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How civil society is responding to repressive regimes

Lessons from Burundi, Zimbabwe and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory

Repression is marked by shrinking space for civil society

This learning brief summarizes learning from research commissioned by Christian Aid Ireland into the ways in which local civil society actors are responding to or finding ways to continue their work under increasingly repressive regimes. The learning draws from empirical studies conducted in Burundi, Zimbabwe and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IoPT). This brief focusses on the strategies of response deployed by local organizations and the key recommendations arising from these approaches. The research in IoPT was carried out prior to October 2023.

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Context

In Burundi, Zimbabwe, and IoPT, like many other country contexts, there's been long-term repression and rising authoritarianism by state actors and state-allied actors. Such repression is marked by shrinking space for civil society, increased human rights violations, and impunity for state actors.

Repression used by the state takes on a wide variety of forms. There's repression through legal regulations and also through less formal means. This can range from an increase in surveillance culture to control through administrative and regulatory mechanisms, outright banning of protests and public assembly, arbitrary detention, and physical violence. All respondents noted significant effects on their mental health due to the impact of living under long-term situations of repression.

One mechanism of control is the restriction of funding or significant state oversight of where funding is allotted to civil society. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that high-level donor funding from international institutions is also becoming either limited, 'in retreat', or increasingly conditional. The implications of less funding for civil society means less ability for human rights defenders to take action, thereby enabling autocratic states' oppression.

How are local organizations responding to such repression?

1. Local organisations frequently rework programme designs or adapt work plans to bypass such controls. Some organisations also speak about the importance of being visible and doing their work regardless. Others noted that they succeed by doing the work in piecemeal ways or focusing specifically on grassroots issues. Those who make this argument note that they ask the question "what is do-able?" and act accordingly.

2. Alliance building, either among local organisations or through global linkages is a key strategic response. This includes sharing materials and resources across groups, and building consortia in order to raise awareness on an issue, or to present a united front against government attacks. Organisations may feel stronger or safer advocating in coalitions instead of speaking out as individual organisations. International alliances are seen as key to awareness raising, as well as attracting high level donor support. For some, these alliances also help to mitigate the long-term mental health effects of living under a repressive regime.

3. Many local organizations use encrypted platforms like Telegram and Signal to circumnavigate digital surveillance. They may also operate online to overcome restrictions on physical movements such as being followed by state surveillance or because they're unable to pass through a checkpoint. Social media can also be a space through which education on key issues is done or meetings held. As these are a high risk for suppression and surveillance, the use of social media must always be subject to a risk assessment.

4. Restricted funding led organisations to form civil society consortiums, coalitions, and networks for fundraising. Some also diversified their programme of work to apply for available grants and funds.

Shrinking Civil Civil Society Space

Multi-stakeholder, collaborative efforts are essential

5. Several organisations noted the importance of work that involves not only 'service delivery' or the implementation of project activities but also acts and advocates for policy reform. They highlighted the different regulatory laws hindering their work and the importance of focusing on policy reform.

What key recommendations have arisen from this research?

1. All work must be context-driven, consultative with a variety of stakeholders and include a risk-mapping plan that identifies risks and mitigation strategies, guides decision making and doesn't put civil society partners at risk.

2. International actors must engage in international advocacy efforts to raise awareness of the shrinking space for civil society organisations. INGOs can support local and global alliances and movement-building among civil society.

3. Funding and programme support must be flexible enough to support local partners as they frequently adapt to repressive measures. Local organisations need the space to adapt programmes and work when faced with restrictive legislations. International donors and INGOs must find ways to commit to flexible core funding and avoid insisting on overcompliance.

4. INGOs can support advocacy to overturn repressive policies. In-country support to partners can extend to advocacy and international network support.

5. International actors need to provide targeted capacity-strengthening programmes and resources to civil society organisations and human rights defenders to enhance their skills, knowledge and resilience in terms of responding to authoritarian governments.

6. INGOs must continue to support civil society links to in-country diplomats as well as global networks.

7. INGOs can enlist the assistance of groups like faith councils who may be able to support local organisations.

8. Co-develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) with partners to support and protect human rights defenders (HRDs) and other local activists who put their lives at risk for this work. Christian Aid has a useful guide to protecting HRDs.

9. Build digital protection support into project design, including support for partners' digital security capacity. Discuss with global activist networks how they have developed secure digital networks, and also consult with the extant literature/toolkits on this issue.

10. For organisations who wish to provide greater support on mental health impacts, it is important to remember that any and all assistance must be context driven and place the local organisations' needs first. Recognise the complexity of mental health as an approach and give deeper consideration to what it will mean to become more trauma informed. Consult with extant literature, toolkits and experts on how to build sustainable approaches to mental health support and the implications of certain forms of work.

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