

THE CLOSING SPACE CHALLENGE: HOW ARE FUNDERS RESPONDING?

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As restrictions on foreign funding for civil society continue to multiply around the world, Western public and private funders committed to supporting civil society development are diversifying and deepening their responses. Yet, as a result of continued internal divisions in outlook and approach, the international aid community is still struggling to define broader, collective approaches that match the depth and breadth of the problem.

An Incomplete Bridge

Continued closing space. Just in the past two years, China, India, and Russia, along with many smaller countries—such as Cambodia, Hungary, and Uganda—spanning all ideological, economic, and cultural lines, are stepping up efforts to block foreign support for domestic civil society organizations.

Broader repression. Attacks on foreign funding for civil society are often the leading edge of wider crackdowns on civil society. Power holders justify broader sets of restrictive measures like limitations on freedom of assembly using the anti-foreign-intervention line.

Multiple causes. Attributing the closing space problem mainly to the authoritarian surge around the world overlooks the diversity of the causes. Rising nationalism, counterterrorism policies, a wider questioning of Western power, clashes between economic interests and civic activism, and other factors also spur the phenomenon.

How Funders Are Responding

Changing how they operate. Public and private funders are stepping up the sharing of information about closing space problems among themselves, conducting more risk analysis, revising communication strategies, operating remotely in more places, and bolstering efforts to work directly with local funding partners.

Changing what they do. Funders are scaling back potentially politically sensitive activities in some countries and increasing emergency funds and protective assistance for besieged civic activists. They are also supporting national and regional NGO platforms and new resource centers, and exploring alternative ways to support civil society, such as by shifting attention to social enterprises and social movements.

Pushing back. Having accumulated considerable experience backing domestic and international campaigns to persuade or pressure closing space governments not to enact restrictive NGO laws and other barriers to civil society support, funders are now attempting to extract practical lessons from these campaigns and increase their efficacy.

Struggling to unify. Governments hostile to foreign civil society aid are undercutting coordinated responses to their restrictive actions by exploiting enduring divisions of outlook and approach within the international assistance community, including between public and private funders, U.S. and European funders, and developmental and political funders. Conflicting policy interests, especially relating to counterterrorism, have weakened the response of Western governments in some countries.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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