

Counter-strategies to shrinking space for practitioners in civil society development cooperation

The purpose of the workshop was to promote reflection on what development cooperation organisations and donors can do to counteract (and not contribute to) narrowed space to act for people organising for change. The session was held under Chatham House Rules, so no participants are quoted. Below is a compilation of recommendations provided through the group discussions.

Before the group discussions an international panel of civil society leaders gave introductory speeches on how civil society works in their different country contexts to be able to operate and effect positive change. They spoke of their experiences of working in international partnerships, and gave recommendations to international partners supporting civil society in contexts of limited democratic space. Some of the key points made during this introduction were that:

- every context has its specificities and the importance, as an international partner, of listening and acquiring deepened knowledge of the context,
- the positive change that organisations and activists want to achieve in their society is at the centre of international cooperation, so supporting long-term processes is vital, as well as short-term support to activists who come under pressure,
- all dimensions of international support and solidarity are important: human support, political support (using and opening up spaces for dialogue with embassies or at the international level), and funding support (process-oriented and conscious of not adding burdens).

The ten recommendations below are for development cooperation partners to local organisations who want to work more effectively in difficult contexts and to manage and counteract a closing civic space. They were developed through thematic group discussions and a rating exercise.

1. Context and choice of alliances are key

- Adapt which actors you engage with to the specific context
- Form alliances with new actors based on your analysis of the context and ways forward
- Promote diverse alliances and support multi-sector platforms (universities, mechanisms for including new or weak actors)
- Examples of actors to engage for civic space could include academia, universities, cities, religious actors and arenas, social media companies, new development funds, investors, etc.
- Networking between all levels (local, national, regional, international)
- Choose to work with the actors most affected by closing space

2. Build closing space into your risk analysis

- Assume potential for changing civic space in strategies, designs, theories of change
- Have a checklist of what to do at times of risk, based on on-going discussions with partners, and acknowledge that the situation can and will change
- Continuous analysis of the context, risk, actors and conflict
- Include management of risks associated with closing space in budgets
- Work gender specific indicators (developed with partners) into warning systems

3. Democracy starts from the local level

- Target the sub-national and local level. Engage local decision makers and leaders that people and organisations have access to.
- Support social dialogue that is inclusive and engages different stakeholders and local officials and helps them bring together levels.
- Work with all local stakeholders (citizens, CSOs, public authorities, etc) to make it easier to find common ground.

4. Use international advocacy space - respecting local ownership

- Local CSO's decide – they need to have a say on the strategy for the solidarity, visibility and awareness work done by their partners outside the country.
- Amplify the voices of activists and organisations facing the consequences of closing space.
- International civil society organisations should alert their own governments and intergovernmental organisations and ask for accountability to human rights and enabling environment.

5. Flexibility in funding agreements

- Incorporate options for flexibility and exceptions in funding agreements
- Flexibility in programmes and partnerships – about documentation needed and when we can do without reports, about handling cash, about costs of flying people out of the context, etc.

6. Language on democracy and human rights

- Contextualize rights and choose a language which will convey the meaning correctly in the context

7. Get with the digital security challenge

- Threat aware information and digital security strategies.
- Building capacity on social media security and IT security.

8. Activists are human beings with rights and needs, and being under pressure is incredibly exhausting

- Think holistically about support to activists (incl. their families, and the need for rest)
- Get better at addressing psychosocial needs of local partners
- Create safe spaces to do analysis, maybe bring people out of the context sometimes
- Make sure there are measures for protection, and contingency plans with resources

9. Strengthen the legitimacy of local organisations

- Long-term accompaniment of processes and organisations
- Capacity building beyond the technical
- Strengthen organisations' abilities to generate local funding support and constituency for increased local legitimacy
- Strengthen self-regulation and self-governance of civil society for increased local legitimacy

10. Conflict awareness and analysis

- Think long term in short term interventions – the continuum of humanitarian – resilience – development.
- Engage in conflict sensitivity (in e.g. actor mapping) and assessment/ analysis throughout

Workshop organizers: Members of Concord Sweden's working group on civic space: Action Aid, Church of Sweden, Diakonia, FIAN, Forum Syd, IKFF, Kvinna till Kvinna, Plan International Sweden, PMU, Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Save the Children, Swedish International Liberal Centre, Solidarity Sweden-Latin America, Swedish Mission Council, Världsnaturfonden WWF