



Donor Support for ‘Informal Social Movements’

Jacqueline Hicks

Institute of Development Studies

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Question

What approaches do donors use to support “informal social movements” in their programming, and what evidence do they base their strategies on?

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1. Summary

There is some consensus in the donor and think tank literature found for this rapid review about how to support informal social movements. “Social movements” are defined as relatively informal, heterogeneous, and ideologically and organisationally fluid.

Donor strategies include:

- **Prioritising local knowledge and networks:** A strong investment in civil society mapping in the assessment phase, investments in local research partnerships and maintaining a local network of collaborators.
- **Providing small, long-term, and flexible forms of financing:** Including rapid response mechanisms, seed funds, core support, flexible funding including to individuals.
- **Providing in-kind support:** Including coaching from experts with contextual knowledge and language skills, equipment and materials, solidarity support including regular communication with activists, legal assistance.
- **Working in coalitions:** With multiple donors and local co-sponsorships to avoid delegitimising a local movement.
- **Working through more established NGOs as intermediaries:** Including the provision of community or “walk-in” hubs.
- **Supporting an enabling environment:** Including efforts to maintain a conducive legal environment, open media, open spaces for public dialogue, a reliable mobile and internet network.
- **‘Seeding’ domestic funders:** By encouraging local philanthropy and social enterprise to provide local sources of funding.

A survey asking social movement activists what kinds of external support were beneficial found that they wanted: **security support, amnesty or safe passage, media coverage, and funding types that allowed for flexibility** and built **longer-term infrastructure** without being tied to specific project outcomes.

Activists said that **the least effective external support** occurred **when organisations “did not know enough about our context,” “imposed their own agenda,” and/or only provided “short-term support”** (Miller-Dawkins, 2017, p.3).

Analysis of how to support informal social movements can hinge on how they are defined, and how they are understood to emerge and thrive. Given the extremely diverse and dynamic forms of social movements, donors seem to choose strategies based on specific contexts.

Evidence base: The evidence found during the course of this rapid review was drawn from both the academic literature, and think-tank and donor reports. The academic literature found was extremely large and predominantly drawn from single case studies around the world, with few comparative studies. The literature on donor approaches found from both donors and think tanks was not consistently referenced to research evidence, but tended to be based on interviews with experienced staff and recipients.

In such a large literature, there were some case studies of social movements involved in gender issues, but these were not highlighted in this review.

2. The importance of definitions and approaches

There is a substantial and growing body of work dedicated to social movements, encompassing a **wide range of views about how to define them** (Smelser et al., 2020). This is complicated by the use of **other terms** which shade into the idea of “social movements”, such as grass-roots mobilisation/ movements, non-traditional civil society organisations, voluntary organisations, civic space, new civic activism, active citizenship, to name a few. There is also an **implied informality** to the term “social movements”, so that the research for this rapid review used both “social movement” and “informal social movement.”

“Social movements” are relatively informal, heterogeneous, and ideologically and organisationally fluid.

“Social movements” are by definition **informal or semi-formal**, as opposed to the formal structure of a stable association, such as a club, a corporation, or a political party. They are **relatively long lasting** over a period of weeks, months, or even years rather than flaring up for a few hours or a few days and then disappearing (Smelser et al., 2020).

Social movements are **diverse in terms of scale, level of organisation, and relationship with other established organisations**. They can exist at neighbourhood, city, national and international levels, drawing together individuals who share the same interests and identities (Grant, 2009).

Within a social movement there may be many separate organisations, but none is definitive of the movement itself. They **may be a hybrid of formal and informal organisation**; for example Greenpeace may be described as a social movement because it has a tightly knit organisational structure at its centre, with loose global links that are weakly bonded organisationally. Non-governmental organisations tend to be outgrowths of social movements rather than being differentiated from them (Grant, 2009).

Social movements are **fluid and flexible in terms of their organisation and ideology** (Grant, 2009). They may be reactionary (advocating for the restoration of a previous state of social affairs), or progressive (advocating for a new social arrangement) (Smelser et al., 2020).

Typically, they **engage in some form of protest or civil disobedience** in addition to the more peaceful demonstrations and lobbying that are the hallmarks of more formal NGOs. However, social movements **may also provide the context in which collective identities and lifestyles are generated and maintained**. For example, the Gay and Lesbian movement is an example of the way in which a movement can provide for an ongoing support network for those who because of their sexuality do not fit into established social and cultural modes of activity (Grant, 2009).

Short Definition of Social Movement:

“Social movements are defined as networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities.”

(Diani, 1992, p.1; 2600 Google Scholar citations).

Approaches to supporting social movements can be informed by prior conceptions of how and why social movements emerge.

Different scholars have emphasised different types of conditions to explain how and why social movements emerge, and therefore what they need to thrive.

Very broadly, some of the main approaches include (but are not limited to):

- **Structural explanations:** social movements arise due to large socio-economic problems like unemployment and resulting class relations. Fuchs (2006) describes the **New Social Movements approach** as an offshoot of structural explanations, which go beyond economic changes to include other social and gender issues such as gender and ethnicity.
- **Political opportunity explanations:** certain political contexts provide openings for social movements to proliferate, such as the relative openness of political institutions, a fragmented political elite or a decline in state capacity to repress populations (McAdam, 1996).
- **Resource mobilisation explanations:** explain social movements with reference to their use of material resources (money, labour, organisations, technology, and mass media) and non-material resources (legitimacy, solidarity, moral commitment, loyalty, social relationships, personal and organisational networks, and public attention) (Fuchs, 2006, p.104).

Such explanations are not mutually exclusive. Fuchs (2006) makes the distinction between approaches that focus on the **external environment** (structural, political opportunity), and those with an **internal focus** (psychology, resource mobilisation).

The benefit of outlining these approaches above is that it may help those aiming to support social movements reflect on their own assumptions about how to do so. For example, Shefner (1999, p.376) states that “analysts using resource mobilization and political process theories define external aid and alliances as an important aid to collective action emergence and success.”

Some scholars criticise these explanations of social movements as **biased towards explaining social movements in the West** (Altmann et al., 2016). There is a burgeoning research agenda on explaining social movements in the Global South, too large to detail here; but the principle of

looking “at the particular socio-political, institutional and economic contexts in which they are rooted” (Polet, 2007, p.1) remains an important one for donors, as detailed below in section four.

3. The risks of providing external support to informal social movements

The different effects of external support for social movements is a live and unsettled question in the academic literature (Bob, 2018).

There is evidence that the support of external organisations can help social movements achieve their goals.

Jalali (2012, p.59) cites a number of studies showing that “external support may be critical for movement success” particularly “where less powerful groups lack resources.” She highlights research that shows the success of foreign support for social movements working in democratic political change, including issues ranging from human rights, the environment, and gender to people-oriented development strategies. She also points to her own research on the Indian women’s movement which showed that foreign funds made social movements more viable, facilitated the incorporation of women’s issues into public policy, and helped institutionalize women’s studies in the country (Jalali, 1998).

In an overview of the Senegalese peasant movement since the 1960s that is based on interviews with peasant leaders, outside observers and a literature review, Hrabanski (2010) finds that **donors’ financial support was at times crucial to the development of the peasant movement.**

In a quantitative study using a large dataset on “transnational social movement organisations” (TSMO) from 1953 to 2013, Pinckney and Chin (2021) find that the strongest influence of TSMO activities can be found in their **promotion of counter-hegemonic discourses.** The authors conclude that “policymakers interested in encouraging democracy should look beyond formal, top-down mechanisms and pay attention to the perhaps unruly and yet vibrant world of transnational social movement organizations”, adding that they may be “important cross-national carriers of participatory democratic norms, practices, and mobilizational capacity” (p.12).

Research also shows some of the dangers of external support for social movements.

Providing a large number of references to empirical case studies, Jalali (2012) summarises some of the “unintended consequences” of donor support on social movements as:

- Fear of engaging in political activity not welcomed by their funders.
- The “Projectitis Disease” where groups shift to a “service delivery paradigm” rather than organising and influencing activities.
- Fragmentation of a movement where competition for aid from funding agencies creates power struggles and divisions.

- The NGOization of social movement organisations where they reorient their activities away from grass-roots work toward creating the administrative infrastructure necessary to secure, manage, and sustain funding.
- Prioritises the cultivation of ties with transnational actors rather than building local and regional networks.
- Removing a reliance on their constituency for financial support enables social movements to pursue strategies that do not involve a large membership or broad organisational presence.

Bob (2018) echoes many of these findings, adding that “**transnational linkages can provide authoritarian governments with easy arguments for undermining domestic movements**” (p.124). Szabó (2000) similarly describes “a shift from informal social movements to differentiated types of NGOs” in Hungary in response to Western aid (p.55), but still calls for “Western resources and know-how” (p.69).

Providing support to social movements can also be risky for donors.

Stephan et al. (2015) note the politicisation and unpredictability of some social movements which is one reason why donors choose to invest in Western-oriented NGOs that focus on technocratic fixes. Jensen and Warburg (2021, p. 21) state that “in order to facilitate the new civic activism, **donors and NGOs face the challenge of drawing a clearer line between being politically engaged and being politically one-sided.**”

However, it has also been suggested that “while donors need to be careful to retain their formal political neutrality, by not engaging positively with the new activists they are in fact adopting a political position by omission – one that loads the dice against the emerging civic activism and its new types of substantive agendas” (Youngs, 2019, p.126).

Bouchet et al. (forthcoming, 2022) say that international democracy support organisations, including donors, have tried to channel their support through less overtly political entities by funding informal and cultural groups, and spaces for dialogue. However, more recently, some repressive regimes have “caught up” with these less political approaches and gradually sought to neutralize many of them. The authors recommend that donors change their strategies beyond tactical or operational tweaks, and “reflect on the need to **move back to focusing on overarching politics and political change**” (p.2) especially in hostile environments.

Some research highlights the conditions under which external support may be beneficial.

Citing empirical research from a further five case studies, Jalali (2012) suggests that **one way to mitigate these unintended consequences may be to ensure strong movements locally before seeking international support.**

Jalali (2012) also suggests that some of the domestic conditions under which international support facilitate rather than undermine movement success include: **the nature of the domestic opportunity structure**, the **structural position of the target state**, and **the nature of the**

issue where human rights and violence against women do better with international support than labour rights or women's economic rights.

Searching for correlations in a dataset of 67 cases, alongside qualitative analysis, Chenoweth and Stephan (2021, p.3) find that “direct funding to movements has few generalizable effects on movement characteristics or outcomes...[but that **it depends**] on how it is delivered and implemented, as well as who is driving the agenda. Flexible donor funding that minimizes bureaucratic obstacles has been most helpful to movements.”

The most compelling research asks activists themselves what they need from external support.

Miller-Dawkins (2017) presents the results of a survey of 1,107 activists from 10 countries with closed, semi-closed and closing civil society spaces. The study defined activists as “those active in social movements, community organizing, blogging, legal activism, investigative journalism, and forms of civil resistance that are nonviolent” (p.2). It focuses on the relationships between activists campaigning for political and social change and the foreign governments, foundations, NGOs, and private individuals that support them.

The survey contains a wealth of insights about what activists found helpful from external support and what had negative impacts.

Some of the main findings from the survey include:

- Activists made clear the kinds of support they most want: **closer collaboration, security support, amnesty or safe passage, and media coverage**. Activists felt greater support in these areas would make the most difference in their work (p.3).
- Security-related support was the most mentioned negative experience. Activists often cited that **external organisations overemphasised digital security as opposed to their physical security**, thereby overlooking the ways in which activists are vulnerable.
- A more favourable view can be seen in how activists referred to the delivery of funding. The **most effective funding types were those that allowed for flexibility** and built **longer-term infrastructure** without being tied to specific project outcomes.
- The key differentiating factors that impacted experiences of support centred around whether activists felt their power and autonomy was respected by outside actors. The **factors that most negatively impacted experiences of support** were when external organisations “did not know enough about our context,” “imposed their own agenda,” and/or only provided “short-term support” (Miller-Dawkins, 2017: p.3).

4. How donors support social movements and mitigate the potential negative consequences

Most of the donor documents found during the course of this rapid review recognised that a **different approach is needed to engage with informal social movements compared to more formalised NGOs**, and particularly to “do no harm.” The documents reviewed were not well referenced to research findings, and tended to be based on interviews with staff experienced in engaging with social movements alongside vague references to “the literature.”

There was a high degree of consistency among donors in their findings and recommendations in the documents found during this rapid review.

Local knowledge, networks and analysis is seen as important.

In a paper written for the United States Institute of Peace, a body funded by the U.S. Congress, Stephan et al. (2015) say that donors have a tendency to “under-analyze what they mean by civil society, what they hope to achieve by supporting it, and what the risks and challenges are” (p.8). They say that **civil society mapping should precede programming**.

In a study commissioned by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Bossuyt & Ronceray, 2020), the authors say that the European Commission has championed the use of civil society mappings, which have in more recent years included more information on civil society interactions with the state, in addition to involving social movements and protest movements.

In a study of informal social movements in developing countries commissioned by the Danish development agency (Danida), Jensen and Warburg (2021) say that “**a strong investment in the assessment phase is imperative**” (p.31). The authors note that to mitigate the effects of direct funding to groups that start from a volunteer basis, donors need “the capacity and resources to look into how the group works, understand the power dynamics (including in terms of gender equality), understand what funding can give a much-needed ‘boost’ – or ultimately result in infighting and collapse, in the worst-case scenario” (p.31).

Stephan et al. (2015) suggest several other ways to engage with the local knowledge needed to effectively support social movements, including to **invest in local research partnerships**, employ people with local knowledge (including both domestic and foreign staff), and maintain a local network of collaborators to identify local change agents.

Smaller, longer-term, and more flexible forms of financing are widely considered more suitable for informal groups.

Jensen and Warburg (2021) say that one of the main focuses of Danida’s engagement with informal social movements is the provision of **short-term funding through rapid-response mechanisms**. Based on interviews with Danish civil society organisations (CSOs) and a review of some of the literature, the authors further describe a best practice approach to funding informal movements as using: rapid response mechanisms, seed funds, core support, flexible funding including to individuals, payment for specific activities such as transport, equipment and materials (p.25).

In a paper commissioned by the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, Youngs and Echagüe (2017) reference a “best practice” EU example of a funding mechanism in Turkey called the Sivil Düşün (Think Civil) programme. It provides **small grants** to all types of civil society actors, whether legal entities or not. The authors write that:

“The EU has expressly oriented the initiative towards **small, quick and short-term grants** because the unpredictable and fraught political situation increasingly militates against large, high profile and multi-annual grants. Almost half of the applications have come from individual activists – a figure that diplomats see as a testimony to the success of the programme, as the aim is to ensure that funds reach those individuals whose

NGOs have been banned and can no longer apply as part of a formally registered association” (p.26).

Stephan et al. (2015) say that **micro-grants** are best practice, which simplifies the processes for securing funding and allows **targeted grants to be “surged” at key moments** to help civic mobilisers. They add that “relationship-based management— emphasizing text messages, e-mails, phone calls, and in-person conversations—combined with site visits can be more revealing than formal reports, especially for partners who do not speak English as a first language” (p.9).

Established in 2013 by the EU, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) was conceived as an independent, complementary mechanism for **providing fast and flexible technical and financial support** to democratisation and human rights promotion in the “European Neighbourhood.” In addition to selected CSOs, it also targets pro-democracy movements, civic and political activists, independent media platforms and journalists, newly created or non-registered organisations, informal platforms, youth groups and individuals (Bossuyt & Ronceray, 2020).

Youngs (2019) describes the Netherlands’ approach to funding “non-traditional actors” like incipient social movements, unregistered groups, and technology innovators. He notes that the country has made grants available on “more flexible terms, set up an Innovation Fund for new organizations, extended an Accountability Fund through local embassies, and broadened a Human Rights Fund to focus on small CSOs and human rights defenders” (p.121).

In-kind support is another common donor strategy for reaching informal groups.

Bossuyt and Ronceray (2020) cite an evaluation of the EU programme, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). The evaluation found that the in-kind support provided through this facility was “appreciated” by the actors on the ground, “in particular the regular **coaching through dedicated experts with high knowledge of the context and relevant language skills**” (p.24). Bossuyt & Ronceray (2020) do not provide a reference for the evaluation titled “Evaluation of the capacity building initiatives in support of Civil Society in the Neighbourhood South (2012-2016)”, and the document was not found during the course of this rapid review.

Jensen and Warburg (2021) note that one of the main types of intervention from Danish CSOs to informal social movements in developing countries is “capacity development” which includes **workshops, coaching, and online materials**.

The nonfinancial assistance considered helpful by Stephan et al. (2015) is in-kind support of equipment and materials; solidarity support including regular communication with activists and dissemination of translated statements; legal assistance; training, when appropriately designed. The authors cite the example of the Solidarity Center, which is part of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) umbrella – a U.S. Congress funded NGO:

“[The Solidarity Center] has provided training in collective bargaining skills that, combined with sustained communications with workers during government repression, proved particularly useful in Tunisia and Egypt...Capacity building that facilitates peer-to-peer learning and combines learning with doing (clinics) and mentoring tend to be far more

useful than institutionally oriented or thematic training. Peer-to-peer trainings involving activists from different anticorruption movements have proved especially helpful” (p.10).

The authors base these judgements on two interviews.

“The fundamental challenge for external actors is...to help [social movements] manage the risks involved in challenging vested interests and power structures and to use their leverage with governments to allow space for nonviolent organizing.”

(Stephan et al., 2015, p.7).

Donors may maintain a ‘low profile’ and work in coalitions to avoid delegitimising a local movement.

Stephan et al. (2015) reference a USAID assessment of support in the Dominican Republic, which highlighted the importance of maintaining a low profile to allow the grantees to take the visible lead. They also say that “involving multiple donors and local co-sponsorships can also help dampen the delegitimizing effects of bilateral foreign support” (p.10).

Chenoweth and Stephan (2021) also say that a large number of their interview respondents highlighted **the necessity of alignment and coordination among donors** in supporting movements, which occurred surprisingly infrequently.

Stephan et al. (2015) suggest that private foundations and smaller donors could take the lead in providing catalytic financial support to non-traditional actors, while larger donors invest more in convening functions, peer-to-peer learning, and supporting an enabling environment for civic activism.

Some donors use ‘hubs’ to connect to informal movements via more established NGOs.

Youngs et al. (2022) highlight a growth in informal civil society groups functioning as community or “walk-in” hubs for citizens in Europe, providing the example of **CitizensLab**. These are very small clusters offering “citizen aid” such as working on technological solutions to local community problems or organising legal advice to protect community rights.

Noting that empirical case studies show that informal civil society is not entirely distinguishable from but rather overlaps with formal civil society, the authors suggest that **formal CSOs can support informal groups** in functional areas such as fundraising, resource management, and data management. They further cite several for-profit corporations that have established and funded such hubs in Bucharest, Romania.

Citing a number of studies from around the world, Banks et al. (2015) provide some examples where **NGOs build bridges between grassroots organisations** and local and national-level structures and processes. They state that NGOs could “carry information, ideas, skills, and

funding across the ecosystems of transformative action that are emerging in areas like climate change and the environment, the social economy, and new forms of civil society activism” (p.715).

The authors conclude that “The challenge is to start removing some of the restrictions in the international aid system that currently make the short-term needs of support NGOs irreconcilable with the longer term needs and strategies of social movements and other forms of [mass based organisation]” (p.715).

Stephan et al. (2015) agree that **donors could provide umbrella grants to trusted NGOs that in turn could manage micro-grants**. This approach would encourage productive partnerships between traditional and non-traditional civic actors yet allow each to focus on their comparative advantage. They cite donor examples like USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives in Pakistan, and the USAID/ Swedish International Development Agency’s planning of regional civil society hubs as part of the multilateral Stand with Civil Society initiative.

Helping to support an enabling environment for informal social movements is also recommended.

Stephan et al. (2015) note that “a **conducive legal environment**, political cover, open spaces for public dialogue—including the existence of **independent media**, a reliable mobile network, and **Internet access**—are all factors that support nonviolent mobilization efforts” (p.11).

Chenoweth and Stephan (2021) say that “support for movements, independent media, **human rights documentation and advocacy**, election monitoring, and nonviolent action training and skills-building can help create an enabling environment for nonviolent campaigns” (p. 82).

There have been some efforts to support the ‘seeding’ of domestic funders.

Youngs and Echagüe (2017) say that “one clearly healthy change is that Western donors and large international bodies are now taking the challenge of developing local, in-country funding sources more seriously. This is yet to reap significant dividends, however...the EU should aim some of its civil society support at ‘seeding’ consortia of domestic funders and developing preferential fiscal rules and the like for national contributions to CSOs – at least in places where civil society is still reasonably open” (p.25).

Similarly, Stephan et al. (2015) recommend donors to **encourage local philanthropy and social enterprise**, citing the example of “the Dutch civil society development organization, Hivos, which has encouraged crowdsourced funding and the creation of investment funds to support sustainable local civic activity. Small and medium enterprises in the Philippines, Ukraine, and elsewhere have provided targeted, sometimes under-the-radar financial and other support to local pro-democracy movements” (p.11).

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