

Introduction and Overview



The Problem

A vibrant, legitimate, and well-informed independent sector is essential for a healthy, democratic system and government. Through the freedom to associate, assemble, and express themselves, citizens can shape the political and social structures that guide their lives.¹ Consequently, it is in the interest of funders—particularly those who champion transparency, accountability, and civic participation (TAP)—to encourage open civic space where their grantees operate.

Philanthropic initiatives that support civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Global South face increasing risks to their integrity and impact. The 21st century saw governments around the world introduce a range of measures restricting the ability of CSOs to operate freely. The trend has encompassed an array of repressive laws, regulations, and practices. These include the imposition of excessive bureaucratic procedures, limitations on foreign funding for CSOs, constraints on freedom of assembly and expression, surveillance, explicit restrictions on nongovernmental organizations' engagement of certain issues, and barriers to where they can operate. Therefore, philanthropists must update their knowledge and approaches to help grantees overcome such challenges.

Reversing the shrinking civic space trend requires a multi-faceted and harmonized approach that prizes trust, efficiency, and local knowledge. There is a robust and ongoing global conversation on this very topic, but the wide range of conversations has diluted both the urgency and nuance in figuring out how to ensure civil society

actors can do their work around the world. And compared to what we do know about the shrinking civil space problem, little is known about how individual organizations experience shrinking civic space in different geographic and political contexts,² or the practical solutions funders and grantees use to mitigate the effects of this damaging trend.

The Context

Meaningful civic engagement is crucial to the long-term sustainability and viability of the transparency, accountability, and participation (TAP) field. Yet civil society groups worldwide increasingly face legal and political constraints on their ability to operate freely and independently.³ Since 2012, governments have proposed or enacted more than 100 laws to restrict the registration, operation, and funding of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Grantees face legal and physical assaults on their missions, staff, and funding streams. These challenges would ultimately diminish their influence and ability to serve their constituents. The phenomenon of closing civic space also inhibits civil society functioning, as organizations are forced to divert limited time and resources to fighting state-led physical, administrative, and judicial harassment.

Limiting civic activity is not the purview of authoritarian regimes alone. Restrictions to civic life can occur in a wide variety of political systems and regional, ethnic, and cultural categories. The CIVICUS Monitor shows that more than 3.2 billion people live in countries in which civic space is either closed or repressed. Governments around the world are increasingly asserting their sovereignty and right to define their own development and accountability agendas. In doing so, they favor local responses over international ones.

Combatting the “Foreign Agent” Argument

Research has linked surging nationalism, counterterrorism policies, and a wider questioning of Western power with closing civic space.⁴ Closing civic space is rooted in the structure of a political system. Attacks on foreign funding for civil society, for example, are often early warning signs of broader, more repressive measures. Such measures have societal ramifications, such as restrictions on freedom of assembly and isolationist policies. The “foreign agent” argument behind restrictive legislation—which argues that civil society organizations do not represent the interests of their fellow citizens but instead of those of a global elite—can be

repurposed to support any number of attacks on civil society organizations and society.

These issues are not unique to the TAP sector or to international development actors. The Syrian civil war and the resulting humanitarian crisis, for example, have triggered similar reflection among humanitarian aid funders. Actors from across the international community are contributing to a dynamic, global conversation on how to preserve civic space from numerous angles.

Revisiting Grantmaking

The conversation is gaining momentum during a time of critical reflection in the development community. This reflection involves examining the traditional aid model that governs the funder-grantee relationship. NGOs have long called for an overhaul of multilateral funding managed by the United Nations (UN). Some have requested that more aid is delivered directly to local actors that are directly providing services.⁵

Funders have also struggled to ease the administrative and reporting burden on grantees while meeting their internal transparency and accountability requirements. These standards often require thorough program monitoring and evaluation and significant time, resources, and specialized skills. While an increased emphasis on measurable results and reporting may improve transparency, rigorous monitoring and reporting requirements often fail to capture local and less empirical forms of knowledge, depriving funders of additional detail to verify those who deliver aid can be held accountable to those who receive it. The quest for top-down professionalization, accountability, and strong organizational governance have had the unfortunate consequence of distancing donors from their grantees.⁶

Research suggests that this pressure for professionalization plays a role in the distrust and distance that has emerged between the Western aid system and NGOs—and between NGOs and the grassroots.⁷ That tension has been exploited by those seeking to limit civic action. Furthermore, for the development and humanitarian sectors alike, available funding tends to become concentrated in top-heavy organizations. The quest for top-down professionalization, accountability, and strong organizational governance has had the unfortunate consequence of distancing donors from their grantees.⁸

New Models and a Way Forward

The conversation on how to combat shrinking space is unfolding in this wider dialogue, adding new dimensions to an already difficult problem. The same practitioners and academics actively seeking solutions to the shrinking space dilemma are often the same thought leaders re-evaluating traditional funding and partnership models. A new series of questions have emerged around how donors can best support their grantees and partners operating in challenging environments around the world. To effectively navigate this dynamic, donors and grantees must consider the important roles that they play, independently and in relation to one another, in advocating for robust civic participation.

Though the problem of shrinking civic space is not new, it will continue to evolve and take on new dimensions that challenge our collective thinking about the relationship between donors and grantees. Great potential lies in the global community's effort to learn from successful initiatives, harness new technology, and build creative partnerships to safeguard civil society's activities and dynamism. Despite the daunting and complex problems it has caused, shrinking civic space could also provide the opportunity to re-evaluate and revitalize philanthropy.

References

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