

How Covid-19 Shrank Civic Space

Research Report 2021-22



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Research team:

Charles Gay, Governance and Human Rights Adviser (Project Lead); Anupama Ranawana, Research Lead; Gerhard Buttner, Partnerships and Civil Society Engagement Adviser; Suzanne Fisher-Murray, Research Communications Adviser. With case study research by Blessing Christopher, Senior Programme Coordinator and Chinelo Mokwe, MEAL Officer, Nigeria; Nuzhat Jabin and Dr Kazi Nurmohammad Hossainul Haque (consultant), Bangladesh; Giant Mudimba, MEAL Officer, Zimbabwe; Grainne Kilcullen, Governance Programmes Adviser; Alejandra Albizu, Programme Manager, Colombia; Alicia Malouf, Programme Manager, IoPt; Mani Kumar, Country Manager, Myanmar.

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caid.org.uk

Contact us

Christian Aid
35 Lower Marsh
Waterloo
London
SE1 7RL
T: +44 (0) 20 7620 4444
E: info@christian-aid.org
W: caid.org.uk

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Cover: Bangladesh, Rohingya women's group

Photo: Fabeha Monir/Christian Aid

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List of acronyms

- CBO** Community-based organisation
- CSO** Civil society organisation
- ECID** Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development
- FCDO** (UK) Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
- FOAA** Freedom of assembly and association
- IACHR** Interamerican Commission on Human Rights
- INGO** International non-governmental organisation
- IoPt** Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory
- NGO** Non-governmental organisation
- OECD** Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
- SDGs** Sustainable Development Goals

Below: #EndSARS protest, Nigeria, 2020. Photo: Tope Asokere/Unsplash



Executive summary

**How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted civic space?
What has changed, who has been most affected and why?
How are communities, partners, stakeholders and staff in
Christian Aid programmes responding? What must be done
to protect and expand this space?**

This new study urgently raises issues of participation, freedom of assembly, surveillance and operations in an increasingly restricted civic space since the onset of Covid-19. Some of these are long-term issues, now being exacerbated by the pandemic.

Our research gathers both primary data and long-term experience to guide our own, and our partners' policy, advocacy and programmatic work in protecting civic space. We present primary data from Bangladesh and Nigeria, and case studies from Colombia, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (loPt), Myanmar, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe.

KEY FINDINGS

■ Civic space has shrunk for those with least power

Globally, the right to civic assembly and space has been shrinking over the past ten years. Since 2020, pandemic restrictions have further silenced groups and individuals who were already excluded from national and international arenas. Our report shows the impact on women in rural communities in Zimbabwe and Nigeria; transgender, Dalit and Adivasi groups in Bangladesh; and indigenous communities in Colombia. They have also lost economic power, receiving little state support.

■ Freedom of assembly and activism have been curtailed

In various countries there has been severe authoritarian crackdown. Governments have abused human rights and used technology to spy on activists. Even in more democratic countries there have been restrictions on civic scrutiny (especially with regards to freedom of the press), on holding governments to account and on the right to protest.

■ Operational risks have increased

Many of the groups most affected by shrinking civic space have been hit by funding gaps just at a time when finance was sorely needed. Our research reveals that funds for Covid-19 responses have been channelled into humanitarian relief and social protection rather than strengthening civic space.

Furthermore, a shift is taking place towards powerful private sector interests as providers of support and/or beneficiaries of funding. State denial of the role of civil society in delivering

'In the beginning of Covid-19, many are emotionally broken, many unemployed. Economic and social pressures increase.'

Bangladesh interviewee

humanitarian assistance and relief reveals a drive to centralise power, external funding and control over aid and relief funds in the interests of allies in government and business.

■ **Alternative organising offers a partial solution**

Alternative organising has worked well in some contexts but not others. It is seen as one aspect of a campaign, but not its full realisation. The move to online civic space has meant inclusion for many who previously had difficulty in physically attending; new opportunities for certain groups; and an increase in audience. Yet it has also brought new inequalities of access and participation for those who are digitally excluded.

Use of legal challenges and human rights monitoring agencies has been successful: higher-level routes to redress and accountability may remain open when other routes have closed. This includes challenging rights abuses and pressurising certain states (although not the most autocratic regimes) into reviewing restrictive legislation and behaviours.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For civil society organisations and donor governments / international agencies:

- Support for broad alliances between the most vulnerable groups is key to building strong civic spaces,
- Developing civic space online can lead to greater inclusion and new ways to expand reach and accountability work. Yet it is vital to safeguard against new digital inequalities.
- Human rights law can be harnessed to challenge government surveillance of activists.
- Greater protection should be given to human rights defenders and monitoring agencies by increasing their access to justice and to international bodies.

For donor governments / international agencies:

- Funding and organisational support is needed for CSOs weakened by lack of funding, regulatory increases, Covid-19 restrictions and state repression.
- Close monitoring is required of the commitments to Sustainable Development Goal 16+, to human rights obligations and international commitments to support open societies and civic space made at the G7 summit in 2021.¹
- Civil society effectiveness must be restored through investment in initiatives to strengthen governance and make civic space more inclusive.

1. Introduction and purpose

In 2021, we set out to study the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on civic space, with a special research focus through primary data in Bangladesh and Nigeria, plus case studies on Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories (IoPt), the UK and Colombia.

The purpose is for us and our partners to understand and evidence the impact of Covid-19 on civic space, in order to strengthen this space through effective and quality programming; to provide an evidence base for policy and advocacy work; and to challenge setbacks, new restrictions, and human rights abuse.

As a partnership organisation, a central part of our mandate is to strengthen civil society, building the capacity of our partners and working with them to increase the agency and voice of people living in poverty. Much of our ambition in poverty eradication depends on shifting power in favour of those who have none and fostering stronger governance relationships, so that states meet their obligations to protect, respect and fulfil human rights.

Background landscape

It must be stressed that many of the issues discussed in this study predated the Covid-19 pandemic, and that compounding local restrictions is part of a global shift towards an 'unfriendly' attitude to civil society.

In 2020, efforts to protect civic space experienced further major setbacks with restrictions relating to Covid-19. Serious concerns arose over issues across the globe such as postponed elections, restrictions on free protest and media, and unrestricted emergency powers. Our 2020 report, *Building Back with Justice*² noted that during the pandemic:

'Limits on freedom of speech and movement have created an environment in which other rights abuses have proliferated... In most countries, governments have put in place emergency measures that restrict rights and freedoms, and place control over economic activity. Yet in many instances, these restrictions have also been used as a pretext to gag the media, counter political opposition and constrain civic space. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has voiced concerns about the ways in which governments have clamped down on media and civil society scrutiny of their pandemic responses.'

Definition of civic space

The structures, processes and legal instruments, and the absence of restrictions, which make it possible for citizens to associate, organise and act on issues of interest to them in the space outside the family, the state and the market.

Civic space allows people and groups to express and negotiate their interests, values and identities; to claim their rights and hold power-holders accountable; and to engage with others in a peaceful way.

It must be noted that a certain level of restrictions imposed by governments was justified on public health grounds despite the negative impacts on civil society. Calibrating such policies is difficult even for more open societies when entering an unprecedented health emergency with uncertain information. Yet it was predictable that restrictive tendencies of some states would seize the chance to crack down on the space within which civil society could operate, especially for people with least power and voice.

The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has recommended that states, as development co-operation and humanitarian assistance providers, respect, protect and promote civic space.³

Considering this, it is vital to understand more about the impact of Covid-19 on civic space, who is being affected most and why, how our partners and stakeholders are responding; and what we can do to support them.

2. Methodology

Our overarching research question was:

'How has civic space been further impacted by the restrictions brought on by Covid-19 in certain countries where we work and how has this affected accountability and the freedom to mobilise in these countries?'

Common sub-research questions were addressed by all contexts:

- What are the specific impacts of Covid-19 in changing the dynamics of civic space: in terms of civil and political as well as social and economic rights, and the accountability relationships between government duty-bearers (and other powerful actors such as private business and traditional authorities), individuals and civil society actors?
- Were women or certain poor and marginalised groups affected more than others and what were the key factors at play? What has been the impact on human rights defenders?
- In what ways are civil society actors resisting, coping and finding alternative civic spaces (offline and online)? How are we and our partners supporting other civil society actors to resist, cope and find alternatives? What lessons and recommendations can be drawn?

Human rights encompass economic, social, civil, political and cultural rights. Importantly in times of Covid-19, access to and enjoyment of civic space requires not just being able to move and associate freely, thereby protecting one's culture, but also to be able to work, vote, protest and be informed and active as a citizen.

Below: Access to Covid-19 information, Bangladesh
Photo: Afsar/DSK, Bangladesh Aid



To ensure that the research would be useful across the different programme contexts, there has been a co-owned approach to design, implement and analyse this research with local partners and communities on the ground.

This approach also enabled us to collect local-specific data, bring in diverse knowledge and test any northern/ western/ colonial assumptions on concepts of civic space and rights.

The study was conducted using a combination of primary data plus case studies, as detailed below.

Country	Data type
Nigeria	Primary: survey + key informant interviews
Bangladesh	Primary: key informant interviews + literature review
Myanmar	Case study: partner interviews
IoPt	Case study: overview by country office
Colombia	Case study: partner interviews, media reports
Zimbabwe	Case study: overview by country office, media reports
United Kingdom	Case study (interviews w. CA activists, study of legal restrictions)

Both Nigeria and Bangladesh country teams collected primary data to develop research methods and questions pertinent to their context. Country teams also consulted relevant partners on the development of the methodology and questionnaires.

Full discussions of these approaches and rationales are in the country research reports (see Appendix for links).

Literature review: This review considered the longer-term trajectory and research on civic space over the last 10 years, as well as more recent evidence from the Covid-19 period.

Prior to data collection, a review was carried out of our internal literature, along with academic papers, sectoral reports and reports by organisations such as the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Civicus, Amnesty and Human Rights Watch.⁴

Research methods

Nigeria

Site of study: Anambra, Benue, Borno, Kaduna States and FCT (Abuja).

Total sample: 195 survey respondents (44% female; 56% male) selected randomly across the population of the above states.

Key informant interviews (KII) with representatives of Christian Aid partner organisations in Anambra, Kaduna and FCT states.

Methodological approach: mixed methods using survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Conducted in a hybrid manner.

Bangladesh

Site of study:

Rural: Dalit, plainland and indigenous communities; transgender community.

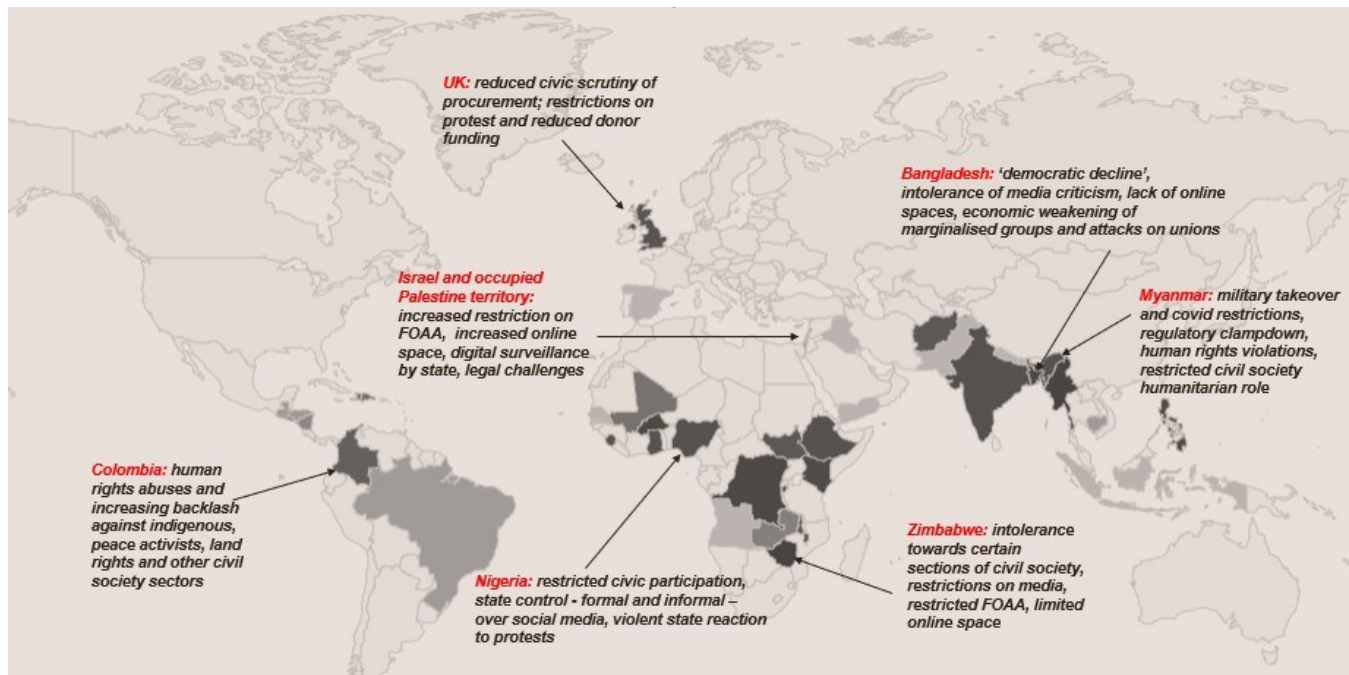
Urban: garment workers.

Total sample: 22 KII conducted. Dalits and concerned NGOs, CSOs and CBOs (6); plainland indigenous communities (*Samataler Adibashi*) and concerned NGOs, CSOs and CBOs (6); transgender or *Hijra* communities (5); garment workers (5).

Methodological approach: Qualitative, using literature and documentary evidence.

3. Research findings

Fig 1: Geographical summary



3.1 Shrinking civic space and the exacerbation of long-term vulnerability

A key issue from our country studies concerns participation and consultation. Here we see a variety of issues, creating a common narrative. The first involves institutional restraints and their varying effects on civil society actors depending on their communal base, political alignment or geographic location.

There are notable limitations in quite participatory settings and opportunistic exclusion in more autocratic settings. As regards the latter, these exclusions are not limited to the pandemic but are long-term issues. The pandemic has exacerbated existing restrictions and inequalities in terms of access to policy making.

NIGERIA: Pandemic co-opted to shut out civic voice

Covid-19 restrictions have clearly limited civic activities in Nigeria, especially participation in governance processes. The government appears to have used the pandemic as an excuse for further restricting civic engagement, especially activities they see as criticising their leadership style. For instance, participants point out that whilst in the capital Abuja, CSOs continue to enjoy a consultative relationship with the government, organisations in other states are often excluded from information and decision-making processes.

'Government and state actors want to dictate for CSOs, for example, who should be the co-chair [in consultations], for those they want, who can protect their interests. It is not inclusive, which it should be.'

KII, Nigeria

Women already find it difficult to engage in decision-making spaces, and lockdown restrictions have made these power dynamics still more exclusive. Virtual alternatives were possible for some but exclude others who lack digital access.

When civic space closes offline, citizens often respond by turning to online platforms; however, governments frequently take measures to shut these down in turn.⁵ In Nigeria, restrictions on digital civic space increased, for example a seven-month ban on Twitter.

BANGLADESH: Restraints on minority groups

Bangladeshi transparency and accountability have been in a long process of deterioration. The addition of the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about a perfect storm and has been a 'gift' to those seeking greater power over the media and pretexts to silence critics.

The marginalised groups and communities we consulted – Dalit, indigenous and transgender communities – note this long-term decline in quality and scope of civic space, the erosion of democracy and the weakening of civil society from within.⁶ They recognise their already reduced ability to exercise voice and agency regarding labour, welfare, public services, justice etc. due to a prevailing fear of state repercussions (see box, right).

For these groups and communities, the Covid-19 lockdown hit hardest in restricting protests and intensifying economic deprivation. As lockdowns came into force they mostly retreated to their hometowns or regions, since so many were employed in daily wage labour or specialised craft work and lost their income sources entirely.

This loss of voice and forced 'displacement' was mitigated, it seems, by groups that mobilised to organise some relief or self-help for those most affected by the lockdowns. These communities report that they have maintained their strong customary, tribal or community identity (although this research did not focus on local community civic spaces but the relation to the state and other institutions).

Secondly, the freedom to speak out in advocacy and through the media appears to have been restricted, due to the government's sensitivity over criticism of its lockdown measures. Bangladeshi civil society has also been impacted by limitations on mobile technology and less ability to engage digitally due to low smartphone ownership, lack of technical skills and poor internet reach in rural and peri-urban areas.

Civic fear

Bangladesh

Dalit communities are often reduced to living in segregated settlements that are already marginalised from mainstream access to services and opportunities.

Lockdown compounded this vulnerability, with Dalits suffering threats, targeted restrictions and social boycotts from non-Dalits.

They report being denied access to shops and public utilities, medical centres and places of worship, as one example from our research shows:

'Due to a localised lockdown, the Rishipara Dalit community lost access to a public tube-well. When they and their NGOs attempted to negotiate access to the well, they hesitated, due to fear.

'What especially drove their fear was that the lockdown and then this tube-well incident can also be a pretext for land grabbing – a threat that has been lurking for some years.

'They were afraid that if they created too much noise over the corona-related backlash, this may lead to a concerted effort to oust them from the neighbourhood, culminating in land-grabbing consequences.'

Bangladesh report

MYANMAR: Military crackdown

Turning to our country case studies, common threads emerge of institutionalised restraints on participation and consultation in contexts of (post-) conflict and human rights abuses, made at least partly worse by the Covid-19 crisis.

In Myanmar, for example, it appears that the unstable institutional context due to the electoral defeat for the military party, along with the Covid-19 emergency, contributed to the desire of the military to seize power in the 2021 coup. They then imposed tough regulatory restrictions on civil society voice and operations and clamped down on civic space more widely.

Before and during the pandemic, the participation of civil society was already limited to the heavily circumscribed space for dialogue at local government level eg, that related to health services. Even this, in effect, has now gone.

A parallel administration to the junta that has been put in place does engage in a high level of participation and dialogue, but this has done little to mitigate the risks involved in civic activism vis-à-vis the military authorities.

COLOMBIA: Power shift

The effects of the pandemic in Colombia have also exacerbated the exclusion of civil society from dialogue spaces. According to our case study, decisions are being taken without consulting sections of civil society that are critical of the government, while civic groups favoured by the current regime have become more involved in policy making, along with entrepreneurs and mainstream churches aligned with government policies.⁷

This coalition of the political right, wealthy élites, certain churches, powerful mining companies and the vast garment production business sector⁸ is allowed to participate politically (as well as siding with the government in opposing implementation of the 2016 peace agreement).⁹

Engagement with these selected interests means the government can pretend to be 'open' to dialogue without any real consultation with civil society, social movements and human rights organisations on key policies related to rural reforms, inclusive governance and political participation (as well as the many other crucial aspects of the peace agreement).

IoPt: Increased violation of Palestinian rights

In our case study from IoPt, it is very clear that for non-Israeli civil society, effective participation in policy-making decision spaces was already extremely limited in early 2020. This has been further restricted by Covid-19. Decisions made by the Israeli occupying forces over Palestine and Gaza have been imposed with little scrutiny from international observers, at a time of increased violation of Palestinian rights and state impunity.¹⁰

Our partners in IoPt report that their work has been heavily restricted by the various lockdowns, and that international scrutiny projects like Ecumenical Accompaniment in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) that monitor abuse and assist with mitigating certain impacts, were forced to suspend their protective programming due to the pandemic.

UNITED KINGDOM: Lack of public scrutiny

In the UK, the government's emergency Covid-19 powers reduced civic and political capacity to hold government to account. Civic rights of participation and consultation were suspended, and parliamentary scrutiny limited in May 2020.

These emergency powers could only be reviewed every six months by Parliament, and the Prime Minister's office wielded considerable power over contract awards. The effects of this have been seen in procurement scandals, where the lack of due diligence and parliamentary scrutiny as well as public consultation on Covid-19 procurement led to millions of pounds being wasted on unusable protective personal equipment (PPE) materials.

The National Audit Office criticised diminished public transparency, stating: "We cannot give assurance that government has adequately mitigated the increased risks arising from emergency procurement".¹¹ INGOs and UK parliamentary committees have also strongly criticised the lack of civil society participation and oversight.¹²

3.2 Surveillance cultures and high-risk contexts

Our research highlights the fact that Covid-19 restrictions have impacted on the right to assemble and dissent and that this is often entangled with existing political context or crises. The issue of surveillance culture, state violence against activists and the link between economic hardship and freedom to assemble are themes that resonate across many of the country sites.

Increased government restrictions have led to concerns over the risks for CSOs that are actively trying to protect civic space.

Surveillance

A win against the state in IoPt

In April 2020, our partner Adalah, the Legal Centre for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, challenged the state in the Supreme Court for their disproportionate use of surveillance to track citizens.

The result was a unanimous, precedent-setting decision stating that the Shin Bet intelligence services cannot track citizens without legislative authority, even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, this decision was counteracted later in 2020 when a temporary order was quickly enacted authorising the tracking of civilians for six months.

Yet the court decision remains significant, as it has the potential to limit future surveillance powers.

Some of those interviewed requested anonymity, fearful of speaking openly. Restrictions placed on international actors have been a major blow: we and other (I)NGOs have had to suspend citizen scrutiny and rights monitoring projects. Such restrictions, along with increased surveillance and information technology, have been used, for example, to further worsen human rights conditions for Palestinians under attack from Israeli settlers and military, amongst many others.

NIGERIA: Surveillance and arrests

In our perceptions survey in Nigeria, 63% of respondents note significant restrictions to freedom of assembly, citing as key causes surveillance culture, undue arrests and a weak civil society-government relationship. This was the case with or without the effect of the pandemic.

The crackdowns on public protests around the ‘#EndSARS’ social movement against police brutality in 2020 are an example (see also quote, right).¹³ Under pandemic regulations, there were restrictions placed on the number of persons allowed to gather, and the need for permits was introduced.

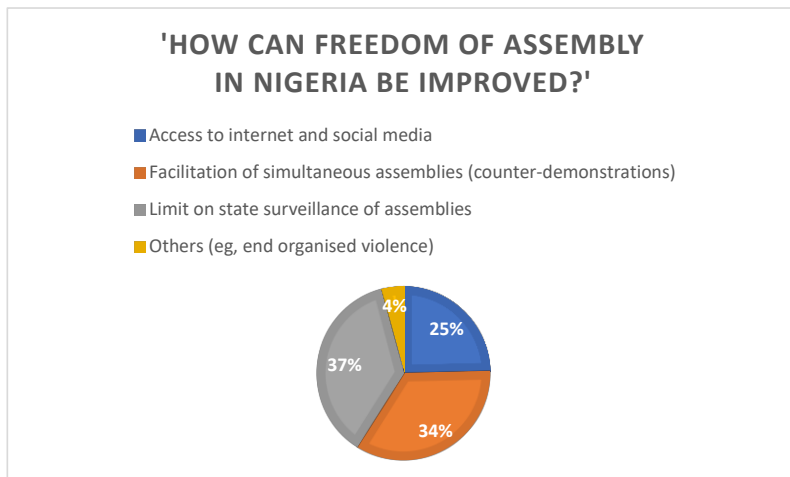
Restrictions on freedom of assembly not only infringed civil and political rights but also economic rights, as ‘stay at home’ orders prevented communities from working together to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic. According to our qualitative research, ongoing legal restrictions against LGBT groups in Nigeria have left them unable to raise their concerns or participate openly.

Heightened surveillance is inhibiting people from accessing help, as one key interviewee notes: ‘This monitoring is going to affect the rural people; people will no longer be bold to say what they want to say. Getting information to engage stakeholders will begin to shrink because of intimidation.’

‘During Covid-19, we saw a lot of rights violations. Because of the measures put in place, the security agencies took advantage of that and killed some people just because they saw them outside – these people weren’t even armed. There were reports of sexual molestation of people who were arrested in violation of the lockdown order. There were also cases of gender-based violence in some places in Kaduna State, so people were affected financially, emotionally and psychologically.’

KII, Nigeria

Fig 2: Survey response Nigeria FOA



BANGLADESH: Protests halted

Here the first lockdowns brought a severe halt to much protest activity, with some damaging consequences for Dalit, Adivasi and transgender communities. From interviews with some key actors in civil society, it emerges that the civic space deficit has become greater for most vulnerable populations.

A number of traditional groups withdrew into their core communities during Covid-19, partly out of economic necessity and inability to travel and work elsewhere. Several well-recognised Dalit community leaders found the scope and capability of their CBOs, CSOs and movements limited. For others such as the Garo community, who are quite well organised through local churches and community groups, there has been little impact in policy and wider civic space.

For garment workers, who have strong rights consciousness and mobilisation, a more normal period of organising and advocacy has resumed as economic lockdown ended.

It has primarily been groups with strong organisational and operational ability (with numerous trade unions, NGOs, CSOs, CBOs and politically affiliated labour organisations especially) who have been able to organise again, re-engage and negotiate restrictions around assembly and association.

NGOs and community organisations supported relief efforts from donors to provide food, medicine and hygienic packs in the first lockdown phase. Spaces normally used for civil organising were employed for this. However, respondents note that the pandemic has enabled state actors and powerful businesspeople to get rid of activists from factories and thus reduce the ability of organised labour to protest, voice dissent and engage in freedom of assembly and association (FOAA). Instrumentalization of retrenchment has been used as a labour law tool to get rid of activist garment.

MYANMAR: Human rights violations

Since the coup, individuals have been criminalised for protesting or speaking out against human rights violations. The military government has implemented severe financial restrictions on civil society actors and instituted internet shutdown. (NB It is difficult to untangle violations due to the pandemic, military coup and counter-protests.)

As in Bangladesh, CSOs have been key to delivering relief for communities during the pandemic, suggesting that autocratic regimes make use of civil society organisations when it suits them, but also implying that these states were not trusted by donors or by recipients to deliver aid.

'In many townships across Myanmar, curfew was imposed as Covid-19 prevention and control, which restricted mobility and access to emergency services. There is some evidence-based data on the military shooting of those who violate these orders. In some cases, such as in Mandalay and Bago regions, where there are violent protests, stay-at-home orders (daytime) were issued in the name of Covid-19 prevention.'

CSO source (not identified here)

COLOMBIA: State violence against civic leaders

The government has increased its repressive policies in rural areas during Covid-19. There have been continued killings of leaders pushing for the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement, and of human rights defenders including women and defenders of the environment.¹⁴ Police and the military were authorised to respond violently to the largely peaceful demonstrations that began in April 2021 in response to tax reforms, inequality, state violence and economic crisis.¹⁵

This continues historic suppression in Colombia of public protest, with a marked increase in killings by paramilitaries of community leaders, activists, human rights defenders and journalists since the peace accord.

State-backed violence has also affected civic space in other ways, including self-censorship of activists and journalists, especially in rural areas where there is more criminal and paramilitary control. During the pandemic those who raised their voices were further isolated and at risk. A 2021 report by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) states that indigenous rural, female and LGBT protesters suffered most from human rights abuses such as high levels of detentions, gender-based violence, police abuse and violent raids. (See also box by 5.2).

ZIMBABWE: Mixed results for online space

As in many other countries, the government of Zimbabwe announced Covid-19 measures containing emergency powers – gatherings were prohibited, preventing physical meetings for activists and halting workshops, conferences, board meetings etc. For most CSOs this has led to more programmatic activities being conducted virtually.

Institutional accountability actions could not continue and attending local accountability and scrutiny committees has been impossible, compromising the quality of CSO programmes and reducing the ability to organise.¹⁶ This has been compounded by the inability to access state-owned broadcasting services, forcing advocacy actors and other dissenting voices to use privately-owned media houses.

For women, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups in Zimbabwe as elsewhere, this situation has been particularly isolating. Many key populations cannot access the digital civic space due to high mobile phone charges, low-quality devices and lack of energy supply. Women's community participation and voice has therefore been reduced and with them the consequent loss of per diem related payments that allowed them to take time away from family work.

Advocacy v. violence

Highlighting human rights abuses in Colombia

With our partner organisations in Colombia, we redoubled advocacy and communications work to highlight the government's unwillingness to implement the 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP).

During Covid-19 we and our partners have kept up a flow of information from rural communities, alerting national and international bodies to the dangers they face,

We have highlighted the torture and killings of activists by paramilitaries, and flagged the issues faced by rural women over human rights abuses and FOAA.

With other CSOs, we pushed for an IACHR visit to Colombia in June 2021, to investigate human rights abuses conducted during the violent repression of nationwide protests.

Under pressure, the Colombian government allowed the visit. The IACHR published a full report condemning the excessive use of force by the state against citizens, including journalists and many marginalised groups.

It also established a Special Follow-up Mechanism on Human Rights for Colombia to prevent impunity for violence and to protect the freedom to protest.

UK: Civic freedoms reduced

The UK government also brought in strict Covid-19 restrictions that impacted upon rights of assembly and freedom to protest, and upon the working of Parliament. While this was widely accepted in terms of necessary measures to combat the pandemic, since the lessening of restrictions new legislation has been proposed to limit engaging in protest.¹⁷ This is paradoxical, given the promises given by the UK government while chair of the G7 in 2021 (see right).¹⁸

3.3 Freedom of information and media

A key series of findings from our study involve the loss of freedom of information (FOI), restrictions on the media and the inability to communicate widely.

These were highlighted as issues of concern in many countries pre-pandemic and have now been compounded over the last two years. We are seeing heightened surveillance cultures, as well as increased government control over the media. Journalists are finding themselves in increasingly precarious positions vis-à-vis the state.

NIGERIA: Journalists in fear

A third of Nigerian respondents say that they know of restrictions to media, journalists and CSOs in their freedom of expression due to Covid-19. They also feel the need for practical freedom of speech and expression of citizens and better collaboration with government (see Fig. 2 above). A majority (63%) do not think the government has taken action to ease access to information following the pandemic. Key interviews detail the intimidation and fear instilled in independent critical journalism. While respondents in Abuja report more media freedom and access to information, other states have seen heightened tensions with government.

BANGLADESH: Media control

A major concern here has been the failure of government communication on the spread of Covid-19 infection. Freedom of speech in general, and particularly for Dalit groups, Adivasis, transgender people and other minority groups, has rec due to fears of government sanction or arrest.

Most of our interviewees note that as the government has absolute control over the media, it is predominantly state actors or politicians who are allowed to speak in the press, TV and radio. Transparency and responsiveness have long been deteriorating and the Covid-19 pandemic has been a 'gift' to those in government seeking greater power over the media and

With the other six nations of the G7, the UK committed to: 'Strengthen open societies globally by protecting civic space and media freedom, promoting freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association.'

Open Societies Statement, G7, 2021

'Journalists now cannot publish things the way they want to because of fear of being arrested.'

KII, Nigeria

an enhanced ability to silence critics. The restrictions became an excuse to silence certain communities and to gain greater political and economic power.

MYANMAR, IoT AND COLOMBIA: Surveillance and stigmatisation

The surveillance culture imposed in Myanmar means CSOs are often under scrutiny from the government and more recently the military junta. This, alongside frequent internet shutdowns, significantly curtails citizens' access to information. In this situation also, state actors have complete media control.

As noted previously, it is difficult to untangle legal restrictions due to elections, coup and Covid-19 causes and together they have formed a cumulative negative impact on free media, accurate information and open communications.

In IoT, information and media operations through local observers like Adalah or through local journalists critical of the Israeli government face the possibility of restrictions, harassment and surveillance. Meanwhile in Colombia civil society organisations have been discredited by state-backed media and government communications. One of the 41 recommendations from the IACHR in their report of July 2021 into human rights abuses was that the government and security agencies should refrain from 'stigmatising or inciting violence against protesters'.¹⁹

ZIMBABWE: Silencing public scrutiny

Here too the pandemic has brought greater restrictions around information, media and freedom of speech, especially when criticising the government. Scrutinising government activities has become difficult due to limits on access to information.²⁰

Zimbabwe's press freedoms have meant that some media practitioners contributed to greater accountability whilst facing constrained reporting conditions and harassment. In one such instance an investigative journalist faced (groundless) charges when questioning the government's procurement of Covid-19 material.²¹

3.4 Operational constraints and risks

There is evidence from our qualitative studies, as well as quantitative results in Nigeria, to suggest that a number of CSOs have lost funding because of the prevailing economic situation connected to Covid-19. The restrictions on funding have also affected how and whether organisations were able to mobilise.

'The pandemic has greatly affected funding for the organisation, and it has made us to look inward towards next steps.'

KII, Nigeria

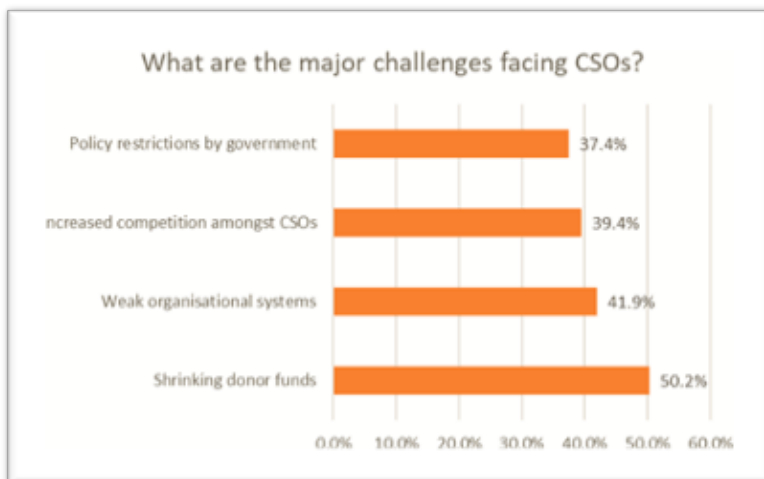
The UK government cut funding for civil society effectiveness programmes both early and right in the middle of the pandemic, at a time of greatest need for Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Myanmar. This notably included the Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development (ECID) programme of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

Results from both Nigeria and Bangladesh, underlined by our case studies, show how government responses to the pandemic have accentuated risks for CSOs, including funding constraints, staff travel limitations, forms and level of public participation and engagement.

In Nigeria, funding constraints were noted by half of our 195 respondents (see Fig 3), mainly due to funds being purposed for emergency Covid-19 relief, while funding for civic space and accountability has dropped off - programmes have had to close, staff have been let go etc.

Around 4 in 10 respondents also note that even when they did access funds, the issues of weak organisational systems, increased competition between CSOs and policy restrictions by the government have effectively restricted funding overall (Fig 3). Hence, they stress the urgent need for sustainable projects with assured funding.

Fig 3: Challenges for CSOs in Nigeria



Covid-19 response diverts funding

In Bangladesh and Colombia (and to a more extreme degree in Myanmar) the funds available for civil society projects shrank due to Covid-19 dominating the needs assessment, and the state identifying alternative providers. As seen above, governments in Nigeria and Myanmar have closed off civil society access to humanitarian assistance and sought to control aid in their own interests and those of their allies. In many of these situations, private sector actors are said to be favoured by government allies.

Requirements for resilient organising

In Bangladesh and Colombia, as in many other countries, we found examples of self-help and local community organising as counter-active to government exclusion of civil society and community groups.

In Bangladesh, we found that groups who had most access to funding, such as garment workers' and labour organisations, were better able to organise and mobilise. Funding from NGOs /INGOs was key to the ability to have strong civil society agency.

We also found that local organisations needed greater scope and opportunity to build their capacity. For example, a local NGO noted that community-based organisations require both technical and financial support so that they can 'raise their voice'. Local CSOs require assistance to get to a stage where they can independently organise rather than being externally reliant. This is a key finding for ongoing localisation efforts in which we and other organisations are engaged.

Consequences of funding cuts

Across the board, in the case studies, we also see effects related to the loss of funding, as well as the inability to provide face-to-face interactions. In Myanmar, for example, CSOs face significant cash flow issues as the military controls funds via the central bank. CSOs have been searching for alternative ways to receive transfers, usually entailing high service fees. Staff are forced to travel to the programme areas with substantial amounts of cash, placing their personal security at risk.

In Zimbabwe, as noted above, the UK FCDO funding cuts directly affected work with the most marginalised groups through the ECID programme. Innovative pilot programmes that were demonstrating flexibility and resilience in the face of Covid-19 challenges have been significantly affected by the cuts.

Below: Accessing Covid-19 aid, Nigeria

Photo: Latitude Space/Christian Aid



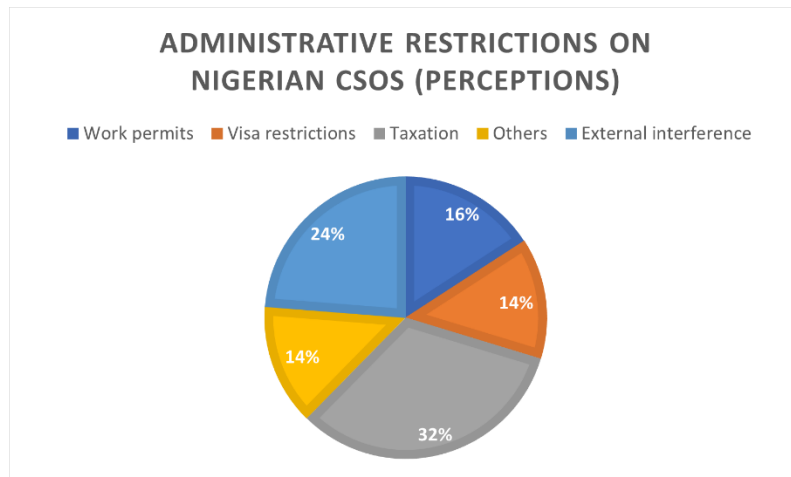
'Dalit CSOs and CBOs worked as conduits or distribution channels for food relief from local governments... as well as NGOs, INGOs and IOs at the grassroots.'

Dalit activist, Bangladesh

Administrative constraints in Nigeria

In Nigeria, survey respondents noted multiple administrative and monitoring constraints on their work related to external interference, taxation, visa restrictions/ work permits and registration requirements (Fig 4).

Fig 4: Constraints on CSO work, Nigeria



3.5 Alternative organising: on and offline

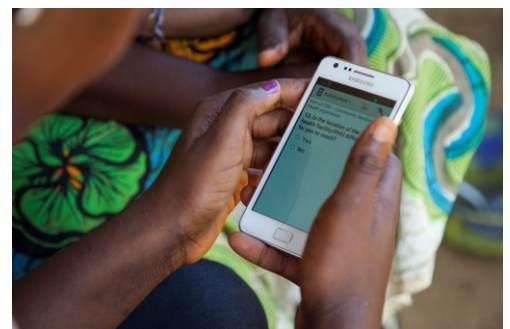
One key aim of our research was to understand how civil society actors have adapted to restrictions placed on their work before and during the pandemic. We found both online and offline alternative ways of working due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Online technology has allowed many people to participate in spaces where they would not otherwise have been present. However, not everyone has been able to benefit due to digital exclusion as discussed above (3.1). Other groups have returned to operating in person – with hygiene measures – once governments relaxed restrictions on meeting. The frequent use of radio or direct telephone communication has shown that older technologies continue to be effective in information sharing and accountability work.

Nigerian CSOs working on health issues flag the difficulty of restricted numbers in meetings due to social distancing, with implications for how they engage people. Meetings meant for a hundred people may now have only thirty. Online platforms help some to participate but exclude others.

In Bangladesh the default position was always to demonstrate or protest in person. Lockdown stopped this, but revised Covid-19 restrictions do not seem to outlaw in-person protests or gatherings. In this sense the Dalit, Adivasi and transgender

Below: Low mobile ownership brings exclusion
Photo: Christian Aid



groups have resumed their usual methods of protest and activism. (See box, right, for online reach.)

In Myanmar, local CSOs are keeping a low profile and using coping strategies, while trying their best to support Covid-19 affected communities. They overcome banking restrictions by carrying cash (adding to risk). One states, "Among all the difficulties, we are still able to provide cooked food to Covid-19 affected families in our operation areas." Staff have been arrested during such efforts due to restrictions on movements, and some are privately advocating to UN and international governments to improve conditions for CSOs.

Our Colombian partners have maintained permanent communication with social organisations by using online tools. They have also strengthened links for resistance with other social bodies such as trade unions, strike committees and networks within women's organisations.

Online spaces for networking, reporting and accountability have been hugely successful in IoPt during lockdown, where new audiences are accessing our partner Adalah's activities and information via frequent webinars. Adalah has been able to form new partnerships (locally and globally) as a result.

Our Palestinian partner agency Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA) adapted its programme and implemented new remote approaches, enabling women and children in quarantine circumstances to overcome the impact on their education, health, and community participation.

Online talks by our partner, EAPPI (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel), have engaged the public in parts of the country not reached before, and with higher audience numbers. (EAPPI offline accompanier talks averaged around twenty people but may now attract over one hundred.) This new medium has also allowed for international audiences to join online, boosting the profile of their work.

In Zimbabwe, Covid-19 has brought prolonged periods of severe restrictions on gathering in person. Partners found ways to try and navigate the challenges of not being able to meet in accountability groups (such as Health Action Groups) by using mobile phones, online meetings, and limited numbers (see exclusion issues above, 3.1).

Our partner Padare uses community radio in Zimbabwe to strengthen the referral pathway towards addressing gender-based violence that ensures survivors access medical treatment as well as the due legal process, by conducting group dialogues and promoting peace in the household.

Social media

Online activism in Bangladesh

Transgender groups tell us that the community organisations with whom they work conduct awareness-raising mostly via online platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom), but that in-person actions are necessary for advocacy.

Interviewees from the Dalit community explain that social media platforms were already in use for campaigns and follow-up activities but other actions such as a human chain or a sit-in could not go forward now. So, awareness raising could occur but not the justice demands or redress campaigns that are usually part of their process.

However, only people living in urban areas or NGO workers serving our partner communities can fully exploit new ways of online activism. There is also a lack of affordable access to smartphones and laptops, data, and internet access.

'Santals and other plainland indigenous people are often not in possession of suitable smartphones, let alone the technical know-how to capitalise them for online advocacy and campaigning. Hence, there is less opportunity for them to raise their voices about economic woes brought by the pandemic.'

Bangladesh report

4. Key learning

4.1 Civic space has shrunk for those with least power

- **Impact on civil rights:** regulatory impacts of Covid-19 have clearly changed the dynamics of civic participation and consultation, constraining access in varying degrees to rights (political, civil, social, and economic), to democratic voice and to citizen influence. The impact has depended on how that space was used previously, how successful any alternatives have been and how quickly it has been possible to resume normal operations.
- **Exclusion and inequality:** people and groups who were already marginalised seem to have been affected most, with their civil and political rights curtailed. We found increased inequality for women in rural excluded communities in Zimbabwe and Nigeria, transgender, Dalit and Adivasi groups in Bangladesh and indigenous communities in Colombia. They had little voice before the pandemic and the new restrictions effectively silenced them. They lost economic power and got little state support. In the UK, certain BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities who already had least power and influence, suffered more due to pre-existing economic inequalities (eg, working in lower-paid, less secure, service sector jobs) where they risked loss of earnings and feared to speak out.
- **Harsh government restrictions have hit civil society:** there has been withdrawal of funding for CSOs and channelling of funds to the private sector. Civic actors routinely appear to have been side-lined; excluded from a role in humanitarian assistance; weakened by lack of funding; impacted by a shut-down of organisational and advocacy functions; and disadvantaged by competition for the favour of government and INGOs.
- **Human rights defenders under threat:** Covid-19 regulations have widely been used by states as a cover to single out and attack HRDs. The protection role of INGOs has been diminished as their own agency has been systematically weakened by funding and registration constraints, violent attacks, and discredits.
- **Freedom of assembly and activism severely curtailed:** authoritarian crackdown by various governments has included human rights abuse and spying on activists. Even more democratic countries have implemented restrictions on civic scrutiny and protest.

‘We have no value as indigenous people. We do not and will not get any benefits in all fields including civil rights, right to express opinion, right to do business. It is necessary to ensure equitable distribution of government aid.’

Bangladesh interviewee

4.2 Funding, organisational and regulatory setbacks are impacting civil society

- **Funding gaps have arisen:** groups we researched who are working on civic space or advocacy issues found their funds cut just at a time when they were most needed.²² Funding for Covid-19 response has instead been channelled into humanitarian relief and social protection. This suggests a lack of creative strategising by donors, who have failed to learn from innovative projects such as the UK FCDO's civil society effectiveness projects eg, ECID. Shutting down civil society access to humanitarian assistance and its role in delivering this reveals a drive to centralise power, control over aid and relief funds in the interests of powerful allies in government and business. Overall, private sector actors are emerging as key government allies.
- **Operational constraints on civil society:** these appear to have hampered effective response and been related to an agenda that is anti-local autonomous civil society. In varying contexts, we have learned of political and ideological reasons for curbing the strength of civil society by blocking locally led and accountable Covid-19 responses.

4.3 Resistance and alternative strategies

- **Broad alliances** between marginalised and least powerful groups and international networks are helping to counter-balance power asymmetries and build strong civic spaces.
- **Potential of digital space:** While civic space has successfully moved online in some cases, this has also introduced a new digital divide, especially for women, remote communities and those with certain disabilities. Digital platforms were already in use in most urban or well-connected locations, while in other areas communities and organisations simply had to wait until they could organise physically again.
- **Success of legal recourse:** our report has shown the effectiveness of legal advocacy, as in the successful Adalah case against the Israeli state over unlawful surveillance, and in Colombia, where a human rights monitoring visit by the IACHR led to an important independent report in July 2021 (see box beside 5.2). Both examples represent the potential of legal advocacy capacity to organise and resist civic restrictions. The ability of independent Supreme Court institutions or oversight and investigative bodies like the IACHR to conduct fact-finding visits and evidence sessions has been crucial.

'Traditional tools like seminars, dialogues, sit-ins, lobby meetings, processions and human chains are still the preferred techniques to engage and organise in respective civic spaces. Most interviewees agreed that the new online tools have not yet become any viable alternative to in-person tools.'

Bangladesh report

5. Recommendations

5.1 Build strong alliances

Broad collaborations are a vital way to expand civic space once more, after the setbacks of Covid-19. International networks can provide considerable support to civil society organisations that are not supported by their own governments.

Our evidence suggests the need for further joint reflection on decolonised practice and localised responses to confront shrinking civic space.²³ Despite widely differing contexts, there is value in south-south learning exchanges to share good practice.

5.2 Deploy legal challenges where possible

Our research shows evidence that the use of legal challenge against government surveillance, and human rights monitoring agencies for voice/redress has been effective in certain contexts. This requires expanded support for access to justice, legal challenge, and international rights bodies.

5.3 Protect press freedom and civic space

Increased resourcing through programmatic interventions and support for human rights defenders will be vital to reverse the setbacks experienced in social media, community reporting and investigative journalism. This will enable CSOs to present evidence of restrictions in local civic space. Programme strategies should expand participation, support freedom of assembly, media and voice – based on the real experience of communities at the margins as well as the mainstream.

Governments should be held to account over these freedoms:

- SDG 16+ monitoring and commitments should be strengthened with human rights obligations.²⁴
- Calls by the G7 in 2021 to “strengthen open societies globally by protecting civic space and media freedom, promoting freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association” and agreed to “continue to exchange information and coordinate effective responses to shared threats to human rights, democracy and the rule of law”.
- OECD Development Assistance Committee recommendations should be resourced with guidance and tools to support states to open up civic space.

Below: Protesting against police brutality during Covid-19, Nigeria

Photo: Oladipo Adejumo/Unsplash



5.4 Expand funding sources

There is need for locally led and locally accountable Covid-19 responses as well as a global push to support local funding for civic space and civil society effectiveness programmes.²⁵ This will cover some of the deficit through the Covid-19 period to date. It will also support alternative strategies as outlined above related to online, inclusive, media-focused work in support of human rights defenders.

Lobbying of international institutions and donors is required to press governments to allow civil society access to humanitarian and development funding including economic empowerment, without which the most vulnerable cannot address social and political barriers. This will open up participation, ensure localised decision-making on expenditure, and promote greater transparency and accountability in service delivery.²⁶

5.5 Support online spaces

Online participation should be supported, due to its effectiveness in certain contexts; yet it is also clear that face-to-face activity is still required. Support (technical and funding) should be prioritised for women and marginalised groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, minority religious or ethnic groups to claim and defend new civic spaces whether online or in-person.

5.6 Support network building

Our evidence shows need across the board for strengthening the organisational capacity of partners their ability to engage in networks to complement each other. INGOS should promote a model for strengthening civic space actors based on solidarity and partnership, emphasising local knowledge and contexts.

Use should be made of existing and newly emerging toolkits and audit scanning tools that assist local CSOs to understand the key issues better and find collective points of action.²⁷

'We need to make civic spaces accessible to those who are in the rural areas... The digital divide would have to be bridged, by providing the necessary things like computers and access to internet and training on how to use it. That's the only thing that gives the marginalised access.'

KII, Nigeria

Conclusion

This research from our country programmes and partners shows definitively that civic space has been markedly diminished by restrictions imposed during Covid-19, as part of a longer-term trajectory.

This has manifested in diverse ways in varying national contexts, but the overall trends run absolutely counter to the principles of civic participation and defence of human rights and the commitment to accountable, effective and inclusive institutions in Sustainable Development Goal 16.

The study reminds us of the urgent need to promote a vibrant and open civic space to combat poverty and injustice. CSOs and NGOs face huge challenges in addressing the negative impacts of Covid-19 and states must be supported to reverse the long-term negative trend to shrinking civic space.

With our partners and stakeholder communities, we want the learning from our research to be applied in practice. The international donor community must support civic actors and state institutions to rebuild local civil society and to expand and protect civic space as well as making it more inclusive. This involves taking action through programme design, engagement with government and long-term strategic funding.

Covid-19 has changed the face of civic space and leads us to the requirement for new and alternative ways of working that need decisive support. The danger is that if we do not act now then these restrictions will become embedded, as societies emerge from the crisis period of the pandemic.

Below: COP26 protest, Glasgow, UK

Photo: Amy Menzies/Christian Aid



Appendix

The following materials from our study are available on our website: <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/our-work/research>

- Terms of reference
- Background literature review

Requests for the following primary data can be mailed to Charles Gay: CGay@christian-aid.org

- Country research reports and anonymised key informant interviews where possible:
 - Nigeria research report - title
 - Nigeria KII 1
 - Nigeria KII 2
 - Bangladesh research report
 - Bangladesh KIIs
- Case studies

End notes

- 1 See joint statement from G7 in 2021 calling for Open Societies: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2021-open-societies-statement>
 - 2 Christian Aid 'Building back with justice' report: <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/building-back-justice-report>
 - 3 OECD calls for stronger civil society: <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5021>
 - 4 Literature review available on request from Cgay@christian-aid.org See also <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/our-work/what-we-do/voice-and-governance>
 - 5 IDS 'Digital Rights in Closing Civic Space' (Feb 2021) analyses how opening and closing of online space affects citizens digital rights. <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/digital-rights-in-closing-civic-space-lessons-from-ten-african-countries/>
 - 6 <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/re-imagining-democracy/stories-from-the-frontlines/3342-the-compromised-state-of-civil-society-in-bangladesh>
 - 7 Detailed in our Colombia case study available on request: cgay@christian-aid.org
 - 8 Report on textile and apparel industry: <https://www.statista.com/topics/7177/textile-and-apparel-industry-in-colombia/#dossierKeyfigures>
 - 9 Colombia peace agreement report: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/colombia-peace-agreement-advances-snail-pace/>
 - 10 Christian Aid on IoT inequalities: <https://mediacentre.christianaid.org.uk/news-report-warns-unequal-status-quo-in-israel-and-palestine-will-lead-to-more-violence/>
 - 11 UK National Audit Office Report: <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/government-procurement-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
 - 12 See summary in TI report: <https://www.transparency.org.uk/track-and-trace-uk-PPE-procurement-corruption-risk-VIP-lane>
 - 13 #EndSARS was a social movement against police brutality in Nigeria, particularly the Special Anti-Robbery Squad. The movement widened into demands for accountable governance.
 - 14 <https://lab.org.uk/ten-years-an-ngo-adapts-to-peace-building-in-colombia/> and <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/programme-policy-practice/ten-years-colombia>
 - 15 Human Rights Watch news item on Colombia civil protest: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/09/colombia-egregious-police-abuses-against-protesters>
 - 16 News report on Zimbabwe rights abuses: https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_zimbabwes-alleged-use-covid-excuse-stifle-dissent-draws-un-concern/6201949.html
 - 17 News report on UK Policing Bill Jan. 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/13/green-activists-urge-labour-to-vote-against-policing-bill-climate-catastrophe>
 - 18 Bond UK report on G7 commitments: <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/06/g7-commits-to-protect-civic-space>
 - 19 OAS report on IADHR investigation of rights abuses in Colombia: https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/ObservacionesVisita_CIDH_Colombia_SPA.pdf
 - 20 For Christian Aid project reports on Data availability / trust / reliability in Zimbabwe, see: <https://evidenceforinclusion.org/zimbabwe-research-report/>
 - 21 Journalist Hopewell Chinono award: <https://www.thezimbabwenewsline.com/journalist-hopewell-chinono-wins-award-for-exposing-corruption/>
- See also: [European Union Presses Zimbabwe to End Rights Abuses](#), Human Rights Watch, (21/2/21).
- 22 Bond UK news item on UK aid cuts 2021: <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/05/uk-aid-cuts-little-information-but-devastating-consequences>
 - 23 Example of coordinated action: partners in ACT Alliance have developed tools: <https://actalliance.org/act-assembly-posts/story-of-hope-shrinking-space-for-civil-society-task-group/>
 - 24 ACT civic space report: https://actalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ACT_CivicSpace_Brief_2019_FinalVersion.pdf
 - 25 Possible action: lobby UK FCDO Civic Space and Civil Society Team to propose follow-on funding based on learning from ECID and from Nigeria governance programming; lobby UK Government on anti-protest/current UK Parliament bills limiting civic freedoms to protest.
 - 26 Possible action: 1. Lobby trusts and foundations, EU, Irish Aid, UK FCDO Civic Space and Civil Society Team and Anti-Corruption teams and Democracy and Human Rights Teams to propose creative funding solutions. 2. Policy advocacy to UK, EU, WB, IMF on financial transparency and improved monitoring of social protection funds through accountability initiatives.
 - 27 ACT Alliance tool: <https://actalliance.org/act-assembly-posts/story-of-hope-shrinking-space-for-civil-society-task-group/>
Oxfam tool: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/civic-space-monitoring-tool-understanding-what-is-happening-in-civic-space-at-a-620874/>
Christian Aid GIPP tool: <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/our-work/gender-inclusion-power-politics-gipp-toolkit-part-one-guide>

Charles Gay: Governance and
Human Rights Adviser
Christian Aid
35 Lower Marsh
Waterloo
London
SE1 7RL

+44 (0) 20 7620 4444
cgay@christian-aid.org/
info@christian-aid.org
caid.org.uk



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