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Defending Civic Space: Is the International Community Stuck?

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Executive Summary

Civic Space Continues to Close

Since the mid-2000s, civic space has come under attack in many countries around the world. To counter this trend, transnational actors that support civil society have responded in many ways—from exerting diplomatic pressure and building international norms to providing emergency funds for activists.

Despite these efforts, governments continue to impose legal and extralegal restrictions amid a worsening larger political environment for civil society. Closing civic space now appears to be just one part of a much broader pattern of democratic recession and authoritarian resurgence. The international response seems stuck: some useful efforts have been undertaken, but they appear too limited, loosely focused, and reactive.

Areas of Progress in the International Response

- **Research and knowledge dissemination:** Timely information about civil society restrictions and overall trends is now widely available. Funders, policymakers, and relevant multilateral organizations are generally more aware of the problem; some actors have carried out internal strategic reviews and trainings to strengthen their programmatic and policy responses.

- **Support for local resistance and adaptation:** Major funders have established or expanded emergency funds for persecuted rights activists and organizations. Some have also initiated programs to help civic actors adapt to regulatory, political, and legal pressures, while some have examined ways to offer more flexible funding. Several new transnational coalitions and initiatives have been set up to share lessons and lead joint campaigns.

- **Diplomatic pressure and international policy changes:** Western governments have sometimes applied pressure on countries that are closing civic space, and they have supported advocacy in international bodies such as the United Nations. Civil society advocates have successfully pushed for reforms to harmful counterterrorism regulations, and some have begun engaging private sector actors on the importance of protecting civic space.

Factors Limiting the International Response

- **Lack of conceptual and strategic clarity:** Ongoing confusion over the root causes of closing civic space impedes efforts to develop a more unified strategy. Diverse actors disagree on whether tackling the challenge will require addressing the global political backlash against progressive causes or the overall global democratic recession, or whether a more focused approach would be more effective.

- **Countervailing interests:** Most Western governments still do not strongly prioritize closing civic space in their foreign policy agendas. They often refrain from escalating diplomatic pressure on repressive governments for fear of damaging their geopolitical, security, or economic interests. The loss of U.S. leadership on the issue has been particularly damaging.

- **Closing space at home:** Civic space is now under threat in many established democracies, and the international repercussions are profound. Western governments that lash out against domestic critics are less likely to speak out against civil society restrictions abroad, and they have less credibility when they do so. Their actions also set a negative example for leaders in other parts of the world.

- **Inadequate scale:** The resources committed to fighting the problem have been insufficient. Funders have also generally failed to embed their responses into a broader strategic framework. Explanations include a weak appetite for political risk among funders, the cross-cutting nature of the problem, and a lack of clarity on what a large-scale response might look like.

- **Working in silos:** Weak coordination and information sharing between different parts of the assistance community persist. Obstacles include the diverging policy and organizational interests within and between governments, as well as divisions in the wider funder community, including between human rights organizations and development and humanitarian actors.

- **Struggles to change aid practices:** Implementing far-reaching changes in aid practices has proven difficult, due to bureaucratic inertia, risk aversion, and narrower methods of monitoring and evaluation.

- **Chasing a moving target:** The problem of closing space continues to evolve quickly, which makes it difficult for the international community to anticipate new openings and threats. For example, international actors have been slow to react to the spread of new technological tools for restricting civic space online and offline.

Policy Recommendations

- **Develop a strategic framework** that links closing civic space to other key foreign policy challenges, articulates a positive vision of civic space globally, and offers tailored tactical guidance. Such a strategy should differentiate short-, medium-, and long-term priorities and distinguish between different types of political contexts.

- **Improve foreign policy alignment** by issuing specific guidance on defending civic space to embassies, systematically integrating the issue into diplomatic training and senior leadership briefings, designating a senior official to spearhead interagency coordination on civic space– related issues, and amplifying the voices of civil society actors, particularly in restrictive contexts.

- **Avoid setting negative precedents** by ensuring that domestic legislation does not threaten civic space. Nongovernmental actors should build cross-border alliances to share knowledge and

resources, engage lawmakers in established democracies who stigmatize civil society, and champion transparency and accountability in internal practices and external partnerships.

- **Bolster coordination** among concerned transnational actors by evaluating existing mechanisms, investing in new platforms or tools for information sharing and institutional learning, expanding country-level networks, and forging new partnerships between governmental and private funders.

- **Adjust funding practices** to ensure a balance between support for long-term institution-building and catalytic funding, and track how much funding goes directly to local organizations as core versus project support. Funders should continue to expand flexible funding strategies for hostile environments, work with intermediaries that can reach a wider range of partners, and reduce grantees' administrative burdens.

- **Anticipate new opportunities and threats** by, for example, monitoring and recognizing examples of positive reform, developing targeted roadmaps that identify opportunities and flashpoints in collaboration with embassies or local partners, and investing in technological know-how.

Civic Space Continues to Close

In the mid-2000s, a disturbing international trend emerged: a growing number of governments around the world began restricting space they had previously permitted for independent civil society, using both formal legal and regulatory measures and extralegal actions. These governments also targeted international support for civil society by, for example, hindering foreign organizations from providing assistance to civic groups and denouncing such aid as illegitimate political meddling. Autocratic governments in Ethiopia, Russia, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe initially propelled the trend, but over time, a wide variety of governments joined in—including some democratic ones, such as India, Israel, and Peru.[1]

Transnational actors that support civil society in developing countries and postcommunist countries noticed and began responding to this trend. These actors include most major Western foreign ministries and aid agencies, some multilateral organizations, many international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), and several private philanthropic foundations. They initiated what soon became ubiquitous discussions and strategic reviews focused on "closing civic space" or "shrinking civic space." Their responses ranged from applying diplomatic pressure on countries that had enacted new civil society restrictions to establishing emergency funds and programs to help besieged civil society organizations survive in more restrictive environments.[2]

Despite these responses, the negative trend has continued and even intensified. Freedom House data show that, between 2006 and 2019, associational and organizational rights have eroded significantly in forty-three countries, while improving in only sixteen.[3] A November 2018 CIVICUS report found that "civil society is under serious attack in 111 countries," with restrictions often taking the form of new NGO legislation, counterterrorism measures, and administrative rules.[4] In a few cases, domestic and international advocacy has managed to ward off or limit repressive measures.[5] But the wider trend of governments using legal and extralegal means to limit or close civic space so far shows no signs of abating.

Moreover, the wider political context for civil society has worsened in significant ways. When closing civic space first emerged as an identifiable trend, the concerned international community largely saw it as a discrete problem, a somewhat self-contained stain on a larger picture of continued global democratic enlargement, or at least stability. Yet over the last ten years, a broader pattern of democratic recession and authoritarian resurgence has become evident. Closing civic space now appears as just one part of an encompassing set of daunting democratic challenges. These include stagnation and often backsliding in new or emerging democracies; serious political woes in some established democracies, including the United States; the hardening of autocracy in many countries; and greater transnational assertiveness on the part of some authoritarian powers.[6]

Fueled by larger nationalist, populist, and sometimes extremist currents, illiberal political forces are driving democratic backsliding in a growing number of countries. These forces often stigmatize and repress activists fighting for the rights of minorities and marginalized social groups—key issues on the civic agenda. In some countries, the election of nationalist or right-wing populist leaders and parties has given greater political cover to illiberal or extremist nonstate actors, who often directly target minority communities and government critics.[7]

Several other elements contribute to this gloomy larger picture. First, communication and information technologies have fundamentally reshaped core aspects of democracy and politics, redefining what constitutes civic space to include virtual platforms and networks. Autocratic governments are increasingly using these technologies to amplify their repressive tactics and illiberal narratives, both within their own societies and beyond their borders.[8] Their arsenals include the use of new surveillance tools, online harassment, and social media to spread disinformation on a much wider scale. At the same time, democracies are grappling with the implications of technological innovation for privacy and information consumption, as well as the power of private companies to shape citizens' attitudes and preferences.

Second, the proliferation of elected strongmen with crony ties to business interests has spurred an uptick in state and nonstate attacks on human rights defenders working on environmental protection, natural resource conservation, and indigenous and land rights. Particularly in Latin America and parts of South Asia, commercial interests have pushed for the criminalization of environmental protests and advocacy, while gangs and militias tied to landowners and corporations use violence to displace communities and target those who resist.[9]

Third, the global democratic recession has proceeded hand in hand with increasing authoritarian efforts to weaken or co-opt international institutions that help shape international norms and hold governments to account for their conduct. Examples range from the Chinese government playing a more activist role in the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council to China, Russia, and other authoritarian states jointly developing democratically problematic proposals and UN resolutions on global internet governance.[10] They have been able to do so in part because some Western democracies have disengaged from these same institutions or have been slow to recognize and counteract growing authoritarian influence.[11]

Yet the global picture is not entirely negative. Large-scale protest movements pressing for greater governmental responsiveness and openness have multiplied, sparked by discontent over poor basic services, corruption, and a lack of alternations in power.[12] New youth-led movements are emerging around climate change mitigation. While such mobilizations have often been met with new protest regulations, violent policing, and surveillance, some have brought down corrupt leaders or triggered democratic reforms—such as in Armenia, Romania, and South Korea. At least a few governments

are opening up rather than closing down politically and have sought to loosen onerous legal restrictions on civil society. Most recently, Ethiopia's new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, spearheaded reforms aimed at opening political and civic space, including a less draconian NGO law.[13] And even in politically repressive contexts, citizens are organizing in more informal and fluid ways, particularly at the local level.[14] While new technologies are enabling increased state surveillance and repression, they are also helping citizens to come together around shared concerns, build communities, and take collective action.

Nevertheless, the global picture is sobering and presents hard questions for international actors committed to defending civic space. Many policymakers and aid officials believe they have gained a stronger understanding of the issue and have undertaken some useful responses. But there is also a quiet yet widespread sense among some of those most engaged on the issue that the international response is stuck. They see diagnostic efforts repeated again and again without commensurate action being taken, responses being drawn from a limited menu that does not match the scale of the challenge, and international attention showing signs of drifting rather than focusing harder, even as the problem worsens.

To take stock of the state of the international response to closing civic space, three questions must be examined:

1. What are the main areas of progress in the international response?

2. What are the main factors limiting the response?

3. How might those limitations be at least partially overcome, and how might the response be strengthened?

The focus here is on the international rather than domestic or regional responses to shrinking civic space. The term "international actors" is used as a shorthand for the (primarily) Western bilateral aid agencies and foreign ministries, multilateral organizations, INGOs, and private foundations that are working on this issue. In many cases, these international actors collaborate with or directly fund regional and national organizations, and their efforts thus have direct implications for local responses. However, the aim here is not to assess the wide range of often innovative and creative resistance strategies initiated at the national or local levels.

Areas of Progress in the International Response

International responses to closing civic space mostly fall into three broad categories (see table 1). The first is generating research and analysis about the nature of the problem and spreading this knowledge both within organizations supporting civil society and within foreign policy communities more broadly. Public and private research funding has supported many studies of the closing space trend by think tanks and INGOs, as well as numerous workshops and conferences to let concerned actors share perspectives and lessons learned.[15]

The second category involves helping civic activists and organizations in affected countries fight back against new restrictions and continue their work under more difficult circumstances. Such efforts include emergency funds for activists, support for advocacy work and new protective measures, new funding mechanisms aimed at circumventing restrictions and strengthening local organizations' resilience, and the establishment of new innovative civil society coalitions at the local, regional, and international levels.

Third, concerned governments and other organizations are pushing back directly by applying diplomatic pressure on repressive governments. Some of these concerned actors are also seeking to influence broader international norms and policies related to civic space, including in the realms of development cooperation and counterterrorism.

While a comprehensive assessment of these responses is beyond the scope of this study, some initial observations can be offered on the progress to date.

Research and Knowledge Dissemination

Researchers and organizations have generated and disseminated considerable knowledge about the closing space problem within relevant policy and aid communities. Timely information about civil society restrictions and overarching trends is now widely available, especially thanks to the pioneering monitoring and analysis work of CIVICUS and the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. Various networks and organizations have produced tool kits that outline advocacy and response strategies to support civil society.[16] As a result, there is significant awareness of the issue among INGOs and donor organizations working on governance, development, and human rights and at least some awareness within broader Western foreign policy circles. Some aid providers have carried out internal strategic reviews to strengthen their programmatic and policy responses and have implemented trainings for staff and management.

Table 1:
How the International Community Is Responding to Closing Space

Research and knowledge dissemination	Research and analysis by think tanks, universities, advocacy organizations, and funders
	Strategic reviews, awareness raising, and training within organizations working transnationally to support civil society
	International conferences to share experiences and lessons learned and to identify joint priorities
Support for local resistance and adaptation	New emergency funds for activists
	Support for active resistance within affected countries
	Reshaped funding methods to better fit the realities of closing space
	Measures to encourage greater local philanthropic support for civil society
	New civil society coalitions and funder coordination initiatives
Diplomatic pressure and international policy changes	Bilateral and multilateral diplomatic pressure
	Efforts to strengthen relevant international norms
	Modifications to the Financial Action Task Force regulations
	Engagement with private sector actors

However, most analyses of the issue stem from organizations situated in the Global North, which have not always systematically disseminated this work to activists and organizations that operate in closing space contexts.[17] Internal and cross-institutional learning from past successes and failures has been inconsistent. Moreover, silos and gaps in understanding persist between different communities of international actors.

Support for Local Resistance and Adaptation

Providing emergency funds: Over the past decade, major donor organizations have joined together to establish or expand several major emergency funds for persecuted rights activists and organizations, such as the European Union's ProtectDefenders mechanism and the Emergency Fund for Human Rights Defenders At Risk, the Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund, and a new pooled fund for environmental defenders.[18] Activists can access these pots of money quickly for a range of purposes, like paying legal and medical expenses, monitoring trials, temporarily relocating endangered individuals, or capitalizing on brief moments of opportunity for advocacy. These funds have provided vital help to thousands of activists and organizations.

At the same time, the scale of repression globally goes far beyond what this type of emergency assistance can alleviate.[19] Accordingly, most funders and policymakers view them as a limited tool, valuable for carving out some space for resistance but incapable of reversing broader political trends.

Supporting active resistance within affected countries: Some funders have made new assistance available to help activists in countries with closing space adapt to and/or resist new regulatory, political, and legal pressures. This includes programs to help activists analyze pending measures, learn from the experience of activists in other sectors or countries, form resistance coalitions, and mount advocacy and public awareness campaigns. For example, the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society and the Fund for Global Human Rights have convened dialogues with civic actors in selected countries that have experienced or are at risk of civil society restrictions. These dialogues aim to foster cooperation and to ensure greater alignment between external funders and domestic actors.[20] Funders are also increasingly offering training and protective technologies to improve local organizations' digital security and help them protect themselves from online surveillance and harassment.[21] Some exploratory efforts have focused on helping civic organizations forge new narratives about their work and civic engagement more broadly, so as to counter governmental smear campaigns and public mistrust of civil society.[22]

It is difficult to gauge the overall impact of these measures. Funders generally recognize that resistance to civic space restrictions needs to be locally led, particularly since governments are adept at using international funding and ties to delegitimize their civil society critics. Yet external assistance

has helped equip local actors with the necessary information to engage government officials or conduct advocacy campaigns. For example, the Civic Space Initiative, created in 2012 by four INGOs with the support of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), "has provided technical and advocacy support" in more than thirty-five countries, and the agency has helped local activists successfully push back against restrictive measures in Kenya, Ukraine, and other places (and propose enabling legislation in others).[23] Local organizations also highlight peer-to-peer learning initiatives as particularly useful.[24] In some cases, external support has helped kick-start new forms of cross-sectoral collaboration, though funders note that such efforts require longer-term investments.[25]

Making adaptive changes to funding practices: In addition, many aid providers have begun examining their own funding practices to better help their local partners resist and survive. Besieged activists frequently call for more flexible, core support in place of project funding to help them take advantage of sudden opportunities and respond to new threats. Funders often discuss this imperative—sometimes framed as the need for greater local ownership—but still implement it inconsistently. One tangible example is the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy, which enjoys greater flexibility than traditional funders in supporting informal groups, movements, and individuals. Some funders are also trying to help civic groups access alternative resources. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, is supporting the development of local philanthropy in some partner countries and helping civil society organizations use new digital technologies to raise funds through crowdsourcing and other means.[26]

Establishing new coalitions and initiatives: Several new transnational coalitions and initiatives have been set up to tackle new threats facing civil society, share lessons and resources, and anticipate future challenges. For example, USAID and Sida have jointly funded a Civil Society Innovation Initiative, which established seven regional hubs involving civil society organizations from ninety-three countries that work on locally defined priorities.[27] While the initiative's co-design and co-funding process posed challenges, its flexible approach has given rise to several new civil society partnerships and campaigns.

Meanwhile, the Community of Democracies set up a working group on civic space in 2009 that includes fourteen governments, the EU, and five INGOs.[28] This group shares lessons, monitors incipient threats to civic space around the world, and issues calls for action to try to foster more coordinated responses. The Task Team on CSO Development Effectiveness and Enabling Environment, a multistakeholder initiative aimed at advocating effective civil society participation in international development processes, has also served as a coordinating body among major bilateral donors. In addition, a number of groups bring together private funders, including the Funders' Initiative on Civil Society, the Donor Working Group on Cross-Border Philanthropy, the Enabling Environment for Civil Society Working Group run by the Human Rights and Democracy Network, and the Environmental Funders Working Group on Civil Society.

Diplomatic Pressure and International Policy Changes

Engaging diplomatically with governments that are closing space: Western governments and international organizations sometimes pressure governments that are closing civic and political space to limit such actions or reverse course. For example, when the Kyrgyz government proposed a so-called foreign agents law in 2013, several international institutions—including the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe—strongly criticized the proposed measure, and representatives of key donor governments warned of potential negative consequences in high-level meetings. This pressure helped decrease the executive's enthusiasm for the law, which was ultimately rejected in 2016.[29]

At least some such high-level engagement over civic space restrictions has taken place in recent years in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Hungary, Israel, Russia, and Ukraine. But diplomatic pressure has often been inconsistent and poorly coordinated; civic activists note that governments tend to take a "wait and see approach" instead of reacting quickly.[30] Moreover, civil society advocates currently lack indicators or other tools to measure the extent to which governments are exerting political pressure and when or whether this type of pressure is effective.

Strengthening relevant international norms: Some INGOs and donor governments have also sought to establish or strengthen international norms relevant to closing civic space, both by raising global awareness and engaging with the UN and other international bodies. For example, they have supported the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association with technical expertise and human resources, helped UN mandate holders coordinate their actions on issues related to civic space, and enabled civil society participation in the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review process.[31] Drawing on existing policy frameworks such as the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee is in the process of formulating policy guidance focused on member states' work with civil society in development cooperation. Multilateral initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative have also recently taken up the issue of shrinking civic space.[32]

Perhaps the most important achievement in this area is the emergence of a global discussion on closing civic space. Reports and statements by the UN Special Rapporteur have been influential in building international soft norms, particularly by framing organizations' right to access resources as a key element of freedom of association. Yet many governments continue to challenge these norms, and the constraining effect of these norms on government behavior has been weak overall. While

they present useful international advocacy tools, they are often too legalistic and disconnected from local political realities to be useful to civic activists on the ground.[33]

Modifying FATF regulations: One important objective for civil society advocates has been to prevent governments from using the international counterterrorism agenda to restrict NGOs and civil society more broadly. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) regulations aimed at preventing money laundering and terrorist financing are notable examples. Until 2016, the FATF's Recommendation 8 and the accompanying interpretive note had characterized the NGO sector as "vulnerable to misuse by terrorists," and its guidelines often led governments to implement new restrictive NGO regulations ahead of FATF assessments (which influence developing countries' ability to access aid, trade, and foreign investment).[34]

In response, a global coalition of INGOs successfully pressured the FATF to revise its recommendation, and the group continues to lobby for greater transparency and civil society participation in FATF risk assessments. Various organizations have created regional hubs that bring together civil society organizations with expertise in combating money laundering and terrorist financing to monitor how governments are implementing these changes.[35] While challenges in the FATF process persist, the revision of the recommendation has helped weaken arguments by governments that claim they are following an international counterterrorism mandate when they pass restrictive civil society laws.

Engaging with business communities: Lastly, a few INGOs have established initiatives to engage the international business community and relevant domestic private sector actors on protecting civic space, such as the Business Network on Civic Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders set up by the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre and the International Service for Human Rights.[36] The B-Team, a nonprofit initiative formed by a group of business leaders, has also highlighted the business case for civic space.[37]

Yet, in general, efforts to engage the private sector have proved slow going. Environmental and rights organizations have tried to work with corporations in the agribusiness and mining sectors, but getting companies to make concrete commitments has proven challenging. In repressive contexts, businesses often have strong incentives to avoid confronting governments that are closing space in order to avoid unwanted attention or interference.

Factors Limiting the International Response

Although these various efforts have been useful, civic space continues to close in many places. Many policymakers and aid practitioners who have been most closely engaged worry that the overall international response has not matched the scale of the challenge. In interviews and conversations, they highlight multiple limiting factors.

Lack of Conceptual and Strategic Clarity

The numerous studies and reports on closing space, together with the many gatherings to discuss and analyze the problem, have unquestionably generated much knowledge about the issue. Yet the concerned community of international actors still lacks actual consensus on the roots of the problem and what should be done about it.[38]

As noted above, when the issue of closing civic space first emerged, many policymakers and aid practitioners viewed it as a discrete problem that they could diagnose and treat separately from other political concerns. As a result, international responses focused heavily on preventing restrictive NGO laws and finding new channels for external support for civic groups. Yet as the trend continued, analysts and policymakers began viewing it as part of a wider, interrelated set of political woes afflicting more and more countries around the world—including limitations on media freedom, attacks on opposition parties, new antiliberal narratives and ideologies, and the growing transnational assertiveness of authoritarian powers. Some practitioners therefore began calling for responses that would tackle not just specific laws and practices but also the root causes of this broader shift. However, clearly defining these root causes has proven challenging, as the search for drivers makes it more difficult to delineate the boundaries of the problem. Two main areas of confusion and division have become apparent.

First, the assistance community has struggled to clarify the relationship between closing civic space and the wider political backlash against the progressive causes that are important to many civic actors. This lack of clarity is rooted in a core tension at the heart of international civil society assistance: while donors typically frame civil society development as a goal in and of itself, they have often supported groups that advance certain normative sociopolitical goals, such as social inclusion, environmental protection, gender equality, and minority rights. As a result, many funders—particularly left-leaning private funders and INGOs—find it difficult to disentangle new restrictions on civic space from increased resistance against these socially progressive issue areas. To compound the challenge, these two trends *are* indeed closely related—many governments that are closing civic space are also advancing nationalist, socially conservative ideologies. These governments tend to particularly target groups and activists that threaten their political narratives and goals—such as LGBTQ+ and feminist organizations, indigenous and land rights activists, and religious and ethnic

minorities. In many cases, these already marginalized communities also face increased threats from nonstate actors.

This overlap creates strategic challenges for assistance providers. Is it possible or desirable to separate efforts to protect civic space from threats facing specific groups and progressive causes, or are these simply two sides of the same coin? Some experts and practitioners view civic space as a politically neutral value: the right of citizens to associate and organize freely, express their views, and accept assistance from both domestic and international sources—no matter their political orientation. While they acknowledge that certain groups have been particularly targeted and harmed, they worry that merging the issue of closing civic space with particular social or political agendas will weaken their ability to build broad coalitions against government attacks on core civil liberties, both domestically and internationally. Others argue that, by ignoring the larger political backlash against specific groups and causes, those fighting back will miss a crucial driver and dimension of the problem. For example, they note that a narrow focus on legal restrictions tends to miss the role of negative nonstate actors and illiberal narratives.

A second area of confusion and disagreement concerns the relationship between closing civic space and the broader crisis of liberal democracy. Some policymakers and practitioners believe that concerned international actors have generally interpreted the issue too narrowly as a civil society problem, which has led to reactive and legalistic responses. They emphasize the need to couple targeted civil society assistance with a broad defense of core democratic institutions and principles— such as standing up more firmly for free and fair elections and independent judiciaries, doing more to support media freedom, contesting disinformation, and developing smart strategies to push back against Russian and Chinese cross-border political activities. A few donors, including USAID, have already moved in this direction, shifting from the terminology of "closing civic space" to a focus on "politically restrictive" environments, which implies a broader canvas of concern and action.[39]

On the other hand, some civil society supporters note that widening the political lens in this way creates new challenges. They fear political risks: traditional development funders in particular often find it easier to advocate for civic participation and an enabling legal environment for civil society than to engage on democratic reform more broadly. Others argue that a broader approach may diffuse or even paralyze responses.[40] "All democratic deficits around the world are now being termed closing civic space," notes one funder. "We need a tighter frame in order to arrive at actionable steps."[41] In this view, while new restrictions on civil society in any one country often do go hand in hand with an overall weakening of democratic institutions and norms, simply equating the two issues may lead policymakers to overlook the specific drivers of closing civic space and concrete opportunities to fight back.

The lines between these different approaches and critiques, outlined in table 2, are not clear-cut, and many practitioners would agree with elements of each. Yet ongoing debates over the nature of the problem highlight a lack of conceptual and strategic clarity within the community. Over the past several years, the term closing space has caught on because it helps bring together an otherwise diverse set of actors to reflect on shared experiences.[42] At the same time, the multidimensional nature of the problem—and differences in approach among concerned international actors—has worked against greater unity of purpose and focus.

Table 2
Contrasting Overall Approaches to Closing Civic Space

Approach	Protecting the enabling environment for civil society	The battle for the progressive agenda	The larger fight for democracy
Diagnosis	Government restrictions on civic space are caused by various factors, including lack of trust in civil society, fears of civic uprisings and foreign interference, and global counterterrorism norms.	Closing civic space is driven to a large extent by conservative resistance and backlash against progressive social and political agendas.	Closing civic space is one part of a broader attack on democratic institutions, norms, and rights.
Implications for Action	Tackling civic space primarily requires reinforcing the legitimacy of civil society, resisting restrictive legislation, encouraging regulatory best practices, and reinforcing positive international rules and norms.	Tackling closing civic space means fighting underlying drivers of exclusion, including neoliberal economic systems and patriarchal and heteronormative power relations.	Tackling closing civic space requires defending core civic freedoms that apply to all citizens and political groups as well as reinforcing broader democratic values and institutions that help support political pluralism and the rule of law.
Critiques	Framing the issue narrowly may lead to apolitical, reactive, or legalistic responses and may neglect the broader decay of the democratic system as well as the rise of illiberal narratives and ideologies.	Framing the issue in politically normative terms may inhibit coalitions with actors that do not share the same analysis but are nevertheless concerned by attacks on basic civic rights.	Ignoring the political backlash against specific groups and causes and equating closing civic space with overall democratic backsliding could lead observers to miss the most relevant drivers of civic space restrictions and attacks.

Countervailing Interests

Another critical limitation is that major Western governments have not prioritized the international response to closing space highly enough. Many of these governments do routinely raise concerns about restrictive laws and the persecution of human rights defenders, particularly behind the scenes. In some cases, they have successfully advocated on behalf of specific organizations and individuals under threat. Yet they have rarely ratcheted up diplomatic pressure enough to make these governments pay a significant price for their actions. In some cases, Western governments have contradicted diplomatic condemnations with continued or even increased economic and security cooperation. They are also still inconsistent about systematically integrating concerns about civic space into high-level strategic dialogues and insisting on civil society participation in policy discussions with partner governments.[43]

This reality is not unique to the challenge of closing civic space; it affects the overall set of democracy and human rights concerns. Organizations and activists working on these issues routinely struggle to get them onto Western governments' crowded foreign policy agendas. Even when they do draw some attention to their cause, closing civic space is only one of many pressing problems to address, alongside disputed elections, systemic corruption, human rights abuses committed by security forces, the overriding of constitutional term limits, and much else. Moreover, as with all democracy and rights concerns, the willingness of Western governments to exert pressure due to closing civic space frequently runs up against the reality of countervailing security and economic interests, such as the need for cooperation on border control and migration management, counterterrorism, access to oil and gas deposits, countering strategic rivals, and other "hard" interests.

As a result, Western governments' approach to challenges to civic space has often been selective, with donors avoiding politically sensitive issues that may work against their broader interests in the country in question.[44] For example, the governments of Chad, Egypt, and Pakistan have tightened control over civil society, often in the name of national security, yet they continue to receive Western security assistance and enjoy positive diplomatic ties with most Western governments.[45] Human rights groups that try to influence donor policies in such contexts often end up engaging with human rights departments and civil society point persons that wield limited power within donor countries' overall foreign policy and national security apparatuses.[46]

The United States' regression on supporting democracy and human rights abroad has hit the closing space agenda particularly hard. The White House position has changed markedly. In 2015, former president Barack Obama criticized the global "erosion of . . . democratic principles and human rights" at the UN General Assembly and highlighted the importance of a thriving civil society. In contrast, President Donald Trump declared to the same body just three years later that the United States would "honor the right of every nation . . . to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions"

and emphasized national sovereignty as the foundation of democracy and freedom.[47] Trump has also extended his support to leaders engaged in systematic crackdowns on human rights and civil society, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Both USAID and the U.S. State Department nevertheless continue to fund assistance programs to support civic activists globally. In a few countries, including Cambodia and Nicaragua, U.S. diplomats have also exerted some pressure on governments that are weighing new repressive measures. Yet, on the whole, the U.S. government has abandoned its role as a leading voice on the issue.

Even where governments use diplomacy to push back against closing civic space, it is not necessarily effective. Research on successful resistance to civil society restrictions underscores the importance of strong and sustained domestic mobilization, while the influence of outside actors tends to vary.[48] In some countries, particularly those with a history of foreign interference, assertive outside pressure can backfire by providing fodder for politicians' accusations that domestic civil society groups are agents of foreign governments. In Kenya, for example, donor governments that sought to contest draft NGO restrictions tried to ensure that local organizations led the campaign against the proposed measures.[49] Governments' vulnerability to Western pressure also varies: one analysis of resistance campaigns against restrictive NGO laws found that international pressure was more impactful in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan, as the latter is far less dependent on foreign aid.[50]

Moreover, even in places where Western democratic governments do not have strong countervailing interests, it is hard for them to convince governments not to crack down on civil society if they are truly determined to do so. In some cases, the issue is simply much more important to the target government than to the donor country making diplomatic appeals. Cambodia represents one such example of failed political pressure: although both the United States and various European partners repeatedly raised concerns regarding the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations with several ministries and with the parliament, the government passed the measure in 2015 and cracked down further in the years that followed.[51]

Closing Space at Home

An additional challenge is that new threats to civic space have emerged in the long-established democracies that have traditionally been most likely to speak out against civil society restrictions in developing and postcommunist countries. These threats include an increase in hostile political rhetoric toward civil society actors that are critical of government policies, as well as new regulations that restrict media freedom and citizens' right to protest. CIVICUS now classifies civic space in Austria, France, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States as "narrowed."[52]

For example, in Austria, before its dissolution in May 2019, the former coalition government made up by then chancellor Sebastian Kurz's People's Party and the far-right Freedom Party limited the

participation of civil society organizations in governance, cut funding for "critical and diversity-oriented NGOs," and imposed new regulatory restrictions on freedom of assembly.[53] In Italy, organizations defending migrants and asylum seekers have faced smear campaigns.[54] Meanwhile, in the United States, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law has tracked sixteen new antiprotest laws enacted at the state level since 2016; as of mid-September 2019, seventeen such bills were still pending.[55] At the national level, Trump has repeatedly attacked media organizations for spreading "fake news." Multiple informal online records have tallied hundreds (or even well over 1,000) negative tweets by Trump about the press from June 2015 to September 2019.[56] He and his allies have also accused critics of being funded by George Soros, adopting a narrative often used by autocratic leaders to delegitimize dissent.[57]

Shrinking civic space within established democracies has received only limited attention from international actors dedicated to supporting civic space globally. Domestic advocates have typically reacted to and criticized specific regulations in relative isolation, without necessarily linking the issue to broader global patterns or international policy discussions on civic space. The governments in question have responded to criticism by dismissing it as partisan attacks, or by arguing that the restrictions are justified and that civil society in their country still enjoys a much more hospitable environment than in most parts of the world.[58] International funders working on closing civic space note that they often lack strong connections to relevant civil society organizations in established democracies and high- or middle-income countries.[59]

Even if restrictions on civil society in established democracies remain limited, their international repercussions are significant. Western governments that are lashing out at civil society actors and other domestic critics have shown little political will to tackle the issue globally—and they have less credibility when they do try to engage. For example, the United States has become less likely to speak out on closing civic space at multilateral forums, such as the Community of Democracies, and this has made the organization a less effective tool for addressing the issue.[60] Lower-level government officials in the United States and other countries that have experienced backsliding also lack the policy guidelines to speak out on the issue or collaborate with other donors.[61]

Restrictive measures also provide political cover for leaders in other parts of the world engaged in similar or worse actions. Democratic leaders using hostile rhetoric against civil society and the media further normalizes this type of political pressure, as seen in the way various autocrats have adopted Trump's favored term "fake news" to dismiss any type of criticism or negative reporting. For example, as one human rights lawyer notes, "In July 2018, the Egyptian parliament passed a repressive media law criminalizing the spreading of 'false news'—without defining what that meant—for anyone with more than 5,000 social media followers, treating such accounts as 'media outlets.'"[62] In Jordan, she also observed, "New amendments to the country's cybercrime law were

introduced in the House of Representatives in 2018, punishing those who publish 'false news' with fines and prison terms."[63]

Inadequate Scale

Another factor limiting the international response is that the scale of resources committed to the problem is insufficient. Although some public and private funders have developed useful and innovative programs, they have not mobilized large-scale resources, at least in proportion to the wide geographical reach and deep political significance of the problem. Moreover, they have generally failed to embed existing programs and responses in a broader strategic framework.

To date, the most significant financial resources have been dedicated to emergency funds for activists and organizations. For example, the EU's ProtectDefenders mechanism has a three-year budget of 15 million euros.[64] The U.S.-based Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund has operated with a budget of $2 million to $3 million a year.[65] The United States and Sweden in particular have also committed additional funding to responses to closing space, including for innovative partnerships with INGOs. But, overall, donors have not made major commitments to offer greater assistance in this area, especially relative to other high-priority governance and development challenges.

Relatively few private funders—such as the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Fund for Global Human Rights, and the Open Society Foundations—have made closing civic space an explicit element of their grant-making strategies.[66] In a survey of private funders conducted by the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society in late 2018, for example, 78 percent of respondents stated that their organizations were still not paying enough attention to the issue.[67] The report found that "while there's a lot more talk recently about practical solutions—like narratives or supporting local coalitions—putting their money where their mouth is has yet to manifest at any scale."

In part, this is because both governments and private donors lack an appetite for political risk. When governments implement new restrictive NGO laws, donors have typically reacted by scaling back their operations and redirecting funding from politically sensitive issues to less confrontational socioeconomic development programs, rather than doubling down on democracy and human rights.[68] Funding agencies justify such shifts as necessary for retaining a presence in the country and building trust between governments and civil society—though rights and democracy groups note that they risk playing into the hands of autocratic governments, which are cracking down to consolidate power, not because of a lack of trust. While private funders can, at times, be more nimble in their funding practices by, for example, funding unregistered groups in politically difficult contexts, they are often similarly risk averse.[69]

The cross-cutting nature of the closing civic space challenge also figures in. Some donors count their existing civil society support or assistance for LGBTQ+ and other minority rights as their response, even though they have not made any new funding available to counter the problem. Others have struggled to define a clear lead department or agency on the issue, which straddles development assistance, human rights, and foreign policy and thus requires effective interagency coordination.[70]

Lastly, funders lack a clear idea of what a large-scale response might look like. Short-term strategies such as emergency funds and digital security measures for frontline defenders address immediate challenges. But it has been harder for policymakers and donors to articulate long-term, comprehensive strategies. In the absence of broad strategic guidance, many bilateral donors rely on their embassies and country offices to develop their own responses—an approach that has led to successful initiatives in some contexts and ad hoc, reactive efforts in others.[71] As one human rights funder notes, "What does working 'at scale' mean on this agenda? How would this be done and focused on what elements?"[72]

Working in Silos

As noted above, various international organizations and funders have created new mechanisms for sharing knowledge and coordinating responses to closing civic space. Yet despite these efforts, silos separating different donors and assistance communities persist. Most funders continue to approach the problem largely on their own. There exists no clear mapping of which donor governments are prioritizing civic space as a key issue in which countries, and there is no consistent mechanism for sharing operational guidance and strategies.

As a result, various donor agencies have engaged in similar learning exercises without necessarily sharing their findings. International actors also lack an effective joint early-warning mechanism to anticipate new threats to civic space and initiate coordinated responses before governments introduce or pass new legislation. Although the Community of Democracies Working Group was technically meant to play this catalyzing role, observers note that it has become less invested in the issue over time. While the working group continues to help activists reach major democratic governments, its past calls to action lacked clear follow-up mechanisms to ensure governments do in fact act.[73]

This lack of alignment between international actors has several causes. As noted above, the issue of closing civic space straddles foreign policy, development assistance, national security, and trade policy. As a result, coordinating policies and responses between different agencies, headquarters, and embassies within just one government is difficult and presents bureaucratic and political hurdles, particularly in the absence of a higher-level strategy that elevates the issue. Multiplying this complexity across multiple governments that all have their own specific policy priorities therefore creates profound challenges.

Coordination between private funders is not necessarily easier. Initiatives such as the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society have brought together private donors to exchange information and facilitate in-country dialogues. Yet, to date, only a few foundations are actively engaged in the initiative, while many others take part only peripherally in funder forums or consultations.[74] Collaboration depends on existing relationships, which take time to forge. One funder recounts a meeting to discuss funding responses to new threats to civic space in Brazil, a gathering from which environmental funders were completely missing—despite the rise in attacks on environmental activists.[75] Small-scale local and intermediary funds have also often felt somewhat excluded from international discussions, partly because they are not necessarily part of the same networks or do not have access to the same international forums. More generally, private funders also operate based on their own institutional strategies, perspectives, and agendas, a tendency that does not facilitate joint planning.

Another divide that works against coordinated responses, whether among public or private funders, is between transnational actors focused on supporting human rights and those devoted to humanitarian relief or development more generally. Human rights organizations and their funders have often been the first to be directly targeted in a country when civic space closes. They have therefore driven many of the initial debates around response strategies. As the trend of closing space has widened and deepened, it has also reached environmental, development, and humanitarian organizations and funders. Yet they often do not share the same diagnosis, concepts, and risk assessments as the human rights sector does, making it difficult to respond jointly.[76]

Development aid agencies operating in restrictive contexts tend to have a lower risk threshold than human rights groups, as they depend on close relationships with partner governments to implement the bulk of their assistance. As a result, in some cases, they are likely to prioritize developmental goals over specific concerns about democratic governance. For example, one human rights funder recounts a major bilateral donor government signaling its approval of new NGO regulations in an African country that had been strongly criticized by local human rights groups for infringing on their freedom of association.[77]

Struggles to Change Aid Practices

Civil society supporters concerned about closing space have identified several areas of aid practice that funders could change to help tackle the problem. Working with a broader range of civic actors, rather than just professionalized NGOs, can address concerns about such NGOs' lack of local legitimacy and reach. Providing more core support for organizations rather than tying them into project-based funding can give besieged groups more flexibility to find their own solutions to new threats, while helping them build a stronger organizational core. Offering a wider range of assistance

modalities and types of support—including local and regional knowledge sharing, the creation of safe spaces for activists to meet, and long-term study and fellowship opportunities—can also help activists adapt to difficult circumstances.

Some positive changes are happening. USAID, for example, is developing a New Partnerships Initiative, which aims to get more funding to new partners through more innovative procurement mechanisms.[78] The organization as a whole now also places greater emphasis on co-creation with grantees, though there has yet to be an overall culture shift within the agency.[79] The private funders most engaged on the issue are also experimenting with new approaches. The Fund for Global Human Rights has established a New Actors Fund that tries to engage a wider range of informal civil society actors. The Open Society Foundations has started to work more with bridge organizations that bring together labor movements and social movements with other types of human rights defenders.

Yet looking at international civil society assistance broadly, innovations in aid practices remain more the exception than the rule.[80] In a 2018 survey conducted by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, 36 percent of grantees found donor requirements to be the biggest barrier to accessing international funding—a more significant hurdle than governmental registration rules and accounting regulations.[81] Most civil society aid still goes to traditional INGOs and NGOs and largely tracks patterns of assistance characteristic of previous decades. Among public donors, no broad shift has occurred from project support to flexible core funding (and some bilateral donors have moved in the opposite direction).[82] Funder talk about the need to work with nontraditional partners—such as social movements or informal, local groups—has greatly exceeded action. Greater flexibility on monitoring and evaluation remains elusive.

Several factors work against more widespread changes. First, bureaucratic inertia in the aid world is a powerful force, despite widespread concern about the new challenges facing traditional civil society aid in a changing world. In the governance realm, moving from the top-down, technocratic, and often ineffective aid programs that mushroomed throughout the 1990s to aid that is more politically informed, operationally flexible, and adaptive has proven to be a multidecade process.[83] The same is likely to be the case with attempts to fundamentally reshape international civil society assistance.

Second, new approaches inevitably harbor certain challenges—including risks of financial mismanagement, heightened political sensitivities, and the risks inherent to building relationships with new types of partners that may have different expectations or ways of working. Activists from social movements, for example, often push back against external backers that try to influence their goals and activities, while donors may be hesitant to underwrite more confrontational and disruptive tactics such as protests and boycotts.[84] At the same time, minimizing risk remains a powerful

imperative of the aid world, given the shaky public support for international aid in many developed democracies and the corresponding desire of donors to deliver measurable returns on investment.

Third, new funding approaches require learning on the part of aid practitioners, a higher ratio of aid staff to aid dollars dispensed (to manage higher numbers of smaller grants as well as to identify and work with nontraditional grantees), and greater flexibility and creativity when it comes to monitoring and evaluation. These requirements cut against major current trends in the aid world, including the imperative to reduce administrative overhead costs and the need to step up program monitoring and evaluation, often in rigid ways.[85]

Chasing a Moving Target

To complicate matters further, the problem often evolves faster than the international community can keep up with. "In the past, you could count the number of restrictive laws and focus on those," says one aid official. "But now, the problem is growing very rapidly and in unexpected ways. There are not enough resources available for this work given the accelerators."[86]

Complex donor bureaucracies are often ill prepared to react to sudden political transitions, whether they are elections that bring to power a more repressive government or unexpected reforms that enable more space for civic participation. Some policymakers and funders note that there is still a lack of systematic monitoring of early warning signs of closing civic space; as a result, new legal restrictions can catch international actors by surprise. Preventative efforts to bring together actors in countries that appear to be at risk have struggled to gain traction. Not surprisingly, civic actors in those contexts and their international partners often have other, more concrete priorities, and they do not necessarily see the need to come together around an issue they are not yet familiar with.[87]

Funders also often lack a clear strategy for responding to opening civic spaces. For example, over the past two years, sudden political openings in Armenia and Ethiopia have left some international actors uncertain what to prioritize in order to sustain fragile political progress without overwhelming or damaging local civil society. One key question is whether international actors should focus narrowly on a few issues on which tangible progress can be made, or concentrate instead on the bigger political picture, including potential spoilers to reform or sources of conflict. This dilemma is not unique to civil society assistance but one that plagues donor action in all transition contexts.

In addition, the community of concerned international actors has struggled to keep abreast of rapid changes in communications and information technologies—including the spread of facial recognition to crack down on protesters and the use of artificial intelligence to better monitor and restrict free speech online. Some funders have made progress in providing training and assistance focused on civic organizations' and activists' digital security. But many aid providers and human

rights INGOs lack the technical capacity and networks to influence ongoing international policy discussions around technology regulation, artificial intelligence, and internet governance—discussions that at times have been purposefully set up to exclude civil society participation and that take place in forums unfamiliar to most rights activists. Interactions between funders that specialize in the technology realm and human rights and development funders are still limited, though this is slowly changing. Those working on closing civic space have also been slow to link up with tech platforms, which are increasingly playing an outsized role in shaping the digital context for civic mobilization and participation.[88]

Both private and governmental donors are aware of these gaps and are now working to address them by increasing their internal know-how on technology issues and by engaging in new initiatives aimed at predicting and preventing future threats to civic space. Examples range from the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law's Civic Space 2040—which aims to identify trends that will affect civil society and philanthropy in the coming decades—to a new USAID-funded project titled INSPIRES, which seeks to both harness new technologies to forecast threats to civic space and test out new preventative interventions.[89]

Recommendations

There are significant reasons why the international community's response to the challenge of closing civic space is at least somewhat stuck. Some of the limiting factors, like the overall configuration of donor government interests, are deeply rooted. Others may only be bureaucratic hurdles, but organizational and administrative changes within the funding community are never quick or easy.

Yet positive change is possible. Many actors—including various important donor governments, capable INGOs, and sizable private funders—want to rise to the challenge. And countless domestic activists in difficult circumstances are eager to make good use of positive transnational support. Many steps can and should be taken. There is a need for both an overall strategic framework and more specific measures that both governments and nongovernmental actors can take.

Developing a Strategic Framework

The community of concerned international actors lacks a strategic framework for responding to the challenge of closing space. As a result, existing policies and programmatic responses—while useful—often do not cohere. The diversity of actors working on this issue inevitably makes it difficult to define a strategy that will bring everyone on board. Yet it is possible to identify several elements that an effective strategic framework should include, whether for a single large actor or for a group of actors interested in working together.

- **Convey the connections between civic space and other challenges**: An effective strategy should clearly articulate how the problem of closing civic space links to other pressing security, geopolitical, and economic challenges around the world. For donor governments, this means integrating the challenge of closing civic space (and democratic backsliding more broadly) into their wider foreign policy agendas. The Swedish government's recently launched "drive for democracy"—a new effort to further reinforce democracy support as a central tenet of its foreign policy—represents one positive example.[90] If donor governments frame space for independent civil society as simply a subsidiary element of their development aid or as a niche human rights concern, rather than as a central element of a stable and secure world, the issue is unlikely to garner the attention required to scale up the response.

- **Articulate a vision for the future**: Relatedly, an effective strategy should lay out a compelling, forward-looking vision for civic space globally, ideally one that connects the somewhat abstract concept to the near-term concerns and priorities of ordinary citizens. It should offer clear, feasible goals for achieving that vision.

- **Offer tailored tactical guidance**: A civic space strategy should offer tailored policy and operational guidance, organized according to short-term, medium-term, and long-term priorities. Many governments' civil society strategies lack specificity, which makes them difficult to implement when weighing competing policy priorities or response options. It would be useful to differentiate national, regional, and international responses. It would also be helpful to distinguish among the major types of political contexts, for example, between countries where civic and political space is heavily restricted, countries where civic space is partially restricted, countries that are experiencing backsliding or sudden openings, and democracies at risk of future civil society restrictions.

- **Provide sufficient funding and muster adequate political will**: Strategies are only effective to the extent that they are well resourced, spell out staffing needs, enjoy political backing, and incorporate a process for reconciling potential disagreements between different offices or agencies on competing policy priorities.

- **Cultivate effective partnerships**: While actors differ in their analysis of the root causes of closing civic space, creating broad coalitions around shared core principles is critical to achieving progress. An effective strategy should therefore also focus on what partners can be brought together and how such partnerships can be made more effective. Organizations should consider working with partners that do not necessarily share their ideological and policy goals on specific joint objectives—while at the same time pursuing a broader agenda

based on their own analysis of the underlying economic and political drivers of closing space.

In addition to the larger quest for an effective, comprehensive strategy, there are specific ways governmental and nongovernmental actors can strengthen current responses. Key priorities include improving foreign policy alignment, preventing democratic backsliding at home, strengthening coordination between funders, reforming funding practices, and anticipating new opportunities and threats.

Improving Foreign Policy Alignment

While it is inevitable that the various departments or ministries of donor governments will have mixed interests that sometimes detract from a strong focus on civic space, they can take steps to better integrate the issue into their foreign policies and speak with a more internally unified voice.

- **Strengthen policy guidance:** Issue guidance to embassies in relevant countries highlighting the importance of defending civic space as a foreign policy priority and outlining possible avenues for action.[91] In addition, systematically integrate the issue of closing civic space into diplomatic trainings, senior leadership meetings, and briefings to senior officials prior to foreign visits.

- **Designate a senior point person:** Appoint a senior official with central responsibility for policies related to defending civic space, armed with the authority to coordinate the interagency policy process on the issue, including alignment of diplomatic and development efforts.[92]

- **Ensure civil society input:** Amplify the role of transnational and domestic civil society activists in policy formation and implementation both at the international level and within countries of concern. This entails involving them in high-level summits, consultations, and exchanges (while taking care that doing so does not endanger those individuals and organizations).

- **Enhance policy accountability:** In consultation with relevant nongovernmental groups, set clear indicators for measuring progress on defending civic space and publish periodic progress reports. Potential indicators include:
    - senior officials raising the importance of civic space in relevant bilateral meetings;
    - senior officials meeting with civic activists and human rights defenders on foreign visits;

o   senior officials publicly responding to restrictions or attacks on civic space; and

o   civic activists being given a platform to speak at multilateral forums organized or funded by the government.[93]

Putting One's Own House in Order

Donor governments can also strive to ensure that their domestic political systems lead by example and reflect the values of open civic space, while minimizing domestic backsliding that detracts from those goals.

- **Avoid negative precedents:** Review domestic legislation and regulations that target civil society and consult with experts on civil liberties to ensure such laws do not set negative examples on freedom of association, expression, and assembly. This is particularly crucial concerning legislation that aims to regulate terrorist financing or the actions of foreign agents but that may have unintended consequences for cross-border philanthropy; the same is true of new policy and legislative frameworks governing the use of artificial intelligence.

- **Set domestic reform commitments:** Integrate specific and measurable commitments on protecting civic space into Open Government Partnership action plans, taking into account input from a wide range of civil society voices.

Nongovernmental actors also have a role to play in maintaining and advancing civic space in their own backyards.

- **Forge alliances:** Form partnerships between those working on civic space internationally and civil society actors confronting the same threats in established democracies. Such alliances could share experiences and lessons learned, engage in joint advocacy and public awareness campaigns where applicable, and potentially jointly raise funds for their work.

- **Target critical lawmakers:** Concentrate on legislators who are advocating for harmful regulations or spreading stigmatizing narratives on civil society to highlight the negative influence such actions can have on civil society both domestically and abroad. If applicable, develop alternative proposals that address the policy priority in question—such as preventing foreign interference or terrorist financing—without infringing on civic space.

- **Lead by example:** Strengthen practices of transparency and accountability in internal operations as well as in partnerships with local organizations. If transparency endangers specific grantees, funders should have clear, consistent guidelines to explain deviations from

transparency norms. At the same time, international actors should resist efforts by some governments to weaponize the language of transparency and accountability to overregulate civil society.[94]

Strengthening Coordination Between Governments and Funders

Donor governments can also take steps to enhance coordination with other relevant actors.

- **Assess existing mechanisms:** Conduct independent evaluations of existing coordination mechanisms, including the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society, and implement benchmarks for measuring these bodies' actions in defense of civic space.

- **Share lessons learned:** Invest in dedicated mechanisms for sharing internal learning, monitoring threats, and coordinating efforts. At a minimum, donors should know which governments are prioritizing civic space issues in which countries and what their areas of focus are. In addition, donor governments should create internal communities of practice— within aid agencies, foreign ministries, or across both types of institutions—to facilitate information sharing and learning aimed at supporting civic space within governments.

- **Fund creative joint actions:** Take advantage of the greater nimbleness and flexibility afforded to private funders and nongovernmental organizations to build new partnerships or reach new actors.

Nongovernmental actors have a role to play when it comes to policy coordination as well.

- **Involve bilateral donors**: Engage more frequently with major bilateral donor agencies to share information on civic space strategies and push for greater attention to civic space issues.

- **Expand country-level networks:** Build on the lessons learned from previous in-country dialogues on civic space that bring together international and local funders, INGOs, and local organizations and expand these dialogues to other countries.

- **Explore new collaborative models** and information-sharing mechanisms. These could include efforts to:
  - map out existing initiatives aimed at shaping and influencing perceptions of civic activism through the use of new narratives, storytelling, and other tools;

- connect specialized international organizations with technical expertise on legal reform or technology issues with organizations working with grassroots partners that lack access to high-level policy discussions; and
- collaborate to shape a shared public narrative around threats to civic space and improve media outreach capacities.

Reforming Funding Practices

International commitments to support the capacity of local civil society actors are clearly in tension with increasing funder demands for contractual compliance, measurable results, and risk management requirements. Not all funders will be equally able to reach small organizations or provide core support. Addressing this challenge may mean working more with intermediaries that are more flexible and have a wider reach, with the goal of fostering a sustainable funding ecosystem for local civic actors.

- **Build a balanced portfolio:** Ensure that some percentage of civil society funding goes toward long-term partnerships that focus on institution- and movement-building, while more catalytic funding can be used to help smaller organizations grow.

- **Track progress:** Institute an internal tracking system to monitor how much funding goes to local civil society organizations, directly or indirectly, as core and project funding. Investments in intermediary funds and organizations that have relationships with a wider range of smaller, locally rooted organizations should be increased.

- **Provide flexible support:** If restrictions in a particular country make continued funding more difficult or risky, consider alternative support strategies, including funding via intermediaries, support to diaspora groups, and nonfinancial support strategies.

- **Reduce administrative burdens:** Review monitoring and evaluation standards and the extent to which they are applicable to governance work in places with shrinking civic space, taking steps to reduce the administrative burdens on grantees.

Anticipating New Opportunities and Threats

Supporters of civic space should also stay alert to new openings and challenges that may emerge.

- **Publicly recognize positive reforms:** Acknowledge and reward cases of positive civil society reform, including through continued high-level diplomatic engagement.

- **Develop forward-looking roadmaps:** Identify upcoming opportunities and flash points. Such plans can complement existing human rights–focused country strategies and civil society roadmaps, but they need to be tailor-made. In addition, institute an early warning system that involves embassies and allows them to react quickly to emerging threats by, for example, reallocating funding or making new grants available quickly.

- **Invest in technological know-how:** Bring experts on board who understand the rapidly evolving digital landscape and can make the connection to civic space issues, including to future threats. Technology-focused organizations and funders and human rights funders should be brought together to learn from each other and forge partnerships.

- **Go beyond protective technology:** Civil society needs to be part of shaping broader norms and regulations around internet governance, privacy, open data, and surveillance. Funders should support the capacity of local organizations to engage in advocacy and policy development in the digital space by, for instance, connecting them to specialized INGOs in this domain. Donors should also advocate for meaningful civil society participation in international policy forums, including the International Telecommunication Union, the World Trade Organization, and the OECD.

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1   See Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher, *Closing Space: Democracy and Human Rights Support Under Fire*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/02/20/closing-space-democracy-and-human-rights-support-under-fire-pub-54503; Kendra Dupuy, Ron James, and Aseem Prakash, "Hands Off My Regime! Governments' Restrictions on Foreign Aid to Non-Governmental Organizations in Poor and Middle-Income Countries," *World Development* 84 (2016): 299–311, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305750X1530187X?; and Douglas Rutzen, "Civil Society Under Assault," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (2015): 28–39, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/authoritarianism-goes-global-ii-civil-society-under-assault/.

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3   Freedom House assesses associational and organizational rights (subcategory E) on a scale from zero (least free) to twelve (most free). In this case, a significant erosion is defined as a decrease in this score of two or more points, while a significant improvement refers to an increase of two or more points. See Freedom House, "Methodology 2019," Freedom in the World 2019, https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2019.

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7   See, for example, Richard Youngs (ed.), *The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Youngs_Conservative_Civil_Society_FINAL.pdf.

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