

Hostile Local Narratives



Background

As outlined in Hans Gutbrod's *Distract, Divide, Detach: Using Transparency and Accountability to Justify Regulation of CSOs*, governments have been able to manipulate the concepts of transparency and accountability to frame civil society organizations (CSOs) as foreign agents, unrepresentative, and privileged.⁴⁰ The government insistence that CSOs maintain transparency around their funding sources goes hand in hand with the accusation that CSOs represent foreign interests.

Framing CSO interests as foreign is an explicit tactic that not only isolates the CSO but also allows the state the moral authority to make further inaccurate claims to delegitimize CSO activity in the country more broadly. Many CSOs do not have a large local membership base, and they benefit from privileges as international organizations. These factors can reinforce the "foreign agent" argument, which may, in turn, undermine their legitimacy as organizations meant to serve and represent their constituencies.

Coordination and information sharing are important elements to bolster CSO resilience to attack. However, research shows that a sound communication strategy is a critical long-term ingredient to prevent "foreign agent" accusations. Effective communication strategies in a hostile country typically are locally rooted in the culture and somewhat selective in the information they share. This is not to say that CSOs must rely on misrepresentation or deception. Rather CSOs should

communicate the values and initiatives they prize while making their cultural relevance clear.

An effective communications strategy can achieve gains in the human rights field. For example, researchers Daniel Cress and David Snow investigated the communication strategies employed by 15 homeless prevention social movement organizations in eight U.S. cities. They concluded that the success of the movement as a whole was driven in large part by the “rhetorical capabilities” of the organizations and their ability to be “articulate” in explaining their missions when confronted by threats from the state.⁴¹ An articulate communications strategy explains a specific issue and the agent at fault and then offers a focused, concrete solution. For example, multiple organizations conducted an analysis and investigation of shelter operations to improve shelter conditions. The Philadelphia Union of the Homeless communicated how the homeless service provider industry had monopolized the public policy discussion on the homelessness issue and posited a solution that ultimately proved effective – insisting that homeless people themselves be a part of the discussion.

Strategies

- **Increase support for grantee advocacy or publicity work (Funder/Grantee):** The most traditional or widespread funder practice in this area channels funding toward grantee advocacy campaigns to increase positive perceptions of their work and mission. For example, the United Kingdom Charity Bank launched a successful campaign called [#CharityIs](#) to specifically challenge negative perceptions concerning the concept of charity. Similarly, the National Endowment for Democracy’s Solidarity Center provides training to and communicates with workers experiencing government repression. Specifically, the center boosts advocacy efforts and facilitates partnerships within campaigns to ensure the campaigns’ relevance and impact within communities of working professionals. These professionals include those working in mines, agriculture, informal marketplaces, and the public sector, and others in need of help organizing and communicating their missions to advocate for their rights.⁴³ [TechSoup](#) is similarly exploring how communications training could help its network of more than one million

CSOs. It aims to aid the development and adoption of narratives that underscore the value of CSOs and build broader coalitions of support. While TechSoup's work will initially focus on Eastern Europe, it hopes to share lessons globally.

- **Use language local constituencies understand (Grantee):** The broader concept of human rights as communicated in international forums may not resonate with some local audiences rooted in diverse religious and cultural traditions. However, ideas such as freedom from unlawful imprisonment or the right to education may draw from local concepts. Therefore, it is often more effective and sustainable to communicate the values of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) or grantee in terms that the local population would find accessible.
 - **Country Example:** A study of the Indonesian human rights movement of the 1970s demonstrated the importance of adopting local cultural context under authoritarianism. Activists had called attention to the civil and political rights violations experienced by political prisoners. The government countered such claims by accusing the activists of imposing foreign ideas and standards. By explaining how Indonesia had failed in its promise to deliver the benefits of development and modernization to society as a whole, activists reframed their goals in a manner that resonated with local values.⁴⁴
- **Use a mitigated transparency approach (Grantee):** Funders can support grantees by sharing information about the closing civic space problem among themselves, encouraging revision of grantee communication strategies and connecting them to the necessary resources and training to do so, and linking grantees with local partners. According to research from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, many CSOs under threat are adopting a “transparency lite’ approach – being quite transparent about the specifics of their programming in contexts where they are not facing closing space, but selectively reducing available program information in restrictive environments.”⁴⁵ Many organizations have chosen to rebrand activities and projects that might be perceived as politically-sensitive to avoid the government crackdown. This act could entail removing rights-based or governance language from mission statements, funding applications, and activity reports. However, it is crucial to note that it is not always feasible to shift a mandate and programming. Larger organizations that have the necessary bureaucratic structure and resources are more successful in this endeavor.⁴⁶

- Engage in proactive transparency (Grantee):** While nimble responsiveness is key, funders of transparency, accountability, and participation (TAP) efforts can retain their focus on increasing the transparency, evidence, and reporting of their programs and investments. The monitoring and evaluation process, while imperfect is one of few available mechanisms that ensure partnerships are selected based on merit and not on political influence or status.⁴⁷ The process is also a relatively transparent tool for improving accountability, linking funding to tangible performance measures. Recently, organizations such as [Accountable Now](#) have made it easier for grantees to comply with transparency regulations. Accountable Now seeks to strengthen CSO performance, public trust in CSOs, and global CSO collaboration on accountability. The organization coordinated with accountability networks from Africa, Asia, Australia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, and North America to develop [12 simple and accessible accountability commitments](#). Accountable Now members (including Amnesty International, CIVICUS, and Transparency International) report on these commitments annually. While these principles are a voluntary reference standard, Accountable Now will provide opportunities for third-party verification in the future. CSO self-regulation runs the risk of being self-defeating. As Hans Gutbrod [discusses in a piece commissioned by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative](#), governments are increasingly using TAP rhetoric to restrict civic space and CSO activity. CSO transparency can be an important preventative measure to this narrative. However, it can be difficult to find a healthy level of transparency while guarding against the unnecessary risks that might accompany increased disclosures.

Actor	Responses	Examples/Explanations	Key Resources (Reports or Organizations)
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Funder/Grantee

Increase support for grantee advocacy or publicity work

UK Charity Bank, owned by charitable foundations, launched a campaign to challenge negative perceptions concerning charity: #CharityIs

[#CharityIs movement](#)

[UK Charity Bank](#)

Contact: 44 1732 441900

AFL-CIO Solidarity Center facilitates training and conversations with workers enduring government repression

[Solidarity Center](#)

Contact: (202) 974-8383

TechSoup explores how communications training can help develop narratives that underscore CSO values and build a support network

[TechSoup](#)

		<p>The Lafayette Practice and Open Society Foundations Report Reaching the Moveable Middle outlines advocacy and communication approaches to counter classic arguments against LGBTI rights</p>	<p>Lafayette Practice and Open Society Foundations report: Reaching the Moveable Middle</p>
<p>Funder/Grantee</p>	<p>Use language local constituencies understand</p>	<p>Researchers Cress and Snow examine 15 homeless social movement organizations in 8 U.S. cities to measure how framing theories condition organizational success</p>	<p>Cress, Daniel. M., and David A. Snow. “The Outcomes of Homeless Mobilization: The Influence of Organization, Disruption, Political Mediation, and Framing.” American Journal of Sociology 105, no. 4 (2000): 1063–1104.</p>

A 2014 study on the Indonesian human rights movement during the 1970s shows how certain messages are more resilient to attack; activists in Indonesia used the developmental/modernization argument. By explaining how Indonesia had failed in its promise to deliver the benefits of development and modernization to society as a whole, activists reframed their goals in a manner that resonated with local values.

[Making Human Rights Campaigns Effective While Limiting Unintended Consequences](#), literature review by the Institute of International Education

Simpson, B. [“Human Rights Are Like Coca-Cola”](#): Contested Human Rights Discourses in Suharto’s Indonesia, 1968-1980.” In *The Breakthrough. Human Rights in the 1970s*, edited by J. Eckel and S. Moyn, 186-203. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

Grantee	Adopt a mitigated transparency approach	CSOs under threat can be transparent about specifics of programming in less politically sensitive areas and selective about which program information they make available in restrictive environments	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report: "The Closing Space Challenge: How Are Funders Responding?" (summary) (full text)
		Seventy percent of development organizations and 44% of human rights organizations in Ethiopia rebranded their mandates to continue working in country	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report: "Civil Society Under Assault: Repression and Responses in Russia, Egypt, and Ethiopia" (summary) (full text)

Grantee	Engage in proactive transparency	Accountable Now created accountability commitments to help grantees comply with transparency regulations	Accountable Now Accountable Now's 12 accountability commitments Distract, Divide, Detach: Using Transparency and Accountability to Justify Regulation of CSOs
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References:

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https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Making_Human_Rights_Campaigns_Effective_While_Limiting_Unintended_Consequences_-_Lessons_from_Recent_Research.pdf.

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44. United States Institute of Peace and University of Michigan, 2017.
45. Carothers, 2015, pp. 13.
46. Brechenmacher, 2017.
47. Barnett and Walker, 140 – missing complete reference