Solidarity Playbook

Emerging lessons on resilience and solidarity mechanisms to civic space restrictions

International Civil Society Centre

solidarityaction.network

Introduction – About the Solidarity Playbook

The Solidarity Playbook is a collection of case studies and best practices, curated by the Solidarity Action Network (SANE), on how international civil society organisations (ICSOs) and coalitions have developed resilience and solidarity mechanisms to civic space restrictions and changing operating conditions for civil society.

Through gathering these case studies, our aim has been to identify the new ways in which civil society has approached the issue in a more strategic way as the issue has gained steam since it first became identified as a trend. This paper captures key lessons and learnings from 18 case studies, which were compiled between September 2019 and February 2021.

We have considered both individually-led organisational responses from ICSOs as well as those involving coalitions, either at the national or international level. In these coalitions ICSOs are often involved, either directly or indirectly. The case studies are spread across a diverse range of contexts, and from different parts of the world, from those where the closing of space is characterised by more obvious, violent repression, to settings where the restrictions and measures are more subtle and technical in nature. Across all contexts, solidarity emerges as a common theme and need from across the civil society spectrum, manifesting in different ways.

It's important to note that the issues around civic space are evolving, especially as the current COVID-19 pandemic has changed the nature in which many civil society groups have been able to function. The lessons emerging from the Solidarity Playbook will be vital tools in the armament of ICSOs, CSOs, coalitions and funders alike, who want to ensure that civil society can continue to support communities around the world both throughout the pandemic responses and well beyond.

Definitions

According to Civic Space Watch, **'civic space'** is "the political, legislative, social and economic environment which enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns, and act individually and collectively to influence and shape policy-making". The presence of open, dynamic civic space ensures that governing bodies take into account the interests, needs and concerns of citizens, and society at large. If that space exists for civil society to engage, there is a greater likelihood that all rights for all people will be protected. However if there is a **closing of space for civil society**, and threats and reprisals against civil society actors, this is an early warning sign of instability, as those in power attempt to avoid accountability. In the Solidarity Playbook we use the terms **'shrinking space for civil society'** or **'closing space for civil society'** to refer to instances where civil society's ability to function freely and fairly has been restricted. We also refer to **'threats to civic space'** or **'closing civic space'** to speak to the wider context of a society where freedoms of expression, association and assembly have been curtailed for certain groups or in an indiscriminate fashion. We also refer to the **'enabling environment for civil society'** to underpin the norms, rules and narrative environments in which civil society functions.

Civic Space Watch: [What is civic space?](#)

What does solidarity look like for civic space?

Solidarity in action refers to building common cause amongst different groups, which could be characterised as the 'ties that bind': this means that any form of solidarity relies on shared values and objectives, regardless of how it's demonstrated in practice. In civil society, organisations and individuals may all have their own diverse objectives and social purpose. Thus finding shared values and objectives may be challenging. Civic space, however, is an issue that **cuts across different areas or expressions of civil society focus**: humanitarian, development, environment, feminist activism, digital spaces, or human rights. This presents opportunities to work in solidarity in multiple ways and with multiple actors, across issues and organisations, and to find common ground. In summary, solidarity in action is always built on finding that common point where collaboration or cooperation can be reinforced and enhanced.

The Solidarity Playbook has highlighted two dimensions of solidarity to consider in order to establish common cause:

1) The first is identifying the **levels of solidarity**, or the **'WHO and WHERE'**.

   - What are the **relationships** one forms to build solidarity?
   - Can this **cross issues** and organisations?
   - What is the role of the different civil society actors working in **different geographies**, especially for ICSOs?

2) The second is identifying the **modes of solidarity**, or the **'HOW'**. This naturally follows from the first dimension.

   - What are the different ways in which organisations work to build solidarity in a civic space context?
   - How do international actors work with local actors?
   - What do local actors need from international actors?

These two dimensions are discussed in more detail on the next page.

1) Levels of solidarity: Solidarity with whom and where?

We know that solidarity involves sharing values, but it also means building relationships with individuals and organisations with different ways of working or with different needs. This will depend on specific triggers that bring groups together – whether it is a direct attack on an organisation or a gradual shrinking of the operating environment for civil society, or a long-standing relationship that needs deepening or transforming.

With this in mind, we found four broad dimensions involved in the 'with whom and where' different organisations were working in solidarity. These dimensions demonstrate the different levels within which solidarity is demonstrated in practice.

Factors that need to be considered when determining the 'who' and the 'where' might include:

- Careful analysis of the political context and environment.
- Assessing the needs of the different actors in collaboration with them.
- How long a relationship with a partner has been in place and the level of trust, or if building new relationships is required.
- Legitimacy of the organisation (legal or perceived) offering solidarity.

- **Solidarity with local civil society**
  Solidarity may be with **formal or informal groups** who are often at the forefront of direct attacks. They may be social movements, for example, or activists working on specific issues and needing support.

- **Intra-organisational solidarity**
  ICSOs can be large families of organisations each with different priorities, all with multiple departments. Several case studies show the importance of solidarity **between different parts of an ICSO family** and across the organisation itself, for example between the international secretariat and national offices.

- **Intersectional solidarity**
  Civic space, perhaps more than any other issue requires a coming together of civil society across a range of issues, for example humanitarian action with human rights. Intersectional solidarity therefore naturally involves coalition work. Though it can be situated globally or locally, we found that intersectional solidarity was more common at the national or subnational level.

- **International solidarity**
  International solidarity **connects the national to the international**. This could be linking local partners to international mechanisms, such as at the UN level, or connecting different national partners across a single issue, such as anti-terrorism or internet shutdowns.

It's important to factor in that solidarity may be required at **multiple levels**. Solidarity at the international level, for example, can help raise global awareness to issues related to civic space for those at the national level; or build collaboration across borders, whilst solidarity with local partners could involve supporting protective measures at the same time. A multilevel approach to solidarity can act as a 'pincer' movement, creating pressure and support at different times.

CIVIC SPACE SOLIDARITY: Solidarity with whom?

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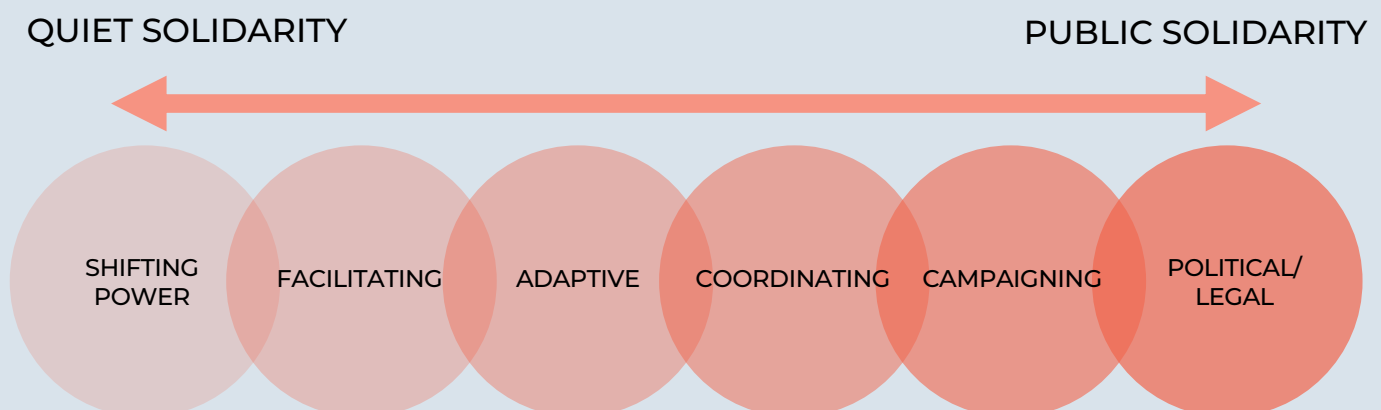## 2) Modes of solidarity: How is solidarity demonstrated in practice?

There are many different ways in which organisations work to demonstrate solidarity across civil society on civic space and the enabling environment for civil society. The tools and resources that ICSOs have, in particular, can be used in multiple ways, and much of this is dependent on the context of civic space in question: Is the environment more repressed and represents a higher risk to individuals and organisations? What level of risk is an organisation prepared to take?

There has been an assumption often made that 'solidarity' requires speaking out publicly about closing space. However, we found many ways of working in solidarity that were not public-facing, though none-the-less effective. This was especially relevant for ICSOs who are often faced with difficult decisions about leaving countries where their work is at risk, and/or where a government seeks to shut them down. One of the key lessons we learned was that even in these circumstances, there were still opportunities to show solidarity with local civil society, and indeed to strengthen and support them more effectively for the longer term.

In general, (though not exclusively) quiet solidarity was adopted in more closed and restricted (and risky) environments. Public solidarity was found where contexts either weren't as closed, but were narrowing, at the national level, or at the international level when multiple organisations joined together to share risk, such as global campaigns and coalitions.

1) **Shifting Power** solidarity happens in many forms. In our review, we found that closing civic space can act as the catalyst to establish new relationships and ways of working with partners such that they have more control over decision-making and resources. As a mode of solidarity, this resulted in the local organisation being able to determine how and when they would work, and having adequate resources to continue to function, even in a highly closed and politicised civic space environment. In these cases, organisations had to address internal systems and/or negotiate with donors in order to address perceived risk. They also had to negotiate with local actors to determine the lead regarding what they want or need from ICSOs. Plan International adopted a 'shift the power' strategy with youth-led organisations in Latin America and found that it enabled discussions about a wider cultural change within the organisation more broadly.

2) **Facilitating** modes of solidarity are those that provide tools to partners on the ground. It might also involve facilitating access to international decision-makers, such as through UN processes. This would require an assessment of the needs and capacities of local groups, and bringing direct (often non-financial) resources to bear, which could include training or spaces in which to meet. It can also involve protecting activists and organisations. Helvetas provided an example of this through their work building capacity to engage with and facilitating access to UN human rights processes by groups at risk in a particular country, connecting them to

CIVIC SPACE SOLIDARITY: How?

QUIET SOLIDARITY   PUBLIC SOLIDARITY

SHIFTING POWER | FACILITATING | ADAPTIVE | COORDINATING | CAMPAIGNING | POLITICAL/LEGAL

CIVICUS, and providing safe spaces for local activists to meet and strategise. This mode of solidarity requires capacity for facilitation and convening on the ground, and high levels of trust between actors.

3) **Adaptive** modes of solidarity were generally adopted on an intra-organisational basis. For example this could entail a Secretariat or federation adapting expectations, requirements, resource flows or engagement in order to show solidarity to a national office, to ensure the work can continue, and to help keep some dimensions of civic space alive in that setting. It may also involve changing organisational strategies and adopting new procedures and risk management approaches. Adaptation has been a strategy adopted by ICSOs in our case studies, including Transparency International in Cambodia and Action Aid in Uganda, the latter as a result of a direct attack on the organisation.

4) **Coordinating** modes of solidarity can see an ICSO acting in a way that could host or create a coalition, or support a group of national or sub-national CSOs. This may involve more risk-taking on the part of one organisation, or bearing more resources, but could also involve a risk-sharing strategy across multiple organisations. VSO in Ethiopia, for example, hosted a secretariat for a national coalition for civil society, to help support the expansion of civic space collectively. This involved provision of resources from the international secretariat, and a greater level of risk bearing held at the national office in Ethiopia.

5) **Campaigning** in solidarity involves creating a joined-up campaign across organisations on civic space. We identified several campaigns that united multiple groups at both the national and international level. In some cases, they were hosted and created by an ICSO, whilst in other cases ICSOs were part of these coalitions, or acted as allies. Campaigning tactics of course varied, from working on shifting CSO narratives in the public sphere, as the 'It Works' campaign in Poland did, where they highlighted through the media and campaigning the valuable work of CSOs; or the '#KeepItOn Campaign' that unites groups around the world to protect access to digital spaces when governments seek to close them down.

6) **Political/Legal solidarity** involves direct challenges to a government through legal or political means. Some coalitions, for example, chose to openly protest closing civic space actions by governments, while others chose to take the government to court through strategic litigation. Issues here included security risks for those on the ground, and threats to access for any regional or international groups involved. We found that this mode of solidarity is most effective when combined with other forms and mechanisms within a multilevel strategy. For example if space is closed at the national level, international actors can campaign to raise awareness at the international level (which also provides vital psychological support to those at risk), whilst facilitating provision of resources to local actors such as security training or legal support to those under direct attack, **alongside engaging in political or diplomatic engagement** whether publicly or behind closed doors. Case studies from Nicaragua and Malawi demonstrate the need for these combined modes of solidarity, including political and legal engagement, from international actors during times of conflict or political and civic strife.

In many of the case studies, we see civil society actors defending or creating space **using multiple modes, and at times moving between these**, depending on where opportunities for openings arise. For example, in Mexico, the UnidOSC coalition pivots between national-level advocacy for legislative reform, local state-level advocacy for new legislation to be introduced, and regional capacity-building and awareness-raising work on the effects of financial and counter-terrorism policies, with technical assistance from international networks.

Similarly, Access Now's #KeepItOn coalition combined strategies are put to use at the multilateral level and national and local levels, leveraging different spaces to improve the enabling environment for civil society more broadly.

What are the main learnings?

Civil society responses to closing civic space have been gaining momentum and sophistication for a few years now. The learning that is brought to bear in the Solidarity Playbook to date shows that the armament to manage closing civic space is getting stronger, with a mix of partnerships and tactics building.

LESSONS LEARNED

Coalitions have huge value-added

Coalition work has become a popular – and perhaps the most effective – approach to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society. In highly restrictive regimes that we looked at, such as the cases in Nicaragua or Ethiopia, they offered protection, cover and shared risk to participants. They also provide economies of scale through sharing resources: such as technical expertise, joint strategies, or they can help to coordinate responses, providing a unified voice across multiple groups. In some settings, where closing space is more subtle or technical in its manifestation, umbrella bodies or networks can play a vital role in this regard, by collating the experiences and unifying the positions of the many different types of groups affected by the phenomenon. It's important to note that coalitions don't have to involve formal, registered institutions, and in some cases, it is preferable if they are less formal. This can help to bridge the work between formal organisations and social movements.

Building shared vision and trust is essential

As our definition of 'solidarity' establishes, shared trust and shared vision were often cited as an important factor in successful efforts to respond to closing civic space. This often involved investing time at the outset, especially to determine shared values in a human rights context. But it was also, in some cases, about building trust with government. Those who adopted adaptive strategies, for example, were aiming to build trust with government in order to keep some degree of civic space active. And this latter aspect is a difficult line to tread: on the one hand, organisations need to ensure that they are working in solidarity with partners; on the other one, an enabling environment for civil society may require a degree of trust and engagement with government actors, who some may see as a threat. Taking the time to build trust, and knowing what the 'red lines' to be drawn are, is important, and should be negotiated with local actors.

Need to be proactive

Many ICSOs and coalitions have addressed closing civic space in reaction to an immediate threat. However, responses require long-term, proactive thinking too, while also being agile enough to respond to political opportunities. As a strong example of this, the Poland "It Works" campaign and coalition did just that. The coalition's long-term aim was to change the narrative of civil society in the eyes of the public, after years of seeing mistrust built up by politicians and the media. But it was agile enough and able to take advantage of a teacher's strike to make the links between education and civil society clear to the public, and therefore to underscore the omnipresence, impact and value of civil society over the long-term.

Civic space programming can be a catalyst for wider organisational change

Whilst a strategy for solidarity may be adopted in one or two national contexts, they may provide feedback mechanisms to engender wider organisational shifts. For example, Plan International situated their specific work in Latin America to support youth-led organisations operating in the region, within a wider organisational strategy to localise and to shift power. We found that where international organisations had flexible pots of innovation funding, these were used by internal champions to show solidarity in contexts of closing civic space which could then shift organisational practice more broadly.

What are the key challenges?

Working on civic space issues – either as individual organisations or in coalitions – is no easy task, not least because it encompasses so many multi-faceted dimensions. The challenges that emanated from the case studies reflect this multi-faceted nature.

Capacity

The lack of capacity – time, human and financial – came up consistently in all of our case studies, especially in coalitions. In many instances, civic space was seen by some as a diversion away from core programming work. This meant that, in the case of coalitions, some organisations couldn't always see the need to prioritise engagement, where there were competing priorities by partners. This is a serious concern because collective decision-making, especially in the early days of a coalition, takes time and focus. It also meant that resources required for successful work in this area were scarce and hard to sustain, especially over longer periods of time. Underestimating capacity needs could dilute attempts at building and sustaining solidarity.

Risk management

Who shares the risk when it comes to civic space? There can be a clash between donor expectations and those on the ground, where the former demands high levels of reporting and accountability procedures. But when groups on the ground are being attacked, a degree of flexibility is required. Solidarity requires an approach to agree who shares the risk and how that will be managed, and it prompts a discussion about which mode of solidarity (the 'how') will be adopted. For example Helvetas, who sought to secure safe access by partner organisations to UN processes in a very closed context, had to ensure that the safety of activists engaging in the UN processes could be managed, as in this instance it involved a high degree of risk to activists.

Technical expertise

While closing civic space can be seen as an existential threat, its response can require very technical know-how on sometimes minute areas of policy. Our cases looked at how civil society groups addressed this, bringing in technical expertise in international anti-terrorism policy, complex accounting procedures, or the mechanisms behind internet shutdowns. But not all CSOs have this capacity, and therefore the added value of civil society infrastructure and umbrella organisations is vital, and resourcing this is a challenge that demands a coordinated response.

What are the recommendations?

FOR ICSOs

✔ **Dedicate resources**
A number of organisations in our case studies underwent substantial reviews and strategy development in reaction to direct attacks, which all need to be sufficiently resourced, both in terms of staff time and financially. It's also important to note that this requires that the right people are involved – from financial and legal staff, to policy and programme people.

Many organisations will also have small 'innovation funds' available. Internal champions can seek to access these types of funds to do a number of things around civic space solidarity, for example gather the right allies for any working group or initiative on the subject; invest in intra-organisational sharing of lessons from different contexts; or create new tools to help partners adapt or assess risk.

✔ **Use 'civic space' as a strategic opportunity**
Civic space can be a huge catalyst to change organisational practice. The issue can link, for example, to stronger practices around 'localisation', or help build stronger alignment between different parts of an organisation as well as between humanitarian/development and human rights approaches. It can also help frame discussions around broader issues about the role of the ICSO more broadly.

✔ **Solidarity should be 'negotiated'**
Solidarity doesn't just mean public campaigning or statements. There is a spectrum of mechanisms and modes available to organisations, from careful or risk-averse to bold and outward facing. Selecting the right or most effective combination of modes and tactics requires trusting partnerships built over the long-term, understanding of the political context, shared risk analysis – between partners, allies and internally – and then the joint development of a multi-pronged approach, as outlined here. The dilemma between maintaining ICSO access to a country vs. addressing civic space concerns head on is not a black and white decision that can be made easily within the organisation alone, even at the Board level.

FOR COALITIONS

✔ **Agree shared values and red lines**
Given the cross-cutting nature of civil society space, and the threats facing groups and activists across the thematic spectrum, coalitions will often be broad and diverse. Whilst this is critical to achieve impact, it is equally important to articulate the shared values as a solid base on which to build collective action. A rights-based approach was often taken in establishing shared values and helping to negotiate the messages, risk appetites and priorities of the coalition, as well as membership.

✔ **Establish common ownership**
Coalitions will often need a secretariat, but long-term sustainability requires a shared ownership amongst the widest group of members as possible in order to drive collective action and secure active engagement. Newly established coalitions should invest in facilitation time to agree the terms of common ownership, including roles and responsibilities. These should be articulated in writing, such as through a memorandum of understanding (MoU).

✔ **Adjust expectations**
Even with long-term flexible funding, donors generally look for clear 'outcomes' to be defined and reported on in grant-making. In the case of civic space, sometimes just keeping civil society present, functioning and secure is a legitimate goal of programming in this area. Real outcomes will be seen long-term and through sustained investment over time.

✔ **Share risk**
Work on civic space can require a significant amount of risk and donors should be sharing this with ICSOs and their partners. Being clear on who is bearing the risk and how that will be managed should be articulated.

✔ **Invest in platforms and infrastructure**
Coalitions and networks often find it hard to secure adequate funding to provide shared services or facilitate collaboration. But they can provide significant added value in civic space responses in terms of joining voices, sharing risk, and by creating economies of scale in terms of technical or legal expertise.

✔ **Play a bridging role**
Donors often have a strong oversight of different initiatives between civil society groups, and across national boundaries. This 'helicopter view' should help to seek out and amplify connecting opportunities between different, but aligned initiatives working on civic space matters. Donors can connect these and help create spaces for adequate learning and information sharing.

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