



GLOBAL PANDEMIC: CORONAVIRUS AND GLOBAL DISORDER

# Civil Society and the Coronavirus: Dynamism Despite Disruption

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Government responses to the new coronavirus pandemic are disrupting civil society globally. Lockdowns and physical distancing measures are confining people to their homes and upending their ability to meet, organize, and advocate. Many civil society organizations have been forced to put planned activities on hold; others are scrambling to shift their work online. More worryingly, illiberal leaders in a number of countries are taking advantage of the crisis to tighten their political grip by weakening checks and balances, imposing censorship, and expanding state surveillance—all at a time when civil society groups are less able to fight back. Such measures pose a significant threat to civic activism. In many countries, restrictive laws already had been squeezing civil society before the crisis hit. The pandemic provides a convenient cover for governments to further tilt the balance of power in their favor.

Foreboding though this picture is, the crisis is also catalyzing new forms of civic mobilization. Civil society actors in many countries, democratic and nondemocratic alike, are rising to the pandemic

challenge in myriad small and large ways. They are filling in gaps left by governments to provide essential services, spread information about the virus, and protect marginalized groups. In some places they are partnering with businesses and public authorities to support local communities strapped for economic relief. They are also forging new coalitions to hold stumbling or recalcitrant governments to account.

Of course, not all civil society initiatives are inherently prodemocratic, and not all civic groups will play constructive roles in the crisis response. Yet the current surge in civic organizing nevertheless provides an opportunity to highlight the vital role of civil society in sustaining vibrant and healthy communities and democracy more widely. International supporters of civil society should step up their efforts to bolster emerging local initiatives, amplify civil society voices in pandemic responses, and throw their weight behind efforts to preempt further government restrictions on democratic rights.



## ACTIVISM IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Pandemic-related activism naturally varies widely across contexts, but several common dimensions stand out.

### New Mutual Aid Initiatives

Across different cities and countries, citizens are coming together in new voluntary associations and mutual aid societies. They are raising money for emergency relief, collecting medical supplies and protective gear for overwhelmed hospitals, and delivering aid to those who lack other forms of social protection. In a number of places, civic actors are collaborating closely with local businesses that are donating medical equipment and food and contributing to relief efforts in other ways.

Some of these activities have scaled up quickly. In Tunisia, for example, more than 100,000 people joined a [Facebook group](#) bringing together volunteers to help fight the virus. The group now has 24 coordination centers across the country; its volunteers have raised money, collected medical supplies, disinfected public spaces, and worked with regional authorities to identify families with urgent financial needs. In [Iran](#), a group of businesses and volunteers has delivered 70,000 respirators and other protective gear to Iranian health workers. Similarly, in Poland, new [online platforms](#) and social media groups are both matching people in need with community groups that can provide support and [organizing](#) to supply medical staff with equipment and food. Many more such local [initiatives](#) are springing up, with neighbors coming together to help the most vulnerable community members. Although all of these groups aim to fill people's immediate needs, some of the activists leading the charge in the United States and elsewhere also seek to advance a [broader political](#)

[mission](#): strengthening community resilience to future shocks and building the basis of new social movements for political and economic change.

### Repurposing

In addition to new mutual aid initiatives, many established civil society groups have shifted their work from longer-term projects to emergency relief. For most development and humanitarian organizations, this is a natural shift: some are partnering with government authorities to distribute aid to their local networks; others are stepping in to fill gaps left by the state. In India, for example, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been at the front lines of [feeding communities](#) under lockdown that are no longer able to go to work. Syria Relief and Development, a humanitarian organization based in Idlib, has shifted toward [training](#) medical staff and aid workers on infection prevention and control.

But even organizations that typically work on human rights and democracy issues are repurposing to address the immediate public health crisis, often with a focus on protecting vulnerable groups. In Brazil, the community organization Coletivo Rapo Reto, which usually documents police abuses in Rio de Janeiro, is now [using its platform](#) to denounce fake news surrounding the crisis. In Kenya, the human rights NGO [Muslims for Human Rights](#) has been distributing protective masks and food supplies to vulnerable community members. The Tunisian anticorruption NGO [I-Watch](#) is collecting masks and other needed equipment from Tunisians locally and abroad and redistributing them to hospitals, while also disinfecting certain public spaces and spreading awareness about COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus (in addition to monitoring public health spending).

Such repurposing is not unique to the current moment: in times of humanitarian crisis and disaster, civil society organizations with community knowledge and local networks are well-positioned to reach vulnerable communities. Yet even though some governments are drawing on civil society's strength to amplify their responses, many local groups already [report](#) that public authorities, intent on retaining centralized control, have neglected to consult with them.

### Fighting Disinformation

Civil society actors are also playing crucial roles in informing communities about the virus. Disinformation and false narratives about COVID-19 are spreading quickly, in some places exacerbated by political leaders. Such rumors can aggravate community tensions, spark [xenophobic violence](#), or lead citizens to ignore sound public health advice. Civil society groups have rallied to counter this trend, drawing on their experience with community education in remote or underserved areas. In Brazil, where President Jair Bolsonaro continues to [downplay](#) the seriousness of the crisis, civil society groups have joined together in a [new national coalition](#) to spread awareness of the virus in the country's poorest neighborhoods using the hashtag [#coronainthepерipheries](#) ([#coronainthepерipheries](#)). In Senegal, the youth movement [Y'en a Marre](#) (Fed Up) has switched gears from advocating for transparent and democratic governance to disseminating songs that promote social distancing. Various Polish NGOs are focusing on [debunking](#) common [conspiracy theories](#) about the pandemic.

Some civic groups have sought to push back against governments that are using the pretext of fighting "fake news" about the virus to [criminalize](#) online and offline speech and strengthen state control over media

outlets—such as in [Hungary](#), where a new law punishes anyone who publishes "false" information on the pandemic with up to five years in jail. In Tunisia, for example, the parliament quickly withdrew a [restrictive draft law](#) with similar provisions after it faced a wave of civil society criticism. The Media Institute for Southern Africa in Zimbabwe has [denounced](#) the government for targeting journalists reporting on the COVID-19 crisis and made an urgent High Court application [demanding](#) that journalists be allowed to do their work. In other countries, preexisting restrictions on freedom of expression are making it difficult for journalists and civil society groups to openly challenge official statistics and narratives: in China, citizens have tried to evade state control by setting up [online channels](#) to share articles and social media posts that had been censored by the government.

### New Advocacy Roles and Tactics

Civil society groups are going beyond relief provision to spearhead efforts to hold governments to account for ineffective or undemocratic crisis responses. Organizations at both the international and national levels are monitoring and speaking out against cases of overreach and abuse of power. International organizations like the [International Center for Not-for-Profit Law](#), [Rights and Security International](#), and [Amnesty International](#) are tracking new emergency measures and pushing for democratic oversight. In Nigeria, the [Action Group on Free Civic Space](#) is documenting and analyzing coronavirus-related government measures as well as violence by public authorities. The group [Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights](#) has launched a hotline to report human rights violations related to the crisis and has successfully filed a court application on behalf of citizens who were assaulted by police officers enforcing lockdowns. In Argentina, the civil society



organization Directorio Legislativo has been [mapping crisis-related regulations](#) issued in Latin American countries and initiated a social media campaign focused on protecting democracy during the pandemic.

In other places, civic actors are demanding that governments step up sluggish response efforts. In [Brazil](#) and [Chile](#), citizens have shown their discontent with government responses by participating in pot-banging protests from their balconies. In some countries, medical professionals and associations have spoken up publicly against government incompetence. In Thailand, for example, an [association of physicians](#) has criticized public authorities' slow response to the spread of the disease. In Egypt, where public dissent is severely restricted, medical personnel at the front lines of the pandemic have also denounced the country's lack of preparedness, with some health practitioners even accusing state authorities of covering up the extent of the crisis.

Lastly, many civil society groups are highlighting the plight of vulnerable groups and pushing for targeted protections. In [Singapore](#), for example, NGOs have successfully put pressure on the government to improve living conditions in a migrant worker dormitory where foreign workers have been confined to contain the pandemic. In [South Africa](#), NGOs have pressured the government to stop evictions while the crisis lasts. Moreover, women's groups around the world have been both [organizing](#) to provide help for those who may be locked down with abusive partners or family members and pressing governments to make additional services available.

### Shifts in Protest Activity

Protest movements that have been forced to abandon street mobilization are directing their focus on the inequities brought to the fore by the pandemic and

experimenting with new protest tactics. Many are trying to maintain political momentum and visibility while at the same time showing direct solidarity with those most affected by the crisis. In [Hong Kong](#), for instance, the prodemocracy movement has shifted to digital organizing, with activists highlighting problems in the government's pandemic response (while also organizing themselves to distribute masks to underserved communities). In [Algeria](#), the Hirak protest movement born in 2019 has focused on organizing food and medical supplies for areas affected by the virus, but activists are also debating how to best turn the crisis into an opportunity to grow the movement's support base and articulate new demands.

In a number of countries, the crisis has also sparked new forms of labor mobilization in sectors that have remained essential during the pandemic and that often rely heavily on contractors, including delivery businesses, warehouses, and construction. In the [United States](#), for example, workers in grocery delivery businesses and Amazon warehouses have protested against inadequate safety measures and insufficient pay. A similar trend has emerged in [Turkey](#), with workers protesting increasing workloads and safety risks or [mobilizing](#) against unpaid furloughs and lay-offs. Although organizing among precarious workers is not a new phenomenon, the emphasis on health and safety at work is a noteworthy trend. As the economic crisis continues, informal and contingent workers likely will continue to organize around the issue of protection, and [citizen mobilization](#) against economically painful lockdown measures is likely to grow.

### PIVOTAL QUESTIONS

The trends highlighted above are encouraging, but one must be cautious about drawing any definite conclusions from such emerging developments. Several

questions will be crucial in determining whether green shoots grow into trees—whether the pandemic ends up undercutting or rejuvenating civil society in many countries over time.

## Regaining Legitimacy

In recent years, civil society organizations in many places have faced questions and doubts about their [legitimacy](#). Many governments have been stoking mistrust in civic actors by framing them as unaccountable, elite, or foreign-sponsored actors disconnected from the communities they claim to represent. Yet as civic groups step in to deliver essential services to affected communities and fill gaps in government responses, they may be able to grow their constituencies and social networks and ultimately strengthen their legitimacy in the public eye. Newly forged alliances with businesses and community-based networks may help traditional civil society organizations reach wider networks of people. A crucial question thus is whether civil society organizations' effective crisis responses will allow them to counter the negative narratives about their lack of local accountability and authenticity. In some cases, governments may try to position themselves as the sole saviors during the crisis by challenging civic actors' newfound legitimacy.

## From Local to National Action

Most of the emerging civic dynamism in the pandemic context is local as communities come together to cope with the immediate crisis. This pattern reinforces a shift from professionalized civil society organizations toward localized, informal civic activism, a trend that was already underway in many places. This growing sense of localism may continue if the mutual aid societies and networks formed during the crisis persist as channels for advocacy, aid, and mobilization. Yet it is still unclear

to what extent local citizen initiatives can sustain their momentum after the immediate crisis subsides and whether grassroots-oriented networks can build broader reform coalitions around national political debates. Local initiatives could prove short-lived and brittle or too fragmented to advance broader advocacy appeals. In this scenario, civil society activism will likely remain structured around fairly hierarchical and professionalized national and international organizations.

## From Emergency Responses to Political Reform

Though many civil society organizations have shifted toward public health activism and humanitarian aid delivery, this may be only a short-term adaptation that will end once the pandemic passes. However, many civic actors and their supporters note that the current crisis—and the inequities it brings to the fore—may present a unique opportunity to advance more ambitious reform agendas. The current global economic disruption could open the door to deep-reaching socioeconomic and political reforms by showcasing the need for stronger social safety nets, more robust healthcare investments, greater equity, and better global and national governance generally.

In the coming months, a key trend to watch is whether global and domestic civic actors are able to take up these broader reform priorities—whether they have the capacity to identify entry points for larger-scale advocacy in the current context in which certain traditional channels, including protests and in-person meetings, are mostly unavailable. In some places, organizations that are responding to the emergency may have less bandwidth to focus on their traditional advocacy and oversight work or to plan ahead; at the same time, groups that are trying to press forward priorities unrelated to the pandemic may receive less attention.



In some countries, government actors are likely to push back against civic groups that move from emergency service delivery toward broader political demands.

### Pulling Together or Apart

Much of the new activism emerging at the local level appears to be collaborative. Groups are joining together and, in some cases, working with local businesses and government authorities. Yet some civil society groups already note that they are not being consulted by state authorities designing national responses, even though [research](#) on past epidemics has shown that government efforts are most effective when they draw on community action and input in order to decentralize responses. One question going forward is thus the extent to which governments will be willing to work with and encourage local initiatives, rather than try to maintain top-down control.

Around the world, the crisis is also reinforcing existing political fault lines—between the national and local levels, between opposing political camps, or between different religious and ethnic groups. India is one example, where some Hindu nationalist voices have used the pandemic to inflame anti-Muslim sentiments and discrimination against people from the northeastern regions of the country. In the [United States](#), citizens opposing ongoing lockdowns are clashing with those urging continued caution. It is possible that civil society will replicate these fissures, resulting in increasing polarization as different groups fight over scarce resources or use the instability arising from the virus to push narrow agendas. That said, some emergent forms of citizen solidarity may be able to transfer into the civic domain, encouraging [new alliances](#) across existing divides.

### Surviving the Economic Crisis

Lastly, it is likely that even as new forms of civic mobilization and solidarity have emerged in a context of lockdowns and other restrictions, the looming economic crisis will hit all forms of civil society hard. Established organizations may lose important sources of funding as foundations and governments slash their budgets; independent media organizations are already seeing a rapid decline in advertising revenues. This trend may accelerate rise in informal activism as compared with formal activism and accelerate a consolidation in the formal NGO sector. Some groups that have had to scale back their activities now may struggle to come back to life if their funding sources dry up.

### BOLSTERING TRANSNATIONAL SUPPORT

As public and private actors that are committed to supporting civil society transnationally hurry to adapt to the new global context, they should prioritize flexible assistance, connecting civil society actors to larger pandemic-related support packages, and fortifying policy stances on the value of civil society generally.

Many aid providers have been talking for some time about the need to *make their funding more flexible* to help local civic groups cope with rising civic space pressures. Yet only a minority—mostly private funders—have turned talk into action. Now is the time to overcome longstanding habits of projectized assistance, cumbersome administrative requirements, and limited timeframes. Aid providers should take on board the depth of disruption in many places and make sure that their support allows civic groups to shift their

objectives, form unexpected coalitions, and experiment with new initiatives. They also should extend their support to organizations that have been forced to halt their activities in response to the pandemic, rather than pulling back funds or asking for refunds if deadlines are not met: doing so will help local groups quickly resume important work in the recovery phase. Several large private foundations have already made commitments to this effect; bilateral and multilateral aid agencies should similarly step up in this regard and also do more to ensure that their support reaches local organizations, not just major international NGOs.

A second priority is to *help civic groups connect effectively to government pandemic responses* when needed and possible—or at least not be actively attacked and harassed by government actors. As they negotiate new assistance packages relating to the pandemic, funders should push governments to incorporate civic actors as implementing partners, particularly in areas where there is limited state presence or low public trust in the authorities. Likewise, they should insist on a role for civic groups in monitoring new assistance packages and include new support for local watch groups, journalists, and anticorruption organizations that can act as watchdogs on the procurement and implementation processes. It is essential that the influx of emergency aid into many countries does not end up reinforcing state control at the expense of democratic participation and oversight. Crucial in this regard will be bridging bureaucratic divides within aid and policy organizations between those persons managing emergency aid funding and those monitoring and responding to threats to civil society and civic space.

At the broader diplomatic level, the pandemic is a critical moment to *push back against the anti-civil society narrative* that has gained so much ground around the world in the past 10 years. The by-now ritualistic

attacks by numerous governments accusing civil society of being elitist, inauthentic, and a tool of malign foreign interests can and should be countered with new, vivid accounts of how local civic groups are standing alongside ordinary citizens, doing what governments are failing to do, and using their resources for the common good. It is imperative that in interacting with partner governments, donors distinguish clearly between accepting tailored, time-limited emergency measures needed to combat the coronavirus and resisting excessive political overreach and punitive restrictions on civic freedoms. This is a time to reinforce, not lessen, international commitments to civic space and democratic values more generally.

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## NOTES

This article draws on comparative insights and examples provided by members of Carnegie's Civic Research Network. [See here](#) for a list of network members.

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