline also reflects a deeper shift, in the organization's view: COVID-19-era corruption has produced a drastic change in people's behavior, helping overcome traditional apathy about governance challenges, as desperation drives people to speak out.[73]

reAcción

As a youth-led grassroots anticorruption group based in eastern Paraguay, it was initially hard for reAcción to get taken seriously by a civil society sector dominated by technical and Asuncion-based organizations. That started to shift over the last few years as reAcción developed more technical capacity and its impact from years of community became more visible on the national and international levels. reAcción also took a stand on the lack of implementation of Open Government Partnership commitments, a move that earned the group respect from other NGOs.

During the pandemic, reAcción worked with IDEA, an established technical NGO with experience in strategic litigation, to file a joint lawsuit regarding the government's failure to release income/asset disclosures for employees responsible for allocating funds from Paraguay's coronavirus emergency fund. Alongside the legal action, reAcción conducted an intensive social media campaign, which leveraged its distinct capabilities and reach compared to IDEA. A month later, reAcción and IDEA won the suit, and immediately began exploring new partnerships together.[74]

TI-Brazil

The Brazilian anticorruption climate has become extremely polarized in recent years. In the wake of the historic Operation Car Wash scandal, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro claimed the anticorruption mantle, which has caused some to view the anticorruption agenda as authoritarian. As a result, TI-Brazil—a staff-driven, capital-based NGO—was careful to "hold tight" to its work, in order to try to avoid the organization's capture. While understandable, this risk-consciousness ended up hindering mobilization and partnership development.

The pandemic helped change these dynamics. The high stakes of coronavirus broke through some of the politicization of the anticorruption agenda, a shift that TI-Brazil reinforced through straightforward messages like, "Transparency saves lives." TI-Brazil also launched a major emergency procurement monitoring project, in partnership with the national audit institution, which generated substantial progress in government transparency. TI-Brazil shared its methodology with subnational groups, who applied the approach locally. In doing so, new local partnerships have sprouted that are prompting TI-Brazil to reflect on how, moving forward, they can balance the need to manage risks with the benefits of "losing control" in order to achieve wider impact.[75]

About the Authors

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