

The role of embassies in defending civic space and human rights – when does it work?

A seminar at the Stockholm Civil Society Days on the 22 of September 2017

The purpose of the session was to reflect on how the international community can be effective in defending and upholding human rights, and on the need for systematic and strategic approaches in embassies to support activists and counteract violations against democratic space.

This was done through questions and reflections by the seminar participants and by a panel of speakers including Leonardo González Perafán, lawyer, researcher and analyst, Indepaz, Colombia; Anna-Maj Hultgård, deputy head of the unit of HR and Intl law at MoFA; Karine Sohet, Senior Policy Officer EU Development Policy and Practice, Act Alliance; and Ulf Schyldt, author. The panel was moderated by Malin Oud from the Raoul Wallenberg Institute. An example of consequences of shrinking space and the role that embassies can play, was shared in a filmed interview with José Pilar Alvarez Cabrera, pastor and human rights defender from Guatemala.

The seminar was held under Chatham House Rules, which means that the below notes do not include statements attributable to any seminar participant in particular, and the points do not appear in a similar chronological order as raised at the seminar. Comments from panelists and audience members are mixed together below.

What's needed to make the role of embassies effective in supporting civic space and human rights – what are best practices?

- The personal commitment of the ambassador and senior embassy staff is exceptionally important.
- Embassies should not take their cues on what to focus on, who to meet and support only from the national government, but build relations with all of the most relevant actors in the country.
- Search for local ideas, plans and world views of people, and be cautiously aware of the fact that even national plans can often be quite European in their world view, and resonate more with donors than with local people.
- Embassies can create meeting places around “sensitive” topics, for example gender, LGBTI, economic, social and cultural rights.
- Push the limits a bit and be brave in toeing just inside the line of what diplomats are able to do within diplomatic immunity, even if that might create some reactions.
- Try out flexible and innovative ways of showing support, for example pictures in social media or letting the ambassador be seen publicly with threatened activists.
- Participate and sit in as an observer in for example manifestations or court proceedings against Human Rights defenders.
- Make field trips “under the radar” and meet grassroots. Listen to the grassroots and refrain from imposing own agendas.
- A coordinated approach between donors has a lot of potential. The EU Human Rights Country Strategies are a good tool.
- Use development cooperation to emphasize the importance of broad participation in policy and sector processes
- Interact strategically with international civil society, especially in difficult situations when embassies can't act in some ways
- Development cooperation can be of limited scope compared to other international relations, so it's important that not only development cooperation stands with people and civil society, but the whole political support of the donor country. Here the EU has not shown enough willingness to for example activating the Human Rights provisions in trade agreements.

What is needed from back-donors to support strategic, systematic and brave action from all embassies – where are the gaps to make best practice the practices of all embassies?

- A strong overall commitment in a country's international policies on Human Rights, democracy and rule of law, which is followed through clearly in the work of embassies.
- There needs to be awareness about how trade and business interests can offset Human Rights and systematic work to make sure Human Rights can't be ignored
- Policy coherence for sustainable development: "you can't support both human rights and businesses that violates them". The importance of not letting donor's political concerns on trade, security, anti-terrorism or migration management overshadow development purposes.
- More sharing of lessons learned and how embassies can work for human rights and civic space
- Make sure that the "toolbox" is the same all over, so that the work in embassies is not too dependent only of the personal commitment of senior staff
- EU countries can choose strategically to step in for each other when one country has added values or difficulties in playing a certain role in a certain country for historic reasons.
- Work strategically also with non-EU countries in joining efforts
- Value field expertise and the sense of accountability to the people on the ground when recruiting diplomats and field staff.
- Early warning systems and early response and support before the situation is too difficult
- Regular dialogue at leadership level on shrinking space/ civic space issues.
- Keep civic space at the core of public debate and policy dialogue.

Seminar organizer/s: 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