Donor responses and tools for responding to shrinking space for civil society: a desk study

Naomi Hossain (Institute of Development Studies)
Nalini Khurana (Independent Consultant)

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Acronyms

CSI	Civic Space Initiative (Sida)
CSO	Civil society organisation
CSPR	Civil Society Partnership Review
DDLG	Democratisation, Decentralisation and Local Governance
DFID	Department for International Development
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EU	European Union
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
GPEDC	Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation
ICNL	International Center for Not-for-Profit Law
ILO	International Labour Organization
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex
NGO	Non-government organisation
ODA	Official development assistance
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization

Disclaimer

The views expressed in the report do not necessarily represent those of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

1 Introduction

This report summarises and analyses donor responses to the closure of civic space around the world. It is part of a wider effort within the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) to enable joint learning to support SDC offices in dealing with the growing challenges they encounter in restrained or shrinking spaces for civil society. Through knowledge-sharing and exchange, it proposes to improve the quality of SDC operations by articulating existing internal discussions, promoting reflective practices on the shrinking space for civil society, and advising SDC on how to respond to this trend.

Specifically, the report provides:
- an overview of the main characteristics and drivers of restricted or shrinking space for civil society, highlighting the systemic challenges to an enabling environment for civil society
- an overview of existing response strategies and approaches based on the international literature on the topic
- a review of current intractable questions and gaps in response strategies, including those generated by the survey of SDC offices, and considering the feasibility of different guiding approaches.

Through the joint learning, the report aims to generate recommendations for different levels of the organisational response (SDC headquarters, SDC offices, civil society organisations (CSOs)), supporting the SDC discussion on response strategies.

The report is organised as follows. Section 2 addresses the characteristics and drivers of closing civic space, discussing why this is occurring across different countries, political systems, and levels of development. Section 3 discusses why civic space is so important for donors, exploring considerations of human rights and of the contributions of civil society to sustainable, inclusive development. Section 4 reviews the literature on the donor 'pushback' or responses to closing civic space, and develops a simple framework for categorising the actions being taken, the gaps in donor actions, and what actions are feasible within different political settings. This framework is used in Section 5 to categorise donor responses according to whether they are making a strategic, operational, alliance-building or evidence-building contribution to the pushback against shrinking space. Section 6 discusses the implications of this work, and how it may be used in SDC's joint learning.

2 Closing civic space: characteristics and drivers

2.1 Definitions and meanings

Civil society is defined as the voluntary middle space or 'third sector' alongside the state and markets. The term commonly refers to a range of social action and actors from local voluntary social groups, to transnational human rights organisations and non-government organisations (NGOs), as well as wider social movements and popular struggles. Civil society tends to be closely shaped by the space created by the state, and by its multiple relationships to the state. A rise in international aid to civil society since the end of the cold

war means that civil society is also closely shaped by transnational relationships and powers.[1]

Within international development thinking, civil society is usually associated with voluntary organisations and associations. For the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), civil society:

> comprises the full range of formal and informal organizations within civil society: NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), indigenous peoples' organizations (IPOs), academia, journalist associations, faith-based organizations, trade unions, and trade associations.
> (UNDP 2006: 3)

The World Bank takes a narrower view of civil society that excludes economic interest groups, defining it as:

> the wide array of non-governmental and not for profit organizations that have a presence in public life, express the interests and values of their members and others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations.
> (The World Bank website)

Broader definitions of civil society encompass a wider range of forms of action, such as social movements, protest movements, digital or online activism, as well as struggles over economic (e.g. land or labour) rights. While the media is often understood to play a critical role in creating space for debate and information, for-profit media organisations have different goals from CSOs and are usually treated as separate or distinct from them.

2.2 Restrictions on civil society

Civic space – or the scope for civil society to operate without fear of incurring official disapproval, hostility, violence or abuse, or without breaking laws or regulations – has narrowed across all regions of the world in the past two decades. This is happening in countries at all levels of economic and human development, and under all types of political regime. Monitoring of civic space shows that civic freedoms were restricted in more than 100 countries in 2016. Some 3.2 billion people now live in countries where civic space is closed or controlled (CIVICUS 2016a; 2016b; other sources cited in Hossain *et al.* 2018).

Instruments of closing civic space range from legal and administrative measures to defamation, intimidation and violence. A variety of civil society actors and social movements have faced efforts to restrict their activities. Among these, some of the most prominent struggles have been over land, and there has been an epidemic of violence against land rights defenders, often indigenous peoples. Other target groups include: labour organisations and activists; environmental, women's and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights activists; journalists, bloggers, scholars, writers, artists and students; democracy and free speech campaigners; groups monitoring corruption, natural resource extraction, and economic governance; and ordinary citizens protesting public policies (e.g. devaluation, fiscal policy). Online civic space has also been subject to closures, distortions and shutdowns as governments seek to manage public discourse. It has also been subject to manipulation by domestic or foreign interests.

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[1] This summary explanation of civil society is drawn from a literature review conducted for two separate research commissions on closing civic space and the implications for development, one for ACT Alliance, and the second for the Department for International Development (DFID). See Hossain *et al.* 2018 or here for more details.

A survey of SDC offices found that closing civic space was often taking the form of delegitimisation. In several countries, governments did not recognise a role for civil society in representing the interests of the people and argued that only elections could confer legitimacy on actors claiming to represent the people. In some places, civil society actors were being branded as 'anti-state' or 'foreign agents'. The survey found that a wide range of restrictive measures were in place, including restrictive legislation, administrative hurdles for CSOs (registration, tax, reporting, requirements for holding bank accounts, etc.), closing down NGOs and media houses, surveillance, intimidation, judicial proceedings, threats, arrests, enforced disappearances, and even murder. Certain issues, including ethnic minority rights, gender-based violence, lesbian, LGBTI rights, land rights, extraction of natural resources/mining, anti-corruption, civic education, and human rights were recurring and acutely sensitive areas. Civil society actors and the media were self-censoring. In some contexts, survey respondents noted that civil society leaders were being co-opted by government, and that elsewhere, government-sponsored NGOs were crowding out other CSOs.

The SDC survey also identified a series of reasons why governments seek to restrict the space for civil society. These include wanting to reduce the space for civil society actors in reaction to losing votes (it is often after elections that governments clamp down on civil society and media organisations seen to have been supportive of the opposition). Governments may also treat CSOs as competitors for official development assistance (ODA) and seek to reduce their legal channels for receiving donor funding. Some governments restrict civil society activity on grounds that they think it may be connected to or enabling terrorism or money laundering, or that civil society activities are working against national stability or economic development. Governments may also be induced to restrict the space for civil society by the private sector, in order to pave the way for lucrative development or other deals opposed by civil society.

The SDC staff survey found that not all problems in the enabling environment for civil society resulted from closures of space. Some weaknesses reflected other aspects of the different settings that civil society operates in, such as the following.

- When there is strong competition between civil society and its coalitions and networks over funds.
- When CSOs have strong political affiliations or, in some contexts, pursue anti-democratic or illiberal agendas.
- When grass-roots movements turn to violence or violate legitimate laws of the state, leading to restrictive legislation.
- When CSOs themselves are not legitimate and representative of their constituencies, thus weakening their credibility, and when formal communication channels between CSOs and (local) authorities are weak.
- When, in the absence of well-informed alternative approaches to improving public policy among CSOs, there is a strong risk that the agendas of donors, international NGOs or other external actors predominate over domestic solutions and consideration of local community priorities.

These broader concerns about the relationships between civil society and the state have shaped the civic space to different degrees across different contexts.

2.3 Effects of closing civic space in different political systems

A recent body of literature situates this shrinking of civic space within national or domestic politics (van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012). These behaviours by political elites are borrowed from the 'dictator's handbook' or 'authoritarian playbook' and should be seen as

part of a coherent set of practices by ruling elites to accumulate power, learned from other autocrats. What these settings all share is an effort by political elites to wrest power away from CSOs (and human rights defenders, the media and social movements), which elites often frame as protecting 'national sovereignty' against foreign interests. There is a consistency across countries that suggests there has been '[l]ateral learning between governments seeking to inhibit the work of human rights activists and civil society more generally' (Mendelson 2015: 3).

However, while the patterns of clampdown on civil society look similar across contexts, they have distinctly different effects because of how they play out across different political systems. The impacts on civil society will not be the same everywhere; what happens to civic space in a given country will largely depend on how political power is organised (or what is sometimes called 'the political settlement') in that country. Whether power is distributed or concentrated – that is, whether it is controlled tightly by a coherent group or competed over by many actors with varied interests – shapes the space within which civil society can operate.

The connections between closures of civic space and national political power struggles can be seen most clearly when we recognise that in many countries that have seen new restrictions, these have come at a time when, and possibly because, the balance of political power is unsettled or shifting. Civil society can play an important role in political systems that are moving towards being more plural and competitive; but they may equally be vital actors to control or tame if political elites are seeking to concentrate power. For instance, in countries that have been experiencing democratisation, and where political settlements are becoming more competitive (for example, Nepal or Pakistan in the past few years), ruling elites facing competition or scrutiny that threatens their grip on power have strong incentives to restrict (some) civil society actors. Those associated with important minority groups, opposition strongholds or secessionist tendencies are particularly likely to face suppression or hostility in such contexts.

Overall, more democratic systems tend to create more political opportunities and resources for civic activism. Democracies typically create the conditions for civil societies with strong grass-roots and popular connections, spaces for state–civil society engagement, and transnational linkages and alliances. Civic activism can be relatively resilient in such settings. The resilience of civil society is currently being tested in Brazil, whose new far-right government has targeted the country's strong base of social movements to pave the way for environmental exploitation and swingeing austerity measures. These new policies threaten to reverse Brazil's hard-won progress on social and economic equality in the 2000s (Sauer *et al.* 2019).

In non-democratic countries where power is concentrated within a small political elite group, civic space will be affected by whether or not elites seek to build their legitimacy through economic and social performance. In countries like Rwanda, Ethiopia, Cambodia and Bangladesh, civil society has the potential to be an important ally in economic and social development, to deliver services to excluded groups, or otherwise support government policies and programmes. But in these same countries where a small coherent elite coalition exercises tight control over political power, new restrictions typically weaken civil society, reducing its role to supportive functions without scope for scrutiny or holding government to account. Ruling elites create pressures to align with the ruling party agenda, and to refrain from criticism or dissent. Such 'dominant' political elites often seek to boost economic performance with big development or energy projects, and silence or undermine civil society activism in order to get socially unjust or environmentally unsustainable projects through. Where authoritarian rulers have a secure hold on power but lack incentives to deliver on economic or social performance (Zimbabwe, for instance), new restrictions on civil society aim to keep it weak and voiceless, continuing or renewing an older pattern. Such 'predatory'

political settlements create few opportunities for civic activism, other than the special and rare instances of large-scale democratic revolts. In such systems, civil society tends to be weak and dependent on external resources, chronically vulnerable to the threat of violence, expulsion or criminalisation.

A key conclusion is that it helps to think about how relationships between civil society and the state are affected by new restrictions not in terms of 'space' but as shaping 'the fit' between civic groups and public authorities. The distance and autonomy to scrutinise or monitor public authorities is not the only factor to consider when assessing civic space; the capacity to influence change is also critical, and this sometimes means getting closer to governments. This in turn means that under different arrangements of political power, restrictions on civic space will play out differently depending on this fit between state and civil society actors. Efforts by donors to respond to restrictions on civic space can usefully pay attention to these political economy dynamics in tailoring their approaches to the situation in different countries (Hossain *et al.* 2018).

Struggles over civic space are also contests over norms, reflecting competing worldviews and values. Where CSOs have been dependent on foreign aid, this has made them vulnerable to accusations of furthering foreign interests, and of being accountable to donors rather than to the people they are supposed to serve. In several countries, restrictions on aid-funded civil society groups with strong transnational links have been justified by nationalists as resistance to the imposition of foreign values and agendas. In addition, while civic space has been shrinking for some groups (mainly in a human rights and liberal or social democratic tradition), others, including right-wing and illiberal groups, have been welcomed and recognised by the new political right. While this is most notable in Europe and the United States, right-wing populist leaders have also been elected in Brazil, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, in recent years.

New restrictions on civil society tend to have further repercussions for development outcomes, as bilateral (official) aid flows tend to drop by almost one-third in the years after governments introduce new restrictions on NGO funds. This is largely due to donors being unable to find ways of financing their preferred civil society partners (Dupuy and Prakash 2017).

3   Why civic space matters to international donors

The closing down of civic space is, or should be, a matter of considerable urgency and importance for international donors and the wider international community. Some key donor allies and CSO recipients of aid are among the primary targets of new restrictions on civic space. These targets include:

- mainly foreign-funded formal NGOs and CSOs in developing and transitional countries, addressing local concerns from poverty and inequality to the environment and corruption, including concerns of indigenous populations and smallholder farmers, industrial workers, marginalised groups, those living in extreme poverty, and women and children;
- democratic development and human rights organisations with strong transnational connections and funding, with particular mandates to promote political and civic rights;
- social movements and grass-roots organisations and networks of (among others) workers, smallholder farmers, women, indigenous peoples, and minority and excluded groups;

- the parts of the media, academic and artistic channels through which these actors investigate and highlight issues, articulate demands and mobilise public opinion in the civic space.

SDC has been operating in awareness of these challenges, through its governance portfolio, with its Peace- and State-building Strategy, and the New Deal principles of being politically relevant and staying engaged. Despite this guidance, the SDC survey identified that there were nonetheless, significant impacts on operations, including the following.

- The challenge for SDC partners and civil society more generally to engage with power-holders/policymakers, and the need to figure out different strategies to maintain relationships at different levels. Access to information is tougher, making it difficult to seek accountability. Donors face particular dilemmas when they have to submit to unwarranted requirements to enable external support for civil society, and this is challenging bilateral relations.
- A loss of trust between CSOs, as civic space becomes more restricted.
- Challenges to current and future governance projects as the legitimacy of (local) institutions is put in question, along with enhanced risks of contributing to local conflict.
- Partner staff turnover, international staff of international NGOs being refused visas, increased insecurity facing staff, etc.
- A limited number of CSOs capable of meeting donor managerial, administrative and fiduciary requirements.
- Delays or discontinuation of basket fund programmes due to other donor withdrawals or lengthy negotiations with governments or partner CSOs being de-registered.
- Lack of donor flexibility to support community priorities emerging from local research and analysis.

The survey of SDC offices and the subsequent discussion of SDC's Democratisation, Decentralisation and Local Governance (DDLG) Network in Kiev in May 2018 identified the following reasons why a restricted/shrinking space for civil society is a concern for SDC.

- In some countries, the state does not recognise a role for civil society in representing the interests of the people, and elected leaders/elections are considered the only legitimate means of popular representation. This makes it difficult for civil society to participate in decision making, and weakens democratic participation.
- Where civil society has not participated in public policymaking, the state may lack the means to be responsive to people's needs. This may be particularly problematic for excluded and marginalised groups in society, whose concerns civil society groups often highlight and demand action on behalf of. Unresponsive state policies can mean a failure to address poverty. This may in turn lead to frustration, which, over time, may threaten the stability of the political system itself.
- Restricted civic space weakens anti-corruption initiatives and may contribute to impunity for corruption.
- Key issues in contention over civic space include ethnic minority rights, gender-based violence, LGBTI rights, land rights, extraction of natural resources/mining, anti-corruption, civic education, and human rights. Several of these are priority areas of SDC's cooperation in developing countries.

3.1 The intersection of human rights and development

Tighter restrictions on civic space are also harmful because of their impacts on human rights and development outcomes. NGOs and CSOs, activists and organisers, journalists and scholars cannot play their role in society, and their rights to free assembly, speech or

expression are effectively violated. This in turn is highly likely to mean that the most marginalised, disempowered and vulnerable groups will lose protection, resources and voice, violating the guiding principles of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, of inclusion, equality, sustainability, and 'leaving no one behind'. Therefore, the problem of civic space is one in which civic and political rights – of free assembly, speech and expression – are closely intertwined with economic, social and cultural rights, to livelihoods and land, jobs, food security, recognition and dignity, personal security, education, health, and shelter. In other words, human rights and 'frontline' human development outcomes intersect in the civic space.

In setting out a response to the problem in 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that civic space was 'not optional' under international human rights law, but that it was also necessary for societies to work out their differences peaceably, for citizens to participate in public life, to widen contributions to public policymaking, and even to cooperate with business to defend basic freedoms (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 2016). Successive UN special rapporteurs on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association have taken a strong position on the 'choking' of civil society for short-term political or business gains (Kiai 2017; OHCHR 2017a: 6). The current UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association underlined their indivisibility from other human rights, explaining that these rights are: 'fundamental rights that form the basis of the full enjoyment of other rights, as they enable the exercise of a number of civil, political, economic, cultural and social rights' (OHCHR 2017a). Civil society and its 'freedom and means to speak, access information, associate, organise, and participate in public decision-making – is essential to the healthy functioning and development of any society' (OHCHR 2014). In 2017, after three years of monitoring the situation around the world, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders reported being:

> … more appalled than ever to see attacks against [human rights defenders] multiplying everywhere, assailing bloggers, indigenous peoples, journalists, community leaders, whistle-blowers and community volunteers [and was now] convinced that the incidents in question are not isolated acts but concerted attacks against those who try to embody the ideal of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in a world free from fear and want.
> (OHCHR 2017b: 3)

3.2 Development effectiveness and civic space

International aid donors that have supported civil society in the past have done so in the belief that civil society participation is essential to development effectiveness, by enabling outreach to marginalised groups, protection of rights, scrutiny of aid and policy, and ensuring broad attention to inclusion, equity and sustainability. A preparatory forum for the 2016 High-Level Meeting of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC) noted that monitoring development progress depended on 'the number and quality of partnerships with businesses, civil society, philanthropies, parliaments, subnational governments and trade unions to achieve development goals', and 'inclusive mechanisms for dialogue and engagement with civil society organisations, with clear goals, mandates and expected results'. The forum concluded that governments should 'improve the policy, legal and regulatory environment so civil society and business can maximize their contribution to development', while development partners should support the capacity of governments to establish and carry out multi-stakeholder partnerships (Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation 2017: 37).

The Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 Declaration frames development as a matter of tackling inequalities of power and resources, with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aiming to:

> end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources.
> (United Nations 2015)

Inclusive development outcomes need inclusive processes of development decision making, to introduce and institutionalise development outcomes that are sustainable, equitable and inclusive, in line with the SDGs (Rocha Menocal 2017). A focus on inclusive forms of development also takes account of the fact that rapid economic growth does not necessarily entail poverty eradication or human development, nor does it ensure that no one is 'left behind', as the SDG principles put it.

Evidence indicates that it is the kinds of work civil society does – to raise awareness, influence public policymaking, mobilise demand for services, rights, and justice, and monitor and hold government and business actors to account – that is most likely to align development along these core SDG principles. SDG 16 is a close approximation of 'civic space', specifically aiming to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'. SDG 16 successfully goes some way towards capturing the intersection of human rights with frontline development outcomes, drawing attention to:

a. the direct impacts on civil society actors (reduction of violence and death rates (16.1); the rule of law at national and international levels (16.2); access to information (16.10); independent human rights institutions (16.a.1); and reduction of organised crime and corruption (16.4 and 16.5));
b. inclusive development processes (public service user satisfaction (16.6); responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making (16.7); broader and stronger participation of developing countries in global governance (16.8); and non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development (16.b)).

However, the full impact of the closing down of civic space for development effectiveness will need to combine SDG 16 with the frontline first five human development indicators of poverty, hunger and nutrition, health, gender equality, and education, as well as to SDGs 8 (decent work), 10 (reduced inequalities), and 15 (life on land), as it is in these domains that the impacts on SDG 16 are most likely to play out. It will also need to take into account SDG 17, and the realisation of the necessary partnerships for development.

3.3 Civic space and developmental states

The strong economic growth and human development performance associated with countries with no strong tradition of independent CSOs or liberal civic space, such as China, Vietnam, Rwanda and Ethiopia, has challenged the view that such conditions are necessary for rapid, broad-based development. The 'developmental state' thesis – that ruling elites may need to silence critics and repress dissent to buy the long-time horizons needed to kickstart economic and social transformations – has been widely used to justify controls on civic space across a variety of political–economic settings. Political elites seeking to implement large land, energy or extractives projects appear to be particularly willing to take steps to silence civil society scrutiny of their impacts on equity or sustainability. However, while 'developmental states' that restrict civic space often feature patterns of development that are high-growth and expand service provision rapidly, they are rarely inclusive or

environmentally sustainable, and may unleash unequal transformations which leave significant groups behind. This is because the kinds of actions taken by civil societies and the media in more open societies, to highlight problems and force them on to the public agenda, tend to be absent or weak and fragmented in authoritarian states – even those with a 'developmental' agenda.

There are several good examples of how a weakened civil society or closed civic space may adversely affect development outcomes within 'developmental' states. In Rwanda, for example, restrictions on free speech have prevented activists and researchers from starting a public debate about the pace and distribution of poverty reduction. Systematic problems in data collection and official statistics go unchallenged, and policies that are likely to lead to worsening inequality or pockets of exclusion persist in this context of closed civic space, raising questions about the extent and distribution of Rwanda's achievements in poverty reduction (Ansoms *et al.* 2017). In China, the past two decades saw growing space permitted to environmental civic groups, in line with an emphasis on environmentalism within the state and ruling party. However, civil society groups operate within strict limits, and are generally unable to raise or mobilise mass public opinion around controversial issues, helping to explain China's significant and continuing localised problems of pollution and environmental degradation (Tang and Zhan 2008). In Ethiopia, violation of the rights to free speech and freedom of association have been associated with pockets of persistent poverty and hunger, and specifically with land deals designed to support large-scale agricultural modernisation or urban development projects against the wishes of local people and small-scale farmers. In the absence of other means of voicing their opposition to such policies, a series of major protests by people from the Oromo community triggered violent state repression, ultimately leading to a change in national leadership in 2018 (Al Jazeera 2018).

3.4 An enabling environment for civil society

The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and follow-up statements affirm that civil society is a critical partner in development effectiveness. Key commitments include:

- 'work with CSOs to provide an enabling environment that maximizes their contributions to development';
- recognising 'the importance of civil society in sustainable development and in leaving no-one behind; in engaging with governments to uphold their commitments; and in being development actors in their own right';
- recognising the importance of reversing 'the trend of shrinking of civic space wherever it is taking place and to build a positive environment for sustainable development, peaceful societies, accountable governance and achievement of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda';
- creating an enabling environment for CSOs that 'maximises their engagement in and contribution to development'.

The GPEDC Monitoring Framework measures 'the extent to which governments and development partners contribute to an enabling environment for CSOs; and the extent to which CSOs are implementing the development effectiveness principles in their own operations'.

Civil society networks and alliances have put forward their views on an enabling environment. The Civic Charter's Global Framework for People's Participation listed, in addition to the protection of civic and political rights, the freedom to accept financial support from home and from abroad, and the protection of the law against attacks on their organisations and space. The CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness similarly

included the following minimum standards for civil society in its 'International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness':

1. Fulfilment of human rights obligations: freedoms of association and assembly, of expression, to operate without unwarranted state interference, of movement and travel; legal recognition facilitating CSO work and to secure resources for legitimate roles in development.
2. CSOs as development actors in their own right, to be assured by governments and donors through legislation, policy and programming.
3. Democratic political and policy dialogue: systematic inclusion of diverse views; transparency and clarity of purpose and process; free access to information, in the language of those being consulted; timeliness of consultations; recognition of the responsibilities and contributions of other actors, in particular local government representatives and administrations; and appropriate resources to enable full participation of all stakeholders.
4. Accountability and transparency, of development priorities, strategies, plans and actions by governments, and a clearly defined place and role for CSOs in donor strategies and plans.
5. Enabling financing, including long-term results orientation, responsiveness to CSO initiatives, access for diverse CSOs and coalitions, predictable, transparent, clear and harmonised terms, promoting local resource mobilisation, and supporting the full range of CSO programming and innovation, policy development and advocacy (Swiss NGO Platform 2015).

4 Donor 'pushback' against closing civic space: an overview

4.1 Categorising donor responses

Donors have made a number of efforts to respond to or push back against closing civic space in development partner countries. Their responses have included documenting and analysing the issue, adopting remote operations where needed, improving communication strategies and analysing risk, encouraging CSOs to reduce dependence on international funding, scaling back contentious activities, providing emergency funds for partners, and exploring new ways of supporting civil society (Carothers 2015). The European Union (EU) had responded with (1) diplomatic and foreign policy instruments such as multilateral dialogue, and (2) a series of funding mechanisms such as: emergency funds to react to partner crises such as arrests of activists or banned organisations; more flexible organisational funding to support CSO capacities to respond in challenging new environments; and funding mechanisms for civil society activism, networking and alliance-building. However, an assessment of the EU response concluded that there was a need for a more 'concrete engagement on the structural roots of the shrinking space' that tackled both the immediate and longer-term aspects of the challenge, as a political and a developmental issue (Youngs and Echagüe 2017).

Other assessments such as a 2015 review of donor responses similarly noted that strategic and policy efforts have been weak, poorly coordinated or misaligned across the international aid system. Actions that required international policy and political coordination were more challenging. Several divisions within and between donor countries were found to hamper collective action to address civic space:

- *Different US and European perspectives:* some Europeans initially viewed closing space as mainly of concern to US human rights groups. Views have harmonised

more recently, as European organisations are increasingly affected. But there remain differences in their approaches to human rights abuses and civic space – notably an American preference for naming and shaming, over a European preference for quiet diplomacy that keeps doors open for dialogue and engagement.

- *Private vs public funders' interests*: private foundations may be reluctant to build coalitions with official aid donors to address civic space, if they fear government involvement may exacerbate the situation, or if they are otherwise opposed to official policies of aid donor countries.
- *Development vs politics:* funders focused more on development and service delivery may be reluctant to act in solidarity with more 'political' human rights defenders, democracy activists or social movements, for fear of jeopardising their own space or government relationships.
- *Aid to civil society:* donors and civil society groups are themselves divided on the extent to which foreign funding is itself at fault, by funding CSOs and professionalised NGOs that some see as lacking in local legitimacy or support. Some see solutions to the closing space problem as only possible with significant changes to this model of civil society assistance (Carothers 2015).

Reports on donor responses to the closure of civic space were reviewed for their analysis of actions that were already being taken, and of the gaps or shortcomings of the donor and recommended responses. These have been classified here into four groups, according to their aims and strategies for resisting or coping with closing space:

1. Policy and strategic efforts, chiefly to persuade or pressure governments to adhere to national, regional and international laws, norms and policy processes regarding civic space, and the coordination of those efforts at international and regional levels.
2. Operational responses, mainly to provide emergency protection to grantees or human rights defenders, and to adapt programming and reporting requirements.
3. Alliance-building and civil society resilience efforts, intended to strengthen civil society's own position within the broader society, including with the private sector.
4. Evidence-generation, to document and monitor threats to civic space, and to make the 'business case' for and positive counter-narratives against civil society.

Reports on donor responses to closing civic space noted an uneven response, with significant efforts on the operational response (2), but more limited strategic or longer-term (1 and 3) responses, and few that challenged national governments directly on policy or legal grounds (1). Efforts to address the evidence base have been largely limited to documenting formal closures of civic space through changes in laws, administrative regulations, and criminalisation of civil society actors and the media (Ariadne/ European Foundation Centre (EFC)/ International Human Rights Funders Group (IHRFG) 2015; Howard et al. 2015; International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) 2018). Documentation and analysis of the wider effects in terms of human rights violations or development outcomes has been patchy, at best. Table 4.1 summarises the recommendations of key reports on responses to civic space, and classifies them according to their aims and strategies. These analyses identify both significant gaps in the donor responses, and opportunities for further action.

Table 4.1 Recommended donor responses to closing civic space

Report	Aims and strategies of recommended responses			
Joshi Ariadne/ European Foundation Centre /International Human Rights Funders Group (2015)	**Strategic & policy**	**Operational & programmatic**	**Alliance-building, resilience**	**Evidence-generation**
Economic interests: align with potential corporate allies, strengthen strategies to hold corporations who benefit from the closing space to account, and make the business case for civil society	▩			
Counter the impact of counter-terrorism policies on civil society, including supporting NGOs to manage the negative impacts of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and other aspects of financial services for NGO actors	▩	▩		
SDGs and other international development processes can convene key actors in development, humanitarian and human rights fields, particularly on SDG 16			▩	
Bring together international human rights norm-setting with domestic legal reform initiatives to strengthen institutions of accountability	▩			
Strengthen and diversify counter-narratives around the value and contribution of civil society			▩	▩
Strengthen diplomatic response to civil society pushback, including addressing 'capture' of regional mechanisms such as the Council of Europe by repressive states	▩			
Strengthen long-term security and resilience of human rights defenders and NGOs, with data and legal protection, accounting/auditing and governance, fostering resilience of movements		▩	▩	▩
ACT Alliance/CIDSE (2015)	**Strategic & policy**	**Operational & programmatic**	**Alliance-building, resilience**	**Evidence-generation**
Gather information to support CSO objectives and monitor human rights abuses				▩
Build formal and informal coalitions across levels and sectors to create space for sharing knowledge, raising issues, increasing legitimacy and influence, and securing funds			▩	
Avoid burdening CSO partners with excessive reporting, leading to 'upward' accountability to donors rather than to local communities		▩		

	Strategic & policy	Operational & programmatic	Alliance-building, resilience	Evidence-generation
Protection, risk analysis and mitigation for CSOs, human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers		▪		
CSOs and indigenous and minority groups need systematic involvement in development policymaking	▪	▪		
CSOs must build close links with communities, enabling participatory and popular education methodologies to bring citizen voice to bear on public policy		▪	▪	
Funding policies and practices should strengthen CSO independence, treating CSOs as equal partners, rather than as dependent grantees		▪		
CSOs need support to generate local and independent revenue streams, including accessing local philanthropy and corporate social responsibility		▪	▪	
Laws that restrict NGO activity against human rights law must be repealed; CSOs cannot operate effectively without the independence and freedoms to which they are entitled under these laws	▪			
The right of citizens to peacefully assemble, march and protest on matters of public concern must be safeguarded, in law and in practice	▪			
Security forces responsible for the aggressive repression of social protest or human rights activity must be investigated and prosecuted	▪			
Effective systems to manage funds in an accountable and transparent manner must be put in place		▪		
International Center for Not-for-Profit Law report (2018)	**Strategic & policy**	**Operational & programmatic**	**Alliance-building, resilience**	**Evidence-generation**
Articulate a clear vision of support for civil society as part of their development and foreign policy statements	▪			
Commit to long-term support for what is an ongoing challenge, and be 'nimble and ready to adapt responses in innovative ways'		▪	▪	
Strive toward policy coherence and coordination, between development and foreign policy	▪			
Empower civil society to respond by monitoring civic space, facilitating collaboration, supporting public engagement, building CSO accountability, resilience and capacity, raising public awareness of civic space; and providing diplomatic support to civil society actors where needed		▪	▪	▪
Adapt aid modalities to current realities, recognising the need to sustain a more diverse array of CSOs with flexible		▪	▪	

funding, long-term core support, non-financial support, and funding for informal groups and movements		▓	▓	
Galvanise governments to defend and expand civic space, strengthen independent institutions, dialogue with governments, multi-stakeholder collaboration on global and regional norms protecting civic space, monitoring and implementation of 2030 Agenda; enabling research on civic space issues	▓			▓
Facilitate cooperation with the private sector on human rights and civic space issues, identifying private sector allies and integrating them into multi-stakeholder spaces, supporting voluntary standards on business practices and human rights monitoring, and cooperation with private sector associations			▓	

4.2 SDC survey responses: key issues for joint learning

Some of the key issues facing members of the SDC DDLG and Conflict and Human Rights (CHR) networks were uncovered by a 2018 survey, which drew on experiences and knowledge of conditions in some 24 countries. The results of that survey are presented in Table 4.2, adopting the same four headings used in Table 4.1. This sets out a broad framework within which SDC can reflect on its own current portfolio of responses, and any gaps and shortcomings, as well as feasible further interventions. This should also take into account the overview analysis of donor responses sketched above, with their assessment of the overall gaps, and specific recommendations.

It should be noted that the responses from the SDC survey are a close fit with other analyses of donor responses to civic space closures, as set out in Table 4.1. SDC staff were most likely to identify operational and programmatic areas for learning about how to respond to civic space, but also identified learning aims with respect to how to address the strategic and policy dimensions of the challenge, as well as in relation to building alliances with and for civil society.

The SDC survey raises a number of additional critical questions about the gaps in knowledge and its practical application to SDC programme and operational design, related to the necessity of tailoring the response to each specific country context. These questions draw attention to several key gaps in the evidence base – for instance, around how to make sense of or work with 'civil society' in the fragile or authoritarian contexts featuring in many of the countries in which SDC is working. There may be additional value to SDC's joint learning about shrinking civic space from taking account of the different political systems and civil society–state relations as they affect country programmes, as was outlined above. A comparative understanding of the political drivers of closing civic space and of state–civil society relations in shaping its outcomes should help with the design of a politically informed and organisationally strategic approach in each country office and sector.

Table 4.2 Key questions for SDC joint learning about responding to closing civic space

SDC DDLG & CHR network survey, 2018 Key issues for learning about responding to closing civic space	Strategic & policy	Operational & programmatic	Alliance-building, resilience	Evidence-generation
Emergency responses: support to civil society actors in exile, including the programmatic risks from remote programming; effective and innovative approaches to risk mitigation; measuring results without endangering civil society groups		▓		▓
Programmatic or operational: adapting SDC's future governance/ decentralisation programming to address the enabling environment for civic space		▓		
Monitoring, research, and knowledge-sharing: identified a range of issues on which evidence was needed, including on experiences with civil society under authoritarianism; the 'business case' for civil society; experiences from around the world with combating closures of civic space; and monitoring the evolution of civic space nationally and at the local level				▓
CSO legitimacy and resilience: key concerns include the need for civil society to reach into wider society, beyond the main cities; to strengthen actors' capacities to promote change while also promoting their independence and sustainability; countering the closure of civic space through local government; and to address the increasingly prevalent notion of a trade-off between civic space and poverty reduction			▓	
Networking and mobilisation: fostering civil society networks and alliances in contexts where civic space is shrinking			▓	
Engaging with alternative actors in the civic space: for instance, with business through multi-stakeholder platforms, decentralised social movements, the media and actors in the digital public space			▓	
'Counter-narratives': key the need for 'winning arguments' about the contributions of civil society, including to development policy, and with authoritarian or anti-democratic governments				▓
Policy engagement: experiences of engaging with governments, in multi-stakeholder platforms, with business champions of civic space, and internationally, with the UN system and multilateral donors.	▓			▓

5 Profiles of donor activities to address shrinking space

This section uses the four categories of donor responses described above to discuss the efforts of five donors: the UN, EU, the Department for International Development (DFID) (United Kingdom), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and, more briefly, the Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations. The profiles were developed using publicly available documentation, and involved no interviews, so some information may be out of date or incomplete. All sources are listed in the References section.

5.1 The United Nations (UN)

(Sources: OHCHR 2014; 2016; Baldus, Poppe and Wolff 2017)

5.1.1 Operational and programmatic domains

The UN has engaged in a range of operational and programmatic efforts to promote an enabling environment for civil society and to mobilise its various instruments to counter the effects of closing space. Taking note of the intimidation and threats faced by many CSOs on account of their cooperation with the UN, particularly on human rights issues, the Human Rights Council has adopted various resolutions, with annual reports from the Secretary-General on such cases of reprisal.

The UN General Assembly has taken note of the risks faced by human rights defenders, and in 2013, adopted its first-ever resolution on the systemic and structural violence faced by women human rights defenders in particular. Access to diverse sources of information, as a part of the right to freedom of expression, is considered to be an important characteristic of enabling environments for civil society, and the UN has scaled up efforts to include NGOs through webcast and remote participation in sessions of the Human Rights Council and treaty bodies. This is especially important for transparency and provides NGOs with a first-hand improved understanding of international human rights mechanisms. OHCHR field presences also aim to improve access to information and increase long-term capacity building of CSOs. However, despite the range of UN responses for civil society support, many CSOs continue to struggle to access and benefit from these mechanisms due to strict requirements and other barriers to participation in UN fora in a consultative capacity.

5.1.2 Building alliances, mobilising

The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association is one of the main focal points for collaborative and coordinated responses to closing civic space. The Special Rapporteur plays a key role not only in gathering information and monitoring changes, but also building alliances with governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders, and leading regional dialogues on foreign funding restrictions in collaboration with the Community of Democracies. Field presences of OHCHR and other UN entities at country or regional levels also provide an important space for civil society actors to come together and form networks among themselves, as well to discuss and collaborate with government officials and representatives. Inter-governmental bodies such as the Human Rights Council are also an important avenue for alliance-building and collaboration on civic space issues. The UN supports states' formal and informal consultations with CSOs, and documents effective participatory processes in numerous reports. SDG target 17.17

further provides a platform for the promotion and improvement of public, public–private and civil society partnerships.

5.1.3 Strategic and policy directions

OHCHR plays a leading role in strategically mobilising various UN bodies and instruments on issues of closing civic space. It should be noted that human rights have greater traction with some UN agencies and bodies than with others. OHCHR works with a range of UN agencies and funds such as the World Health Organization (WHO), UN Refugee Agency, UNICEF, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), with the goal of maximising the impact of human rights work. UN mechanisms further provide for the review of legislation in order to ensure compliance with international human rights standards, particularly to ensure that 'laws on national security and counter-terrorism, money-laundering and incitement to hatred address legitimate concerns without encroaching on human rights and civil society activity' (OHCHR 2016). The implementation of human rights regulations is regularly monitored by panels of experts established by international human rights treaties. The contribution of civil society to these bodies is encouraged, particularly to ensure relevance, legitimacy and accountability. CSOs are invited to participate in various platforms such as international conferences and meetings, with opportunities available through submissions, organising briefings, and networking among participants. However, the extent, reach and implications of CSO participation in UN efforts to counter closing civic space is unclear.

5.1.4 Evidence

The UN special rapporteurs play a key role in gathering and collating authoritative data on human rights abuses, and in generating dialogue about these issues. Information about civic space closures is disseminated through the UN's convening role in review and monitoring processes, and through UN resolutions.

5.2 European Union (EU)

(Sources: Baldus *et al*. 2017; Youngs and Echagüe 2017; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) 2018)

5.2.1 Operational and programmatic domains

The EU's strongest responses to closing civic space can be located within the operational and programmatic domains of activity. The protection of human rights defenders has emerged as a priority and is a major focus of funding from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). The EIDHR, with EUR 1.3 billion available for 2014-2020, provides financial support to an Emergency Fund that covers: legal fees, medical expenses, and the evacuation of human rights defenders; a protection mechanism known as ProtectDefenders.eu, which swiftly coordinates protection and funding for human rights defenders at risk; and a crisis facility that organises emergency response in contexts where the EU cannot launch calls for proposals.

Since 2014, the EU has been developing civil society roadmaps to strengthen Europe's association with civil society. By 2017, more than 100 of these had been finalised and were being implemented, through dialogue, CSO operational support, and operational research. The roadmaps have enabled a more comprehensive approach to civil society, beyond providing operational or financial support, and have helped further policy dialogue, agenda-setting, and joint programme processes between EU members states and partner countries. These roadmaps also contain measures to support 'freedom of association and an "enabling

environment" for CSOs' and provide for support to counter restrictive registration and foreign funding rules, develop domestic revenue sources for NGOs, as well as EU support through mentoring. The EU has also begun working towards greater flexibility in funding modalities by expanding criteria for eligible recipient organisations; guidelines for the European Neighbourhood Instrument further commit to maintain and not reduce financial support for civil society in restrictive environments. The roadmaps are geared towards boosting civil society participation in general; efforts specifically geared towards addressing shrinking space are comparatively limited, but include pressure for easier registration for CSOs, tax incentives for NGOs to increase domestic income, mentoring and support to evade restrictions on foreign funding, and support for business–civil society alliances.

5.2.2 Building alliances, mobilising

While EU efforts to align and coordinate donor interests and responses have been limited to date, gradual progress is being made to build cooperation with CSO networks and alternate forms of civil society actors. Through 23 Framework Partnership Agreements with various civil society networks, the EU has committed to financial support as well as a partnership to support enabling environment concerns. Under the Development Cooperation Instrument, between 2015 and 2017, the Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities programme aimed to support the role of CSOs in pushing for improved governance and accountability, and to strengthen networks of CSOs at the regional and global levels.

The EU further supports various civic space-related initiatives in collaboration with other states, CSOs and donors, including the European Endowment for Democracy, the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Study Group on Freedoms of Association and Assembly, and EuroMed Rights (formerly the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network). The EU has further broadened its definition of human rights defenders in order to support those activists working outside the human rights domain, and EU donors have begun to express interest in funding alternate civil society recipients such as informal social movements and social enterprises. However, the support received by these new civic actors remains minimal. The EU could also do more to integrate closing civic space issues with the SDGs and has yet to cooperate more systematically with pro-civic space private sector actors.

5.2.3 Strategic and policy directions

While the EU has scaled up support for national human rights institutions and has been proactive in its use of UN instruments and procedures, the overall strategic response remains weak, failing to move beyond abstract support for enabling environments to concrete diplomatic efforts that support broader policy responses to closing space. Foreign policy instruments such as conditionality are not applied to the issue of civic space, and the EU continues to offer new agreements, aid and trade to regimes that are highly repressive towards civil society actors. This suggests a lack of coherence with respect to commitment to democratic values in the face of economic and geostrategic concerns on the part of donor governments, weakening any pressure on repressive governments. Collaboration across trade, aid, defence and other platforms would allow for a stronger, more coordinated diplomatic response that better engages with the complex political realities of closing space contexts.

5.2.4 Evidence, data collection and monitoring

No specific EU programmes of research or monitoring of closing civic space were identified. Under specific research commissions, organisations such as the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL) and iCON (the International Consortium on Closing Civic Space) have been involved in specific data-gathering exercises and analyses on behalf of the EU. One

analysis of the EU response identified a need for stronger political analysis capacity in responding to closing civic space. It also noted that EU capacity to monitor human rights issues had declined with a recent reduction in human rights officers in the European External Action Service. A report on civic space in the EU noted the absence of systematic monitoring or data collection on attacks on human rights activists within the EU, in contrast to the context outside the EU, which is more systematically monitored, and the ability therefore of European countries or civil societies to identify trends or take action.

5.3 UK Department for International Development (DFID)

(Sources: DFID 2018; 2017; 2016; DFID and HM Treasury 2015; Digital Defenders Partnership n.d.; Youngs and Echagüe 2017; Baldus *et al.* 2017; CSO Lifeline n.d.; ICNL 2014)

5.3.1 Operational and programmatic domains

While DFID's transparency agenda and Civil Society Partnership Review (CSPR) contain mentions of the 'environment in which CSOs operate' and take note of increasing risks and threats to CSOs, journalists, human rights defenders, and other activists around the world, evidence of DFID programming specific to the challenge of closing civic space is minimal. Based on the findings of the CSPR, DFID highlights the importance of building capacity and resilience among CSOs in order to give them a more prominent leadership role, but these strategic directives are undercut by funding modalities that may pose barriers to funding and support for small- and medium-sized CSOs operating in restrictive environments. For example, CSOs consulted in the CSPR have pointed out that excessive requirements in the application process for DFID funding make it difficult for organisations to successfully apply. DFID has further signalled a shift away from core funding for CSOs towards 'open, competitive programmes' based on CSOs' ability to 'demonstrate effective delivery and value for money' – part of a broader move to prioritise national interest in its response to complex global challenges.

5.3.2 Building alliances, mobilising

DFID has scaled up efforts to support and build coalitions with CSOs, thinktanks, and public and private organisations in order to 'find solutions to current complex situations whilst tackling tomorrow's challenges'. One of the key points raised by CSOs as part of the CSPR was the importance of working together to improve learning and flexible responses to challenges, particularly in difficult contexts. To this end, DFID has launched the UK Aid Connect programme to facilitate greater collaboration on various selected themes, which include 'building civil society effectiveness' and 'building open societies', both pertinent to the challenge of closing civic space. DFID has also demonstrated commitment towards the protection of digital freedoms and free media in restrictive regulatory environments and has linked civil society groups with global transparency initiatives. Along with other donors, DFID has funded initiatives such as the Digital Defenders Partnership (managed by Hivos), which provides emergency support to a range of internet users such as journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders facing acute risk in repressive environments. The UK is also a member of the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society (through the UK Charity Commission), and supports the Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund, which provides financial support and rapid response advocacy grants to civic actors under threat or attack.

5.3.3 Strategic and policy directions

DFID efforts to develop networks with a range of actors – while an important step towards an informed, coordinated response to closing civic space – have largely been unaccompanied

by a broader political and diplomatic strategy to engage and pressure governments that maintain repressive civil society environments. In its 2015 aid strategy, DFID commits to engage in a 'cross-government approach' that allows for aid to be distributed by drawing on the skills and expertise of other government departments, but it is unclear how improved collaboration will be used not only to deliver aid more effectively but also to support civil society in difficult contexts. The CSPR identifies the increasing role of emerging countries in the political economy of global development, but there is no evidence to suggest that DFID is engaging with China or other major players on the issue of closing of civil society space. It is also unclear whether DFID is utilising bilateral, multilateral and regional legal and policy instruments to hold repressive governments to account.

5.3.4 Evidence, data collection and monitoring

DFID is funding a range of initiatives that combine learning and practice about civic space, open societies, and effective CSOs through the Aid Connect programme. Other relevant DFID-funded research includes the A4EA (Action for Empowerment and Accountability) programme, focusing on fragile and conflict-affected states. DFID has also funded smaller studies by the Institute of Development Studies on the implications of closing civic space for development outcomes.

5.4 Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)

(Sources: Ministry for Foreign Affairs Sweden n.d.; Topsøe-Jensen *et al.* 2018; Baldus *et al.* 2017)

5.4.1 Operational and programmatic domains

The promotion of an enabling environment for civil society is a central part of Sida's work in the development sector, with over one-third of funds available to the agency being channelled to and through CSOs. Moreover, Sweden's 2014 strategy for special initiatives for democratisation and human rights amounts to US$120 million per year. One of the two main objectives of Sweden's strategy for support via CSOs is the promotion of an enabling environment, which includes increasing opportunities for CSOs to promote such an environment, strengthening mechanisms for collaboration and coordination in developing countries, and improving aid and development effectiveness in Swedish support for civil society.

Much of Sweden's response to the closing of civic space comes through its long-time core and project funding for CIVICUS, with the provision of SEK 80.5 million between 2014 and 2018. The Civic Space Initiative (CSI), funded by Sida, and bringing together CIVICUS, Article 19, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) and the World Movement for Democracy, aims to protect civic space by supporting journalists, human rights defenders and other groups at risk, and by providing networking and research support. According to CIVICUS, Sida, as a strong donor in this field, can be described as 'flexible, cooperative, and risk-taking', making longer-term strategic commitments and emphasising core funding.

5.4.2 Building alliances, mobilising

Sweden also plays a key role in increasing global collaboration and cooperation on civic space issues. Sweden's strategy for support via CSOs emphasises the importance of 'bridgebuilders' and convening civil society, as well as interaction with other actors such as governments and political parties. To further support political participation through innovation and technology, Sweden – along with the United States, the United Kingdom and the Omidyar Network, launched Making All Voices Count in 2013.

One of the main goals of the CSI is to target public audiences and create counter-narratives that increase engagement and support for civil society. Swedish engagement with CSOs aims to promote local ownership and utilise existing organisational forms for more relevant and effective development cooperation. The Innovation for Change initiative, funded jointly by Sida and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has set up six regional innovation hubs to increase collaborative learning opportunities and build capacity among CSOs. Sida is also a member of the Community of Democracies Working Group on Enabling and Protecting Civil Society, and supports the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Study Group on Freedoms of Association and Assembly, the Digital Defenders Partnership, the Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund, the Prague Civil Society Centre, and EuroMed Rights.

5.4.3 Strategic and policy directions

Within a range of strategic and policy directions, Sweden's response is strongest in relation to its use of bilateral, multilateral and regional policy and legal instruments to address the closing of civic space. For example, one of the main goals of the CSI is to exert influence over policy actors through lobbying and advocacy activities at the global (e.g. the UN), regional and national levels to protect civic space. For example, through CSI, Sweden has made efforts to link civil society with the UN Universal Periodic Review mechanism and the special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council. Sweden was also actively involved in efforts to strengthen the mandate of the UN special rapporteurs, particularly the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, in 2010. While the use of UN instruments to support civic space represents an important aspect of strategic responses to the issue, it is unclear whether Sweden has mobilised diplomatic and foreign policy efforts, or engaged across trade and security platforms in order to create a coordinated response that exerts pressure on governments that continue to restrict civic space.

5.4.4 Evidence, data collection and monitoring

Sida played a key early and consistent role in supporting evidence-generation about the closures of civic space, through funding for monitoring and analysis by civil society and thinktank coalitions such as CIVICUS, the ICNL and other prominent civil society groups.

5.5 The Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations

(Sources consulted: Open Society Foundations n.d.(a), n.d.(b), n.d.(c); Ford Foundation n.d.(a), n.d.(b), n.d.(c))

5.5.1 Operational and programmatic domains

While Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations programming does not directly address the closing of civic space, issues of human rights, civic engagement and internet freedoms are key parts of the respective organisations' work on challenging inequality. The Open Society Foundations' Human Rights Initiative supports a range of groups that work with those whose rights have been violated. Ford Foundation's Civic Engagement and Government strategy seeks to support groups that 'make policy more responsive, to enable people to determine public agendas and priorities, and to reclaim and rebuild trust in government', while its Justice Initiative focuses on legal work rather than grants, and challenges restrictions on freedom of speech and of assembly in the face of abuse of power. Digital freedoms are an important area of work for both organisations, with support provided to partner organisations that work on social justice issues, including privacy and freedom of

expression. While not a direct response to closing space issues, Ford Foundation's Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) programme – a five-year, US$1 billion investment – aims to strengthen the long-term, core capabilities of social justice organisations, the need for which is especially urgent in repressive environments.

5.5.2 Building alliances, resilience

Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations are highly active in their efforts to collaborate with CSOs, donors and other actors to align responses to the closing of civic space. Both organisations' efforts to promote digital freedoms are further expanded through their support for NetGain: Working Together for a Stronger Digital Society, along with the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation, Knight Foundation, and Mozilla Foundation. Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations also provide support to The Funders' Initiative for Civil Society, which aims to support funders in aligning their efforts to counter negative trends in civil society space, as well as EuroMed Rights' Shrinking Space for Civil Society project. Ford Foundation also supports the Fund for Human Rights' Activism Under Threat programme, which supports human rights defenders and human rights organisations in restrictive environments, and the Open Society Foundations has provided funding for the Human Rights and Democracy Network's Enabling Environment for Civil Society working group.

5.5.3 Strategic and policy directions

While Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations are fully engaged in alliance-building and the mobilisation of various actors, and carry out some programmatic work relevant to the closing of civic space, it is unclear whether they are involved in strategic and policy support through national, regional and global policy and legal instruments – particularly within the UN framework. As private donors, they are differently positioned in their ability to pressure governments that restrict civic space. They have the potential to increase engagement with diverse actors such as businesses and contribute more effectively to the creation of positive counter-narratives on the value of civil society.

5.5.4 Evidence, data collection and monitoring

No specific activities were identified relating to generating evidence or data regarding combating shrinking civic space.

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