

How Covid-19 Shrank Civic Space

SUMMARY

Research Report 2020-21



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Cover: COP26 protest, Glasgow

Photo: Amy Menzies/Christian Aid

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NB This is a summary of our full research report, available on our website at bit.ly/CAID_Covid

Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented restrictions to civic space throughout 2020-21.

We and our partners set out to research the impact of this phenomenon, driven by our mission: standing together with poor and marginalised people and civil society groups to express and negotiate their interests, values and identities; to claim their rights and hold power-holders accountable.

As our study makes clear, many states have used the pandemic to crack down on citizen participation, with severe limits on freedom of speech and assembly and a sharp increase in government surveillance. Civic organisations face increasing challenges to their ways of working.

Some of these are long-term issues that are now being exacerbated by Covid-19, and even as the immediate need for emergency measures recedes, we see many remaining curbs on civic freedom and new proposals to restrict and monitor civil society. It is therefore urgent to identify future ways to protect civic space and make it more inclusive, through support to our partners and effective programming, policy and advocacy work.

Our findings reflect different contexts between countries, with their varying systems of government and differing degrees of freedom to associate, press freedom and civic scrutiny.

At a glance: report headlines

■ Civic space has shrunk

Globally, Covid-19 regulations have limited the right to democratic voice and citizen influence in varying degrees since 2020. Emergency powers and new laws have further silenced many excluded groups and individuals who were already struggling to be heard in national and international arenas.

■ Alternative organising has sprung up

Civil society has found new ways of organising (eg, digital), but these have not been universally successful and have excluded some. Some organisations have simply waited for normal operations to be resumed, but there has been long-lasting damage.

■ Funding has been cut

Lack of funding and organisational capacity to deal with the new restrictions have gravely weakened civic space. Huge lending and grants from international NGOs and financial institutions in response to Covid-19 have mostly side-lined the

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

Bangladesh interview

Below: Delivering reliable facts about Covid-19
Photo: Afsar/DSK, Bangladesh Aid



strengthening of civic space in favour of support for business, humanitarian relief and, to a limited extent, social protection.

■ Civic activity has become more risky

Harsh crackdowns by various governments under cover of Covid-19 regulations have included attacks on human rights defenders and increased surveillance of citizens.

■ Power is shifting

Shutting down civil society access to humanitarian assistance and relief by the state reveals a drive to centralise power and control over relief funds in the interests of powerful allies in government and business.

Mutual aid networks sprang up between citizens to lend support not being offered by the state. However, these civil society responses to the pandemic seem often to have been curbed by governments for political and ideological reasons.

'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.'

KII, Nigeria

Purpose and methodology

The overall question for our study is: **'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 freedom to mobilise?'**

Our findings are based on primary research carried out in Nigeria and Bangladesh, and on case studies prepared by our country programme teams for Myanmar, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (IoPt), Colombia, Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom.

Research locations and data type:

Country	Data type
Nigeria	Primary data: survey of 195 respondents and interviews of key informants
Bangladesh	Primary data: key informant interviews. Also, literature review
Myanmar	Case study: interviews with partners
IoPt	Case study: overview by country office staff
Colombia	Case study: interviews with partners + news reports
Zimbabwe	Case study: country office research + news reports
United Kingdom	Case study: compiled by UK staff + news reports, advocacy, study of legal restrictions

Summary results by country

NIGERIA

Covid-19 restrictions have limited civic activities in Nigeria, where the government appears to have used the pandemic as cover for further restricting civic engagement, especially activities seen as criticising its leadership.

Some of our respondents see the government as biased over which civic activities are tolerated, depending on the topic, the social groups involved and location. Participants note that while in Abuja civil society organisations enjoy a consultative relationship with the government, those in other states are often excluded from information and decision-making.

In community and civil society groups, women have found themselves virtually silenced, in a reversal of hard-fought gains to have a voice in public space. Online alternatives are possible for some but exclude others who lack digital access.

Surveillance and arrests

Significant restrictions to freedom of assembly are noted by 63% of our survey respondents. They cite the use of surveillance, especially through social media, to clamp down on freedom of expression; undue arrests; and a weakened relationship between civil society and government.

The crackdowns on public protests around the 2020 '#End SARS' social movement against police brutality are a case in point.¹ Under Covid-19 regulations, the size of gatherings was limited, and at one point they were banned outright due to a stay-home order.

Ongoing legal restrictions against LGBTQ groups have left them unable to raise concerns or participate openly. Also noted are disruptive security monitoring of events; attempts to sabotage assemblies by intimidating protestors; abuse of political power by elected officials and infringement of individual rights.

Funding shortages

Three in ten respondents point to a drop in donor funding when asked what major challenges are facing CSOs in building strong civic engagement. Funding for civic space and accountability programmes has closed and staff have been let go. Also of note is that 43% of respondents see a problem with weak organisational systems, increased competition between CSOs and policy restrictions over how funds are accessed. This effectively restricts funding overall, especially for civic accountability and active citizenship projects. The urgent need for sustainable projects with assured funding was emphasised.²

Research cohort

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.

'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.'

KII, Nigeria

BANGLADESH

Transparency and accountability in Bangladesh have been in a long process of deterioration. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a 'gift' to those seeking greater power over the media and pretexts to silence critics.

Institutional constraints in Bangladesh for marginalised Dalit, Adivasi populations and transgender communities are not new. There is a long-term arc of deteriorating quality and scope of civic space. Now the pandemic, along with the weakening of democracy and civil society, has formed a perfect storm. For these communities the lockdown hit hardest in restricting protests, as well as by worsening economic deprivation.

Local community groups at first protested against government efforts to exclude civil society and community groups from Covid-19 relief efforts. Some suffered discrimination and exclusion due to health concerns of higher caste and majority groups over sharing water resources or health services.

Rights to protest, assemble and advocate were suspended. Alternative ways of organising were limited by lack of mobile technology, with low smartphone ownership and poor internet reach in rural and peri-urban areas.

Groups who had most access to funding (from international or national NGOs), such as garment workers' and labour organisations, have been better able to continue to organise. For other citizen groups, the redirection of relief funds to economic support and loss of income were blows to their ability to speak out and influence policy. Historically, there is a significant protest culture in Bangladesh, and our findings make clear that the first lockdowns brought much protest activity to a sharp halt, with damaging consequences for Dalit, Adivasi and transgender communities. Many leaders found the scope and capability of their organisations severely limited.

Key interviewees note that the pandemic also provided opportunities for state actors and powerful businesspeople to get rid of activists through retrenchment from factories, reducing organised labour's ability to organise protest, voice dissent and represent workers.

For the garment workers, with strong rights consciousness and mobilisation, a more normal period of organising and advocacy has resumed as economic lockdown ended. It is primarily groups with solid organisational ability (with international networking through trade unions or other INGOs) who have been able to organise again, re-engage and negotiate the restrictions around assembly and association.

Research cohort

Bangladesh

Site of study:

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

Urban: garment workers.

Total sample: 22 KIIs

6 Dalits and concerned NGOs, CSOs and CBOs.

6 plainland indigenous communities (Samataler Adibashi) and concerned NGOs, CSOs and CBOs.

5 transgender or Hijra communities.

5 garment workers.

Methodological approach: qualitative, using literature and documentary evidence.

Freedom of speech in Bangladesh:

The ability to speak out in advocacy and through the media in Bangladesh appears to have reduced due to government sensitivity to criticism of lockdown restrictions. Interviewees noted that state actors and politicians control media coverage. The government was slow to acknowledge the severity of the crisis and lack of information has been a major problem.

MYANMAR

An unstable institutional context due to the electoral defeat for the military party in Myanmar, along with the Covid-19 emergency, contributed to the decision of the military to seize power in the 2021 coup.

Tough regulatory restrictions clamped down on civil society voice and operations. During the pandemic, the participation of civil society that had been limited to the heavily circumscribed space for dialogue at local government level, eg, that related to health services, has been reduced to non-existent levels. The parallel administration to the junta does engage in a high level of participation and dialogue, but this does little to mitigate the great risks of civic activism vis-à-vis the military authorities.

Individuals have been criminalised for protesting or speaking out against human rights violations. The military has implemented severe financial restrictions on civil society actors and instituted internet shutdown. Authorities have closed off civil society access to humanitarian assistance and sought to control aid in the interests of themselves and their allies.

ISRAEL AND THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY (IoPt)

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the socio-economic and political rights of citizens. The responses by the state of Israel and the Palestinian authorities exposed political tensions and increased the marginalisation and vulnerability of certain groups. Human rights violations have taken the form of displacement, violence and greater surveillance.

Although Israel 'froze' Palestinian-owned home demolitions twice due to the pandemic, demolitions still reached a four-year high by the end of 2020 leaving nearly 1,000 people displaced. State-backed settler violence increased sharply due, in part, to opportunistic actions during lockdowns.³ Our partners' work supporting human rights defenders was heavily restricted and projects like the Palestinian human rights monitoring and accompaniment organisation, EAPPI, had to be suspended.⁴

Under the cover of the need to track Covid-19 patients and movement being restricted in lockdown, the Israeli government increased its mass surveillance of Palestinians. This was done by the security service, Shin Bet, an institution mandated for state security rather than public health, and renowned for its disregard for human rights.

In response, our partner Adalah, the Legal Centre for Arab minority rights in Israel, launched a Supreme Court challenge

Expanded online reach

Our partner Adalah quickly and successfully moved online to new, digital formats for organising. Local and international audiences are now accessing Adalah's information and narrative via webinars. In 2020, Adalah staff gave over 30 webinars, reaching higher numbers and creating new partnerships.

against the state. The result was a precedent-setting decision stating that the Shin Bet cannot track citizens without legislative authority, even during the pandemic. Although a temporary order later authorised the tracking of civilians for six months, the decision has the potential to limit future surveillance. In March 2021, the Supreme Court ordered its cessation, stating concerns about the level of surveillance being conducted.

COLOMBIA

Despite initial hopes, civic space in Colombia has faced numerous challenges since the signing of the Peace Accord in 2016. Community leaders, activists and human rights defenders have faced increasing levels of violence.

The arrival of Covid-19 exacerbated the situation as the President took advantage of the emergency closure of Congress to govern by decree. Repressive policies intensified in rural areas and there was a sharp increase in the murder of peace-deal activists (the lockdowns made it easier to locate them, as their movements were restricted).

Widespread demonstrations in April 2021, initially against a proposed tax reform but broadening out to civil liberties and human rights issues, led to the deaths of more than 50 people. Violent responses against civilians by armed riot were justified by the government through emergency Covid-19 powers.⁵

The government's refusal to listen to dissenting voices and society in general was also seen in the discrediting and delegitimisation of civil society organisations. This did not begin with the pandemic but became more overt. The government preferred dialogue with businesses and those civil society organisations that were more aligned with their policies.⁶

ZIMBABWE

Emergency Covid-19 powers enacted by the government of Zimbabwe included a ban on gatherings, and new restrictions around information, media and freedom of speech.⁷

For CSOs, this halted workshops, committees and activist meetings. Our partners switched to mobile phones, online meetings and community radio where possible, but the ability to organise inevitably suffered. As noted in other research locations, many women, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups have been digitally excluded from online civic spaces. Their voice has been all but lost during Covid-19.

Public scrutiny of government activities has become difficult due to limits on access to information.⁸ CSOs have been denied

Defending the peace in Colombia:

Along with our partners we have revealed how paramilitary groups have been able to increase threats of violence and killings of activists, due to the government's policy of blocking the 2016 peace agreement.

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

Under pressure, the Colombian government allowed the visit. The IACHR has published a full report condemning the excessive use of force by the state against citizens.

access to state-owned broadcasting services and journalists face tight reporting conditions and harassment.

To worsen matters, funding cuts by the UK government to their overseas civil society programmes hit Zimbabwe at the time of greatest need during the pandemic. In particular, cuts to the Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development (ECID) programme of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) directly impacted innovative pilot projects with the most marginalised groups.

UNITED KINGDOM

In the UK, the government's emergency Covid-19 powers reduced civic and political capacity to hold government to account, in common with many other European states.

The freedom to protest or gather in groups was curbed, civic rights of consultation were suspended and the opportunity for civic scrutiny was reduced due to 'fast-track' measures allowing the government to procure personal protective equipment (PPE), testing and ICT capacity at speed. These emergency powers could only be reviewed every six months by Parliament.

The Prime Minister's office wielded power over contract awards without standard due diligence and tendering processes. The effects have been seen in procurement scandals where millions of pounds were wasted on unusable personal protective equipment, and failed ICT projects. International NGOs and UK parliamentary committees have strongly criticised the concentration of power, the abuse of process and the lack of civil society participation and oversight.

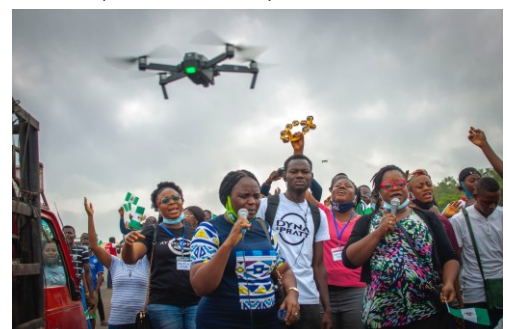
The government's restrictions on the working of Parliament and limited freedom to protest have continued with the proposed Policing Bill, which has been widely criticised by UK civil society because it expands powers to limit freedom of assembly, widens the definition of causing public nuisance and creates new powers to stop and search.

Key learning

■ Civic space is shrinking

As this report shows, institutional and regulatory impacts of Covid-19 have 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. This has accelerated the shifting relationships between government (and their powerful business allies) and civil society, although the degree of impact on civic space has

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



depended on how that space was used previously and how quickly normal operations have resumed or how successful alternative methods have been, in the varying contexts studied.

It must be noted that a certain level of restrictions was justified on public health grounds despite the negative impacts on civil society. Calibrating such policies is difficult when entering unprecedented health emergencies with uncertain information.

Those who were already marginalised seem to have been affected more than others, due to a combination of civil and political rights suspension and economic and social restrictions. Inequality of opportunity has increased for certain groups, such as women in rural excluded communities in Zimbabwe and Nigeria; transgender, Dalit and Adivasi groups in Bangladesh; and indigenous communities in Colombia. In the UK, throughout the coronavirus pandemic, certain BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities have been acutely affected by pre-existing inequalities.⁹

▪ **Alternative organising has mixed results**

Civil society has found new and alternative ways of organising, such as online spaces and mobile technology that can circumvent physical restrictions. But these have not been universally successful or available.

There has been further exclusion for groups who rely on in-person organising to carry out their activities effectively. In some cases, particularly in urban, well-connected areas, online platforms have brought new opportunities and audiences.

Yet new affordability, disability and technological inequalities have also emerged, especially for the poorest, people living with disabilities (eg, deaf or hard of hearing), women and those in remote rural locations (eg, Adivasis in Bangladesh). Many have simply waited until they could organise physically again.

Our research found many informal mutual aid networks springing up to lend all kinds of support between citizens that were not being offered by the state, for example in Bangladesh, Nigeria and the UK.

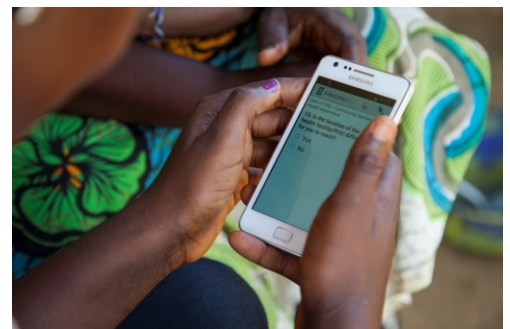
Our report has also shown how legal advocacy worked well, as in the successful Adalah case against the Israeli state in IoPt over unlawful surveillance, and in Colombia, where the IACHR visit led to an important independent report in July 2021¹⁰. Both examples represent the potential of legal advocacy capacity to resist civic restrictions. The ability of independent Supreme Court institutions or oversight bodies like the IACHR to conduct fact-finding visits and evidence sessions has been crucial.

'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...'

'We need equitable distribution of government aid.'

KII, Bangladesh

Below: Low mobile ownership brings exclusion
Photo: Christian Aid



Often CSOs have looked to bounce back quickly and have relied on normal operations being resumed but there are many reports of long-lasting damage, continuing restrictions and even further proposed curtailment of civic space.

■ Funding has been cut

Civic space has been gravely weakened by lack of funding and organisational capacity to deal with the new restrictions. Funding gaps have hit groups working on civic space or advocacy issues at a time when finance is so sorely needed.¹¹

Massive lending and grants from international NGOs and financial institutions in response to Covid-19 have mostly side-lined civic space in favour of support for business, humanitarian relief and social protection.

This has combined with a lack of creative strategies on the part of donors to counter shrinking space. Many have cut funding for civil society effectiveness projects.

Excluded from a role in humanitarian assistance (Myanmar), weakened by lack of funding (eg, UK-based INGOs) and lacking in organisational and advocacy capacity to withstand the restrictions, civic space is under stress due to competition for the favour of government and donors. Urgent discussion is needed over how funding cuts at the global level severely impact the ability of civil society to mobilise at the local level.

■ Civic activity has become more restricted, and risky

Harsh crackdowns by governments under cover of Covid-19 regulations have included attacks on human rights defenders and increased surveillance of citizens. Civil society is suffering increasingly hard-line government restrictions, with the pandemic used as a cover to make arrests and limit activities.

Further, operational constraints on civic space appear to have hampered effective Covid-19 response. This seems to spring partly from a government desire to curb the strength of local government and civil society, who have been side-lined throughout the pandemic.

■ Power is shifting

Shutting down civil society access to humanitarian assistance and relief by the state reveals a drive to centralise power and control over relief funds in the interests of powerful allies in government and business. Under cover of Covid-19, power has shifted away from CSOs seen as critical and therefore in need of tighter control by government.

Below: Difficulties of reaching COVID-19 aid, Nigeria
Photo: Latitude Space/Christian Aid



Recommendations

For civil society organisations and donor governments/ international agencies:

- Broad alliances between the most vulnerable groups, with support from international networks, can be key to building strong civic spaces.
- Online civic space can bring greater inclusion and reach, as long as new digital inequalities are addressed.
- Deploy legal challenges against government technology and surveillance of activists where possible. Our report shows these have proved effective in some contexts.
- Increase access to justice and to international rights bodies for human rights monitoring agencies and defenders.

For donor governments/ international agencies

- SDG 16+ monitoring and commitments should be strengthened with human rights obligations.¹²
- Donor governments and international development agencies should ensure funding and organisational support for CSOs weakened by lack of funding, regulatory increases, Covid-19 restrictions and state repression.
- Civil society effectiveness must be restored through investment in initiatives to strengthen governance and make civic space more inclusive.

Conclusion

Our research shows that civic space has been markedly diminished by Covid-19 restrictions, within a longer-term trajectory. National contexts vary, but the overall trends run 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. With our partners and stakeholder communities, we want the learning from our research to be applied in practice. The international donor community must support civil society actors and state institutions to expand and protect civic space and make it more inclusive. This means taking action through programme design, engagement with government and long-term strategic funding. 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: Meeting with Rohingya women, Bangladesh
Photo: Fabeha Monir/Christian Aid



End notes

- ¹ #EndSARS was a social movement against police brutality in Nigeria, particularly the Special Anti-Robbery Squad. The movement widened into demands for accountable governance.
- ² Requests for primary data can be emailed directly to Charles Gay: CGay@christianaid.org
- ³ Demolitions increase during Covid-19: <https://mediacentre.christianaid.org.uk/news-report-warns-unequal-status-quo-in-israel-and-palestine-will-lead-to-more-violence/>
- ⁴ The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in the oPt and Israel brings people around the world to work as monitors in the West Bank: <https://www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/eappi>
- ⁵ IACHR details violence against social protesters under cover of Covid-19 restrictions: https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/ObservacionesVisita_CIDH_Colombia_ENG.pdf
- ⁶ Colombia peace process contested: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/colombia-peace-agreement-advances-snail-pace/>
- ⁷ UN concerns over Zimbabwe using Covid to stifle dissent: https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_zimbabwes-alleged-use-covid-excuse-stifle-dissent-draws-un-concern/6201949.html
- ⁸ Data is not fully available or trusted as reliable in Zimbabwe, see for example: <https://evidenceforinclusion.org/zimbabw-e-research-report/>
- ⁹ UK Parliament report on existing inequalities made worse: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmwomeq/384/38403.htm>
- ¹⁰ IACHR independent report: https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/ObservacionesVisita_CIDH_Colombia_SPA.pdf
- ¹¹ UK Aid Connect funding for Civil Society Effectiveness was cut by 12 months <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/05/uk-aid-cuts-little-information-but-devastating-consequences>
- ¹² ActAlliance paper: 'Development needs civil society': https://actalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ACT_CivicSpace_Brief_2019_FinalVersion.pdf

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