

Civil Society at a Crossroads

The context within which civil society operates has changed radically in recent years. Traditional non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are facing funding cuts and hard questions about their legitimacy. Meanwhile, new ways of organising are emerging that blur the lines between social movements, community groups, and campaigns.

INTRAC and five other organisations from across the world worked together between 2011 and 2013 to examine this changing context and what it means for civil society. We used 23 case studies from 16 countries to pin down the implications for individual civil society activists, practitioners and supporters worldwide.



Protests in Ukraine — Maksymenko Oleksandr | maksymenko.com.ua

Most significant findings

▶ **Disillusionment and dissatisfaction with public authorities have driven the emergence of widespread social protests, citizen-driven initiatives and other new civil society actors.**

Rising expectations and the poor performance of public authorities have created a gap that these new groups seek to close through holding governments to account and challenging long-standing political issues and social injustices.

▶ **New actors are organised differently to established civil society organisations, which have become more formal and professionalised as well as larger and more complex.**

New actors have adopted more horizontal and spontaneous forms of organising to prioritise expression, inclusion, participation, innovation.

▶ **The legitimacy of many established civil society organisations is under threat.**

Increasing co-optation and dependence on government donors, as well as the adoption of more hierarchical and exclusionary modes of organising, have created a gap between many organisations and their constituencies. New civil society actors are in some cases stepping into the breach.

▶ **Shifting resource flows to civil society are reshaping civil society roles and relations.**

Declining funds for civil society from official donors and northern NGOs are forcing organisations to mobilise resources from different sources. However, looking for new funding to replace old may not be enough to guarantee sustainability and legitimacy. Organisations may also need to re-evaluate their organisational focus, form and functions to survive and thrive.

▶ **Political space for civil society is both expanding and contracting.**

In some contexts, political space for civil society is expanding, while elsewhere, groups find it increasingly difficult to work on more sensitive, political issues. Blurred links between political activism and social justice work can also create tensions with states that curtail political space through legal and practical restrictions, and sometimes extra-legal measures. Yet even in these contexts some space may exist at the sub-national level.

All quotes from Development in Practice, Vol. 23, Issues 5-6, Aug. 2013

“Recent years have seen citizen uprisings in Latin America and the consolidation of new forms of civic participation... Unlike many protests, these movements focused on large scale reforms and policy changes backed by broad coalitions rather than opposition to concerns that affected narrow constituencies.”

– *Anabel Cruz on new social movements in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, p681*

“We seek to be the change we wish to see in society.”

– *Occupy London activist quoted by Neil Howard and Keira Pratt-Boyden, p732*

“The Dutch civil society sector has lost its links with civil society... Dutch non profit and civil society organisations came to regard the state as their primary source of financial support, and as a consequence, also as their source of legitimacy instead of their constituencies.”

– *Rik Habraken, Lucas Meijs, Lau Schulp and Cristien Temmink, p743-44*

“Flexible funding that allows a certain degree of autonomy from the government and political system has particularly dried up for intermediate NGOs or voluntary development organisations who mobilise communities to claim their rights, and whose efforts question the absence of democratic accountability of the state and its institutions.”

– *Debika Goswami and Rajesh Tandon on funding for Indian civil society groups, p662*

“Large scale mobilisation of citizens in the current political context is seen as a threat to the political establishment... [it] is often seen as political activism that transcends the perceived roles of civil society.”

– *Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay and Thida C. Khus on political space for civil society in Cambodia, p672*

“In Latin America we are witnessing the creation of new innovative and expanded spaces for civil society, with important amplification and expansion of rights and claims of rights by social collectives and social movements.”

– *Anabel Cruz on new social movements in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, p680*

Why the findings matter



For civil society programmes

- ▶ New forms of citizen mobilisation that seek to address longstanding political and social injustices pose a challenge to conventional civil society programmes focused on service provision.
- ▶ Programmes must recognise and explore the best ways to support the diverse forms, roles and responsibilities of civil society, from local citizen-driven initiatives focused on community mobilisation, to national and international NGOs delivering essential services.
- ▶ Programmes must pay renewed attention to citizen awareness, organisation and activism by finding new and innovative ways to support citizen advocacy, mobilisation and organisation.

For civil society policies

- ▶ Changing global economic and political relations, and shifts in resource flows to civil society, continue to create new problems and opportunities for civil society. To help civil society thrive in this ever-changing context, civil society policies should take a long-term perspective focused on diversity, legitimacy and sustainability.
- ▶ Investing in resources that are long-term, flexible, and responsive will support civil society groups to strengthen their capacity to flourish in this new environment and improve their organisational sustainability.
- ▶ Civil society organisations should increase their independence and sustainability through expanding and diversifying their resource base by exploring new, independent forms of funding. This may also involve re-evaluating their organisational focus, form and functions to further improve sustainability and legitimacy.

For civil society in restrictive contexts

- ▶ In many contexts, regulatory and political space for civil society is limited and restrictive. Civil society groups are finding it increasingly hard to fulfil their organisational mission, particularly if it involves work on more sensitive, political issues.
- ▶ Civil society groups and their supporters should encourage the development and implementation of clear and supportive legal frameworks for civil society and seek to hold governments accountable on legislation.
- ▶ Where space for working on issues such as citizenship and human rights is limited at the national level, organisations should explore windows and niches for working on these subjects locally.

Resources

- ▶ [Development in Practice special issue: Civil societies at crossroads](#). Vol. 23, Issues 5-6, August 2013
- ▶ [Conference report: Civil Society at a New Frontier](#), December 2011
- ▶ [Global synthesis report: Civil Society @ Crossroads](#), December 2012
- ▶ [Short film: Civil Society at a Crossroads](#)

Briefing papers and case studies

- ▶ [The history of UK civil society](#)
- ▶ [Russian civil society: history, today, and future prospects](#)
- ▶ [Responding to crisis: Understanding the effects of political and economic crisis on civil society in the Republic of Ireland](#)
- ▶ [Struggles against systems that impoverish: South African civil society at the crossroads](#)
- ▶ [Multi-layered relations in civil society of South Africa](#)
- ▶ [Zimbabwe: Development challenges and CSO responses](#)
- ▶ [Civil society at crossroads in Malawi](#)
- ▶ [Traders and citizens against financial crises in Uganda](#)
- ▶ [Tanzania village leadership: New formations in civil society](#)
- ▶ [Changing civil society in Cambodia: In search of relevance](#)
- ▶ [Citizens' action against forced land acquisition in Cambodia](#)
- ▶ [Civil society in changing India: Emerging roles, relationships and strategies](#)
- ▶ [The anti-corruption movement in India](#)
- ▶ [KRL mania: The internet-based consumer movement of the electric railway train users in Indonesia](#)
- ▶ [Treading new ground: A changing moment for citizen action in Greece](#)
- ▶ [Dutch civil society @ crossroads](#)
- ▶ [Professionalise or explode? The Makassar neighbourhood community in Amsterdam](#)
- ▶ [Occupy London: Pre-figurative political action and civil society](#)
- ▶ [Grassroots civil society at crossroads in UK](#)
- ▶ [Beyond emergency housing: Youth participation in civil society in Latin America](#)
- ▶ [The Chilean student movement: An expanding space for civil society](#)
- ▶ [From subjects of shame to agents of change: The LGBT movement in Argentina](#)
- ▶ [The women's movement in Uruguay: A decade-long struggle for legal abortion](#)

Other related resources

- ▶ [ONTRAC 56: Funding civil society in emerging economies](#)
- ▶ [ONTRAC 50: Civil society at a new frontier](#)
- ▶ [Blog post: Civil societies at crossroads](#)

