



CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

**LEARNING AND
FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

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For the past five years, the Fund for Global Human Rights' Enabling Environment for Human Rights Defenders programme has supported activists against unprecedented attacks on civic space. COVID-19, however, has accelerated the proliferation and abuse of security powers, tools, and discourse used to squeeze civic space. As human rights defenders—and those who support them—adapt to meet the challenges of the moment and prepare for the post-pandemic era, we're evolving our strategy to focus on countering this trend and sharing what we've learnt so far.

THE FUND FOR GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS' ENABLING ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

Civic space—the environment that enables people to organise, participate, and communicate openly—is under attack. Societies around the world face an unprecedented crackdown on this space, a trend marked by states' and private interests' increasing use of repressive or violent tactics to constrain activism. This can be seen in the sharp rise of legal, defamatory, and physical attacks against activists and civil society organisations (CSOs) and the increasing use of administrative measures, such as security and tax legislation, to deliberately shrink civic space.

In this environment, where human rights defenders' work and lives are at risk, the Fund for Global Human Rights (the Fund) recognised that it was more vital than ever that activists have the financial support, strategic expertise, and solidarity that they need to remain safe, resilient, and effective. In response, the Fund launched the Enabling Environment for Human Rights Defenders programme in 2015. The programme sought to:

- counter the trend of shrinking space for civil society,
- build the capacity of CSOs to navigate restrictive legal and regulatory measures, and
- promote a positive enabling environment through new protections and better practices for activists and civil society.

The Fund has since emerged as a thought leader on this issue amongst peer organisations and funders, with rare access to the perspectives, experiences, and power of frontline activists working in some of the world's most difficult contexts.

Since 2015, the Enabling Environment programme has made \$2 million in grants to activists and CSOs across a wide geography, with the Fund strategically directing resources where it could fortify power in communities facing acute risk, foster learning around creative or experimental approaches, and influence outcomes in tipping point environments. The programme has sought to be flexible and responsive to evolving trends to effectively engage with different drivers and manifestations of closing civic space. The Fund has also worked to nurture unity and collaboration across movements affected by this unprecedented crackdown on civil society, resulting in more coordinated responses to threats and the emergence of new networks and coalitions that challenge the threat of closing civic space.

The Fund for Global Human Rights equips grassroots activists across the globe with the financial and strategic support they need to improve lives, mobilize movements, and build a better future for their communities.

Since 2002, the Fund has raised and invested over \$100 million into the work of community activists in more than 25 countries, providing these bold local leaders with the funding, tools, and contacts they need to tackle some of the world's greatest challenges. As a result, millions of people worldwide now have access to basic resources and opportunities to participate fully and equally in society.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR?

The Fund's Enabling Environment programme was developed to respond to these challenges, recognising a gap in the philanthropic field to provide cohesive support on this issue. The Fund developed a multi-faceted approach, focused on six strategies, driven by the multi-dimensional nature of the crackdown on civic space. Over five years the Fund pursued this approach by providing financial and technical resources to more than 70 frontline CSOs and activists, coupled with tailored accompaniment.

A review of this programme in 2020 allowed the Fund to evaluate our initial assumptions and reflect on what has been learnt about the challenges and opportunities of key strategies deployed to counter shrinking civic space across diverse geographies:

- Local-level **collective action** can effectively prevent or mitigate some restrictive measures, hold space open, and provide solidarity and protection for activists. However, to create 'deep' local change and scale up impact to the national level, sustained investment is needed, particularly in support of catalytic groups, alongside relationship building that addresses values and power dynamics and access to resources for collective use.
- In funding the nascent field of **narrative building**, the work benefits from an openness to experimentation, forward failure, and risk-taking. This can be manifested by supporting and learning from novel strategies to reclaim civic space, such as using narrative change tools to counter anti-rights agendas.
- Convening and networking activists at the forefront of civic space struggles can succeed in enabling **peer exchange and learning** that both exposes civil society groups to new analyses, tactics, and tools and fosters active transnational networks. A robust methodology, with the right capacity and resources that enable activists to apply insights to practice, is needed to strengthen the impact of this exchange and learning on human rights defenders' strategies and their influence on civic space.
- When national activists **build the right coalitions and relationships to work at the nexus of domestic and international arenas**, they can effectively use international frameworks to push back against local threats to closing space. Activists working to address anti-money laundering and terrorist financing measures that target or hinder legitimate human rights work, for example, have made significant progress in some contexts by leveraging the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). They have deployed several strategies, from increasing awareness of the link between FATF and civic space and collaborating in evidence-gathering, to dialogue and advocacy with domestic financial authorities and engaging parliamentarians, media, and the public. This work requires long-term commitment, from both CSOs and funders, along with targeted technical assistance.
- Activists can reduce their vulnerability to digital and physical attacks, as well as criminalisation, by finding creative ways around restrictions and combining preventative and reactive strategies to reduce risk. This includes **support to activists' compliance, security, and resilience** so that they can sustain their work. These strategies require flexible funding that can resource practical and local responses to dynamic contexts.
- The Fund can complement efforts of human rights defenders, CSOs, and the wider community working to counter shrinking civic space by contributing to **strategic thinking, policy development, and advocacy**, given our identity, credibility, and relationships within private philanthropy and other donor spheres. One of the programme's most valuable functions for activists we support has been to serve as a bridge to international civic space actors, fostering exchange, and facilitating their participation to influence global policy spaces.

AT THE ONSET OF THE PANDEMIC,

44% REPORTED RESTRICTIONS ON
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

AND/OR ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN RESPONSE TO THE
PANDEMIC WERE AFFECTING THEIR WORK OR SAFETY

47%

REPORTED THAT CURFEWS AND OTHER PANDEMIC
CONTAINMENT MEASURES WERE USED TO TARGET AND
DETAIN ACTIVISTS

Source: FGHR COVID-19 Impact survey April – May 2020, with more than 200 grantees from over 20 countries responding.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM COVID-19?


Prior to COVID-19, civic space analysts warned of a looming “convergence of crises—including democratic erosion, widening inequality, climate change, public health emergencies, and the use of digital technologies to constrain human rights.”¹ They forecasted that state and private actors would respond by deploying security-led measures and discourses at the expense of human rights and civic space.

The experience of COVID-19 has validated this analysis. Government responses to the pandemic have exacerbated and created new threats to civic space and the human rights defenders at the forefront of activism. From April to May 2020 the Fund conducted a survey with over 200 grantees to better understand the impacts of COVID-19 on these frontline activists, including how the pandemic has affected civic space. From this it was clear that grantees are facing unprecedented or exacerbated challenges of closing civic space. This has manifested in state repression of activists and CSOs through limits to freedom of expression, repression of digital space, power grabs, and lockdowns enforced by military and police. Grantees also reported that government responses to the pandemic impacted their ability to continue their work, from obstructing their access to funding

to escalating ongoing struggles for legitimacy. Alongside this, the pandemic has laid bare the systemic problems of inequality and discrimination.

The experience of COVID-19 also validated the efficacy of the strategies deployed as part of the Fund’s multi-faceted approach to countering shrinking civic space. In Nigeria, for example, Spaces for Change and the informal coalition it spearheads has successfully challenged new legislation that used COVID-19 as a cover to significantly restrict human rights in the country and expand government powers. In Kenya, the Defenders Coalition has mobilised to provide legal, medical, and other essential support to activists and civilians arbitrarily detained or persecuted by state security forces using the pandemic as a pretext to target human rights defenders and LGBTI people. In the Philippines, grantees are experimenting with new and creative strategies. The Center for Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR), for example, has shifted their relationship with a corporate actor based on a shared opposition to the government’s attempt to use the pandemic to further crack down on dissenting voices. Through this relationship, CTUHR is encouraging the company to take concrete steps towards improving workers’ rights.

¹ ‘Rethinking civic space in an age of intersectional crises: a briefing for funders’, Ben Hayes, Poonam Joshi
– Funders Initiative for Civil Society (May 2020)

A portrait of Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black top with a vibrant yellow and orange geometric pattern on the sleeve. She is looking slightly to the side with a thoughtful expression.

'The grants may be small, but they are timely, and usually unattended by the lengthy, bureaucratic grant-making protocols that delay funds from reaching beneficiaries when they are needed most. The most important aspect of the support from the Fund's Enabling Environment Programme is that it gives [our organisation] the flexibility to experiment with new ideas, test new strategies, learn from mistakes and make adjustments along the way. This approach, for us, has been empowering.'

Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri, Executive Director, Spaces for Change (Nigeria)

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The pursuit of multiple approaches over five years has provided rich learning on the potential and limitations of each of the strategies pursued. The Fund's programme review also prompted the reflection that while many strategies and initiatives tackle the critical manifestations of the crackdown on civil society, too few address the underlying root causes and drivers of shrinking civic space. The Funders' Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) was established in 2016 by a group of foundations and funder networks - including the Fund - to develop a strategic funders' response to the systemic challenge of closing civic space. In 2019 FICS led a global review of the future of civic space, which identified that oppressive state and transnational security interests will be the dominant driver of shrinking civic space in the decade ahead. The Fund shares the analysis and the ambition to tackle this root cause head on. In response, the Fund's Enabling Environment programme will focus on countering the abuse of security to restrict civic space, while building civic power through resourcing and accompanying human rights defenders and other movements.

Working with FICS, this new strategy will see the Fund become a founding partner in a new, global, cross-movement, networked response. The aim is to rewrite what FICS have coined the 'security playbook' of the ways that frameworks, tools, and discourses are weaponised to suppress protest, dissent, and civic power by:

- **Disrupting** the ability of state and non-state actors to criminalise, delegitimise, surveil, and intimidate those engaging in protest, dissent and shifting public opinion on contested issues;
- **Reforming** the security architecture to expand civic space through the creation of legal and social norms, frameworks and accountability processes and effective regulation that hold state and non-state actors to account and effective and balanced regulation of the private actors who enable closing of civic space through their operations and platforms;
- **Transforming** the space of those engaging in protest, dissent and shifting public opinion on contested issues through generating political and public support for alternative approaches to security, within which civic participation, dissent and protest are integral.

Alongside this frontline activism, the Fund and FICS will seek to equip a wide cross section of funders and allies with collective learning and intelligence on the most effective strategies for countering the security frameworks, tools, and discourses that are restricting civic space. The Fund will also support FICS' work to encourage further funder collaboration to direct resources at scale to meet this global challenge.

As funders and grant makers, our collective task is to foster and fuel innovation and action to defend and expand civic space and ensure the future is not determined by fear, but instead grounded on a hopeful vision of humanity and human rights.



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PHOTOS:

Cover: Members of Mombasa's activist network prepare to mobilise with a local, marginalised community.

Above: The Fund's Enabling Environment programme has helped Thai activists protect communities' freedom of expression.