

Methods for supporting or countering informal social movements

Overview

- 1 Social movements tend to be perceived positively. However, this is an assumption, and it is still possible to have regressive, illiberal, maligned goals in social movements. This needs to be taken into account.
- 2 There has been a call for more support to international social movements, and a focus on the ethics of funders, so that they do no harm in working with international social movements.
- 3 Supporting social movements is important, but it has also become 'trendy'. Trust in civil society has been diminishing for a long time, [as evidence illustrates](#). Young people are turning away from traditional Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) affiliation, which is contributing to the emergence of more informal social movements. Some might argue that practices of the aid sector, and particularly Northern funders has caused this, thereby detaching NGOs from their local accountability structures.

What the literature says

There is [growing literature on social movements](#), and how they have been adapting in the current context. Key findings from the literature illustrate:

- > There are unintentional consequences of supporting informal social movements. These include projectisation of social movements, as they become service delivery partners focused on developing the capacity to manage funding and start to compete with others for funding. This may also lead to self-censoring of activities which they believe funders will not support.
- > There is a danger of fragmentation within a movement, as activists seeking funding focus more on international than local networks. Authoritarian governments may use this as evidence to target and undermine activists on a national level.

Reading time:

🕒 3–5
minutes

Who is this for:

FCD0 advisors and programme managers working with INGOs and in the Civil Society space; other stakeholders with interest in or engagement with civil society.

What you can find:

- > Overview
- > What the literature says
- > Effects of not funding social movements
- > The digital sphere
- > The way forward

- > Donors can assist by prioritising local networks, providing small, flexible grants or in-kind support.
- > Coalitions and collaborations between donors can avoid delegitimising local movements and help to build an enabling environment, with an open media and reliable connectivity. Where possible, this type of support should not be tied to specific project outcomes.
- > Social movements should aim to strengthen themselves and solidify their mission before seeking donor support.
- > Donors should strive to understand the local context rather than enforcing their own agenda.
- > Support for social movements raises important questions for donors around the values of pluralism and freedom, and how influential they are prepared to be.

BOX 1

Findings from the Civic Research Network – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

<https://carnegieendowment.org/specialprojects/civresearchnetwork>

Over the past five years, Carnegie has been building a picture of how civic activism is changing. Their research suggests that donors could and should be doing more to support informal social movements, but need to do so with care, as this can backfire. Generally, the overarching current situation is not good as regimes become more oppressive and crack down on local movements. Protection of individual activists has become a priority, and donors are supporting digital security and physical safety. While this is a very important role taken in response to emergency situations, it focuses on supporting individuals. Donors may need to move back to capacity-building as soon as possible.

Social movements are more fluid than Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). However, a lot of activism is even more informal and sporadic than social movements, and ambivalent towards external support. There has been a massive increase in intensity of protest and mobilisation in the last five years across the world, in both authoritarian and non-authoritarian regimes. Much of this is anti-capitalist and left-leaning, but there is also a series of fast-growing right-wing social movements, some of which are fundamentalist and violent. While it may be legitimate to refuse to support these stakeholders, right-wing groups with democratic conservative agendas also exist. If excluded from external support and funding, this might be seen as a new form of colonisation, in which only 'Western politically correct' groups receive external funding.

The pandemic has given rise to a new wave of health-related activism in the past two years, which is less about protest or political objectives, and more self-help mutualism. This could represent a new and emerging form of social movements, and an antidote to the more politicised social movements of last decade.

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) is often seen as the best example of good practice, and is willing to take risks in funding. An example of funding human rights related to informal organisations was a European Union (EU) initiative that removed money from the ministry in Turkey pre-accession and used it to support CSOs that were unable to register.

Effects of not funding social movements

In contexts such as [southern Africa](#), issues of politicisation can result in groups can become partisan. Social movements working under despotic regimes tend to look for solidarity from other groupings, and often find that support in opposition political parties. Activists tend to join political parties or CSOs, eventually leading to the demise of the social movements and its mission. As a result, social movements are constantly looking for new energy and new voluntarism.

Without personal security and support, people are often forced to leave movements to make a living elsewhere. A priority for activists is the availability of strong support when victimised. People are driven by a spirit of voluntarism and passion for the movement, but when incarcerated or attacked, they lack the formal protection of an organisation and might fall between gaps in protection architecture.

A key question to reflect on is: Could support be given within a looser framework to allow protection for all those victimised, through small and flexible forms of financing not paid through CSO fiscal sponsors? CSOs often see social movements as competitors, as money may not be passed on without conditions. Smaller grants, given on a trust basis – and paid direct to activists with minimal conditions – are needed as part of a basic funding framework. This is needed in tandem with a stronger protection framework for those human rights defenders at risk.

Social movements may become compromised by funding, but there are also positive outcomes of funding them: Empowering activists to have a voice and removing politicisation; raising awareness; and building capacity. If funding these movements is not done to support a certain agenda, but to provide a space for social movements to make their voices heard, it will be effective.

The digital sphere

The digital world as a space for activism to take place has seen significant changes over past few years. There are now many more digital policies and regulations which are providing security for CSOs, as well as measures against internet shutdowns.

However, there has been less progress in fostering digital activism, and so there is potential for links between offline and online activism to provide a competitive edge and reform social movements. Newer ways of organising have emerged as a result of Covid-19, including growth in the use of WhatsApp as an organising tool, which allows for the exchange of information without people needing to gather. This opens up movements to other constituencies who may fear meeting in person.

The way forward

Development partners need to find a way to offer smaller grants directly to social movements without requiring a fiscal sponsor from a formal NGO which inevitably leads to competition over limited resources, as funds are scarce. However, this takes time and capacity. Donors often find it hard to move away from their own constraints and focus on the needs of groups they want to support. It raises the question about what the role of the external donor should be, and shifts the focus towards values, and how best to uphold pluralism, freedom, and civic engagement that donors claim to prioritise.

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