christian aid

January 2025

State of Play: Autocratic States Research

A study of how civil society is responding to repressive regimes

Contents

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Acknowledgement

Special thanks to all the civil society organisations and activists who participated in interviews in Burundi, Zimbabwe and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory for their openness and their bravery. Thanks also to Christian Aid colleagues for their assistance throughout the process. Finally, we recognise and appreciate the role of Irish Aid for supporting the programmes and the research that led to development of this paper. Irish Aid is the Government's overseas development programme, as funded by the Irish taxpayer.

The contents of this document are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Irish Aid.

1.0 Introduction

The State of Play research, commissioned by Christian Aid Ireland in 2023, explores insights, lessons, and best practices for partner organisations navigating advocacy in closed and repressive environments. This report highlights strategies for achieving change while ensuring protection and mental health support, with case studies from Burundi, Zimbabwe, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT).

Any recommendations or suggested support must be tailored to the local context and implemented in consultation with local partners. A thorough risk assessment and power analysis should be conducted beforehand.

1.1 Background and purpose of the study

Christian Aid Ireland believes that without open and inclusive civil society space and meaningful and inclusive participation in decision making, violence and injustice will persist. Across the contexts we work in, we are seeing how organisations are being silenced through bureaucratic and legislative mechanisms. Many are facing increased marginalisation due to the dominance of non-state actors or the impact of digital inequality. Repressing community organising is also taking a toll on mental health and social cohesion. Additionally, organisations and individuals speaking out against human rights violations are confronting self-censorship, smear campaigns, and even violent threats.

This research was envisaged as a first step to help Christian Aid Ireland expand and improve its support to partners through three main pillars: solidarity, influencing and capability so that civil society actors have increased agency, are stronger, can do more and relate better with rights holders and power holders. Christian Aid also acknowledges the toll that working in autocratic and repressive contexts can take on the mental health and wellbeing of partner staff. This includes experiencing potentially traumatic events, navigating legislative and bureaucratic obstacles, and managing the tension between internal processes and partner expectations. Similarly, Christian Aid staff supporting partners in such challenging contexts may experience direct or indirect impacts on their mental health.

This research, therefore, seeks to explore and recommend ways to improve external support systems and practices to better serve partner organisations. It builds on the findings from Christian Aid's research report, How Covid-19 shrank civic spaces, and delves deeper into learnings and recommendations that emerged from specific country case studies that are aligned with the geographical focus of this research project.

For this research, the concept of civil society space was primarily guided by, but not limited to the CIVICUS definition: 'When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organizations are able to organize, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions.'

1.2 Research objectives

- Produce a brief overview of the situation of civil society space and the risks that this shrinking space is having on partner organisations.
- Draw out key strategies used by partners within autocratic contexts.
- Understand how partners and Christian Aid can affect change and improve tailored support advocacy, capability and solidarity.
- Provide learning that can support Christian Aid's policy and advocacy work on protecting and promoting civic space.
- Feed into organizational thinking and practice on protecting and supporting civil society space through evidence based research.

1.3 Research questions

How can approaches to solidarity, advocacy, and capability be strengthened for local civil society organisations (CSOs) working in autocratic contexts?

Sub Questions:

i. What are the strategies that local organisations are using to influence change/ advocate in autocratic and repressive states?

ii. How are they responding to risks (physical, mental etc.) - how is risk understood and interpreted?

iii. What are the strategies and gaps in CA's approach to supporting partners and local organisations to influence change in autocratic states?

2.0 Study methodology

2.1 Study area

Christian Aid Ireland has a dedicated programme funded by the Irish Aid scheme, Ireland's Civil Society Partnership for a Better World (ICSP). This programme aims to strengthen the engagement between rights holders and duty bearers in seven countries: Burundi, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Colombia, Guatemala, and El Salvador. It collaborates with 33 local civil society partners that focus on governance, peacebuilding and conflict prevention, human rights, and gender equality.

All these countries are experiencing shrinking civil society space, human rights violations, and impunity. Three of these countries were selected for empirical research based on the feasibility of conducting the research, the need to address gaps in existing studies, and consultations with Christian Aid's regional managers about suitable research locations. The three countries chosen for this research are Burundi, Zimbabwe, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

2.2 Study design

Research must be sensitive to the unique challenges of each context, especially where conducting such research carries significant risks. Fragility and closing civic space present significant challenges, making research on social and political issues particularly complex and demanding.

Given the diverse realities across contexts, our sensitivity to risk, and with a commitment to decentralising research at Christian Aid, this project was a collaborative effort between country-based researchers and the global research team. To ensure the research remained appropriate for each setting, the methodology for each study was adapted based on what the country researcher deemed most suitable. This approach also allowed for ethics plans to be tailored to each context.[1] Each study was then synthesised into this broader report. However, it is important to note that each study also stands as an independent piece.

The following section outlines the specific research approaches used in each country.

2.2.1 Zimbabwe

The research process in Zimbabwe used a phenomenological interpretivism approach. This focused primarily on garnering insight into the CSOs' lived experiences as they recollected them. Using this approach, the researcher looked to clarify the meaning attributed to participants' everyday experiences of the closed civic spaces. Data collection involved active listening, interaction and observation to capture the pure representation of reality, as well as to avoid bias and preconceived representation.

Unstructured interviews were used to collect data, thus gathering rich descriptions from participants. These conversations were dialogic, conversational and open in nature. This form of interview allowed the researchers to gather information about how the participants made meaning of their lived experiences. Interviews were conducted with civil society actors operating at various levels, including community-based organisations, resource governance organisations, anti-corruption organisations, and those devoted to broader human rights work and human rights defence.

Ten respondents were recruited to participate in the study until data saturation was achieved. The sample was purposeful, and the snowball sampling technique was used (Drisko, 2005). The researcher used his expertise to find and pick information-dense cases pertaining to the phenomenon.

After the interviews, the audio recordings were converted into digital information.

It should be noted that, due to risk factors, an additional two participants were unavailable for interview. These two interviews were conducted virtually by the UK-based research coordinator.

Methodology overview:

12 respondents engaged using a phenomenological interpretivism approach.

2.2.2 Burundi

In Burundi, an empirical study was conducted using a qualitative research approach.

Table 1: Respondent list.

Provinces	Number of CSOs	Observations
Bujumbura	7	CSO
Gitega	1	CSO
Ngozi	1	CSO
Makamba	2	CSO
Muyinga	2	CSO
University setting	2	Scientific perspective
International NGOs	2	International perspective
Total number of respondents	**17**	

This qualitative research used semi-structured interviews as a method of data gathering. The data gathering was done using face-to-face interviews. An attempt was made to carry out telephone or online interviews as part of the prior plan, but was subsequently avoided because of the limited internet connectivity, telephone interferences and the delicate nature of the issue being dealt with, as well as the Burundian cultural context.

The sample was as representative as possible and includes feminist organisations, youth organisations, journalist organisations, human rights and governance organisations, and local and international social development organisations. The table above illustrates the respondent list.

2.2.3 Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory

In the country programme in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT), the research used a combined approach to gather the relevant information.

In-depth profiles of two organisations that worked specifically on women's rights or women's issues were done. One of these was located in the West Bank and the other in Gaza. As such, the researcher conducted key person interviews with the Executive Directors of each organisation, and held two half-day workshops where staff were able to come together to reflect on key issues affecting their work in times of significant civil society repression. Two additional key person interviews were conducted with leading civil society activists in the West Bank and Gaza. The workshops were styled as 'learning and capacity building' meetings. These group discussions were reflexive and participatory and allowed for the participants to not only share information with the researcher but to also consider together best steps for negotiating an authoritarian context.

This research was conducted in late 2022/early 2023.

Methodology overview:

A mix of respondents engaged using a combination of key person interviews and reflexive workshops

3.0 Literature review

3.1 Global contexts

In the past decade, an increasing number of governments have brought in new laws and practices that constrain civic space.[2] These regulations have taken a wide variety of forms, from an increase in surveillance culture to outright banning of protests and public assembly, and, in some cases, as with environmental defenders, physical violence. As Frontline Defenders notes, most of these restrictions begin subtly using co-optation practices and then may finally escalate to the criminalisation of social protest.[3]

At the level of formal laws and procedures, both administrative and criminal law have been used to regulate or suppress, depending on one's perspective, the work of civil society organisations (CSOs).[4]

This can include invasive reporting requirements and restrictions in the spheres of permissible activity, such as bans on human rights work (Equatorial Guinea) and construction projects (Afghanistan), or accusations that CSOs are engaging in extremist, terrorist or political activity and thereby criminalising CSOs through anti-terror legislation (Egypt and Russia)[5]. In the most repressive regimes, basic rights such as freedom of association are not even recognised in the constitution.

Civil society does not however exist in isolation, being an integral part of democratic systems and societies.[6] Therefore, current efforts by governments around the world to 'shrink' the space for civil society – or to keep that space at a very minimal level – need to be understood as part of a wider trend towards electoral authoritarianism, illiberal democracy or political backsliding – a trend that is affecting all stakeholders in democratic societies, not only civil society. Some of this, as scholars note, has also been due to a growing global trend where authoritarian leaders are no longer isolated holdouts in a democratising world. Instead they are actively collaborating with one another to spread new forms of repression and rebuff democratic pressure.[7]

Sogge found transnational efforts to restrict civic spaces that included securitisation, constraints on organised labour, marketisation, transnational non-state actors, citizen disengagement driven by state retrenchment, and social media.[8] In particular, CIVICUS and Transparency International have noted systematic attempts to undermine social movements that protest against corporate power by attacking their legitimacy, accountability and funding, and even infiltrating them with corporate spies.

Democratic pressures and restrictions also increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, when many governments used pandemic-related regulations to curtail freedom of expression where they had faced significant contentious political challenges before the pandemic. Bethke and Wolff, for example, found that in Algeria, Bolivia and India, pre-pandemic mass protests fostered the im-position of restrictions on the freedom of expression during the pandemic.[9] Similarly, a study by Christian Aid noted that many of the 'curbs' introduced during the pandemic were long-term regulations that were not only heightened during the pandemic but were then not removed in the aftermath.[10] That same study, as well as others, also noted the different ways in which civil society groups were responding to authoritarianism, finding new ways to mobilise and organise, as well as to navigate their relationship with the state.

Civil society has found new and alternative ways of organising, such as online spaces and mobile technology that can circumvent physical restrictions. But these have not been universally successful or available. There has been further exclusion for groups who rely on in-person organising to carry out their activities effectively. In some Christian cases, particularly in urban, well-connected areas, online platforms have brought new opportunities
and audiences.

3.2 Burundi

Burundi has experienced several cycles of ethnic conflict and genocidal violence since its independence from Belgium in 1962.[11] The assassination of the country's first democratically elected Hutu leader in 1993 sparked a civil war that gripped the country for over a decade. The most visible element of civil society in Burundi in the years following the civil war was a small tier of professional and externally-funded NGOs working on human rights and democracy, that were based in the capital and had relatively few links to the grassroots. Support to civil society has been an important feature of international peacebuilding in Burundi. Part of this support has focused on building the capacity of the sector to assist with the implementation of the peace agreement, and strengthening its ability to hold the government to account.[12]

Burundi is also home to what is considered to be one of the oldest civil society structures in Africa, the *bashingantahe*, an organisation whose roots stretch back to the pre-colonial era and was rehabilitated by international peacebuilders during the civil war. It also hosts a plethora of other organisations that are both externally-supported and locally-based, such as peace committees.[13]

The period after 2015 is characterised by the reign of 'closed' or at least restricted civic space.

In Burundi, the period from 2005–2015 is noted as the heyday of the 'free' civil society in which actors could express themselves freely without fear of retribution. The period after 2015 is rather characterised by the reign of 'closed' or at least restricted civic space. After 2015, civil society was actively targeted, many people were killed, many others jailed or threatened, and many more were forced into exile, or to adopt and adapt to government regulations. The new government-designed way consisted of regulation of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and associations.

The watermark event of 2015 is noted as being the general election, when the incumbent President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to run for re-election despite a constitutional term limit. Nkurunziza's decision contributed to a dangerous rift in opinions within the country, leading to widespread pro- and anti-government protests, with youth and women at the forefront. The events of 2015 brought about uncertainty around the future political trajectory of the country that is still evident today and continues to cripple the dividends of previous efforts to achieve peaceful coexistence. Signs of escalating tension—including hate speech, growing hostility between different identity groups, mistrust, social discord, and fear (perceived or real) of large-scale massacres—have taken hold over aspirations for a better future.

3.3 Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's political regime is characterised by public mobilisation, and the country exhibits some election contestation; yet, political rights and civil liberties are severely constrained. Crackdowns on civil society's ability to organise, claim rights and influence public policy have also increased in the past decade. For example, on 21 June 2021, the Provincial Development Coordinator for Masvingo Province informed all CSOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) whose programming focused on youth issues that they must be cleared and granted a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Ministry of Youth, Sports, Arts, and Culture with immediate effect.

On 30 June 2021, the Provincial Development Coordinator for Harare Metropolitan Province issued a letter informing all NGOs that it was mandatory for them to register with the Provincial Development Coordinator and submit their workplans and projects commissioned by 9 July 2021 (CASA, 2021).

Zimbabwe - The political leadership viewed the pandemic as a threat to their authority and instituted harsh measures.

On 5 November 2021, the Zimbabwe government gazetted a Private Voluntary Organisation (PVO) Amendment Bill, ostensibly to counter terrorism and prohibit political lobbying from NGOs. Following public consultations and submissions from various stakeholders, an amended bill was presented in June 2022 which significantly altered the initial bill, disregarded civil society's concerns, and imposed stricter and more repressive clauses. This bill prohibits PVOs from political involvement and gives the newly established Office of the Registrar of PVOs the power to penalise noncompliant organisations. The Financial Anti-Terrorist Financing (FATF) guidelines and their emphasis on anti-money laundering and counter-financing of terrorism was central to the review of the PVO Bill. All of these developments were a manifestation of the rapid constriction of civic space in Zimbabwe.[14]

This was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic when the state responded by implementing command-and-control techniques. In 2023, a Human Rights Watch report noted that the human rights climate in Zimbabwe deteriorated in 2022 without the government taking any meaningful steps to uphold rights and ensure justice for serious past abuses primarily committed by state security forces. It also found that there has been little progress on investigations into abductions, torture, arbitrary arrests and other abuses against opposition politicians and activists.

3.4 Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory

Civil society actors operating in the Israeli-Palestinian context face an expanding array of repressive measures that compromise their capacity to document, engage in advocacy or express criticism about mistreatment of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT). For international and Israeli civil society, this shrinking of civic space has been propelled by aggressive delegitimisation campaigns conducted by Israeli authorities and non-governmental supporters of Israel's actions, as well as bureaucratic hurdles and legislative constraints that Israel has imposed.[15] Palestinian civil society has endured these as well as other more severe forms of repression by Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the de facto authorities in Gaza, including violent suppression of dissent. It is impossible to understand the situation faced by civil society actors in this region without acknowledging the context and tactics of occupation. As an example, in August 2021, Israeli armed forces raided seven prominent Palestinian CSOs, six of which were arbitrarily outlawed and branded as 'terrorist groups' in October 2021.[16]

Research in IOPT was conducted prior to October 2023. This context analysis is therefore written prior to the current genocide in Gaza.

Scholars who have studied the impact to feminist rights activism in Israel and Palestine have also noted how women activists experienced various forms of oppression, taking the form of physical violence and sexual harassment. Often, feminists are challenged with regards to their intentions, to diminish their political credibility, tarnish their reputation and question their moral integrity.[17] Further to this, as Skelton and Sheombar have found in their extensive study, the ongoing occupation of Palestine provides 'an open-air laboratory for Israel to test techniques of espionage and surveillance before selling them to repressive regimes around the world'.[18] An example is the Pegasus case, in which six devices belonging to six Palestinian human rights defenders were hacked with Pegasus, a spyware developed by the cyber-surveillance company NSO Group.

During the pandemic, declarations of emergency led to the expansion of the restrictions on movement, the banning of public gatherings and the imposition of curfews.[19] Christian Aid's own study found that freedom of assembly and association was curtailed. Our partners' work supporting human rights defenders was limited as movement of people was restricted, for example, the Palestinian human rights monitoring and accompaniment organisation, EAPPI, had to be suspended. Under the cover of the need to track Covid-19 patients and movement during the lockdown, the Israeli government increased its mass surveillance of Palestinians. Legal challenges have been used to review this restrictive legislation and behaviours, for example, the Adalah human rights organisation in Palestine won a court case stating that the Israeli Shin Bet intelligence services could not track citizens without legislative authority, even during the pandemic.

4.0 Research findings

4.1 Repression and Response

In the section that follows, we discuss some of the key strategies through which states practice repression, and how research participants say they have responded. At the level of formal laws and procedures, both administrative and criminal law have been used to regulate or suppress the work of CSOs.

4.1.1 Strategies of repression

In Burundi, respondents argued that the different strategies being used by the government were focused on an intentional 'eradication' of local organisations. In part, this is because many of these organisations were set up in the 2005–2015 era and were therefore immediately assumed to be in opposition to the government. This quote below from a respondent outlines this very clearly: '*Īn reality, no (civil society) organization stops working by itself; it is the authorities that stopped their functioning. The government stops some not others‹ Those who were stopped are those [who] were very virulent and very active in the ⁵ght against the 3rd term. Particularly it was these organizations of which the leaders could stay in the country, and thus were obliged in exile."* (Respondent 12).

Respondents in Burundi also noted that another tactic being used by the government was the creation of governmental civil society organisations, who are sponsored by the government and are therefore closely allied to the state. Some respondents talked about what they called the *Nyakurization* of civil society. *Nyakurization* is a term that blends French and Kirundi phrases to indicate the process through which the state stifles internal dissent by rewarding those who are willing to cooperate with the state, while taking any form of official recognition away from those who wish to remain independent. As this tactic causes severe divides in civil society, respondents feel it obstructs the ability to build a 'true civil society'.

'Any nonprofit organization can be inspected at any time, groups would need to comply with rigorous reporting requirements, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare would have utter discretion to request any documents and determine whether they comply with Zimbabwean 'interests.' Authorities would require only the flimsiest excuse to dissolve an organization. And the more sensitive the subject that a group addresses—for example, human rights or freedom of expression—the more likely it is to be targeted for tax audits, or associational violations.'

CSO Leader, Zimbabwe

The tactics used to stifle 'independent' organisations include: demanding reporting requirements, aligning oneself to policies set down by the minister of home affairs, collaboration with various structural state institutions, ensuring approval and authorisation for whatever activity is to be carried out, and absolute transparency of funding sources.

Respondents note that they are constantly having to explain their work, or change the course of their work due to this significant level of state oversight. This same level of oversight is not placed on those organisations that are happy to cooperate with the state.

Similar tactics also appear in Zimbabwe, particularly in terms of the intentional targeting of organisations. Instruments of repression in Zimbabwe include: administrative and regulatory control mechanisms such as memoranda of understanding, protocols and police clearances, as well as labelling and stigmatising organisations receiving foreign funding as foreign agents. In Zimbabwe, the persecution of human rights groups occurred in the context of a general erosion of democratic processes, which included the marginalisation of parliamentary politics and the diminution of previous consultation processes with all rights advocacy organisations. Legislative measures, such as the PVO Bill, threatened, stigmatised and criminalised noncompliant and foreign-funded NGOs, which encompassed the vast majority of major human rights organisations.

The tactics used to stifle 'independent' organisations include:

- demanding reporting requirements,
- aligning oneself to policies set down by the Ministry of Home Affairs,
- collaboration with various structural state institutions,
- ensuring approval and authorisation for whatever activity is to be carried out,
- absolute transparency of funding sources.

In IOPT, we see a similar, but slightly exceptional picture due to communities living under long-term occupation and having to negotiate ongoing **settlement, land confiscation and freedom of movement**. Respondents noted that the Gaza Strip was subjected to four Israeli aggressions during the past 15 years and a tightened blockade on the Strip. Palestinian political division and the pandemic added more challenges and complications, negatively affecting all aspects of social and economic life, including those related to the psychological and mental health of the employees. Related to the restrictions of occupation, respondents noted that measures of occupation, siege, closure and the difficulty of movement disabled local organisations' ability to participate effectively and directly in solidarity campaigns. They also flagged the high costs of travelling abroad, the complications of travelling outside Palestine to participate in important activities, the scarcity of funding for advocacy activities, and the constant impact of responding to emergency humanitarian aid projects.

'There are internal risks: some are exposed to direct and indirect harassment and threats through the means of communication and social media, sometimes amounting to death threats, and others are exposed to smear campaigns, sharp criticism and threats because they are at the forefront of the scene defending rights and feminist issues in a male-dominated society. Unfortunately, many of the organization's team are exposed to these repeated threats and harassment, including the director, lawyers, and activists.'

Leader of a women's rights CSO, Gaza

4.1.2 Strategy of response 1: Alliance Building

Alliance building, both globally and locally, arose as a key response across the board. In Zimbabwe, for example, some formed local and global alliances to counteract the defunding of work that promoted human rights and resource governance. Similarly, in Burundi, one of the key observations made in the interviews was that global alliances linked to local partnerships were vital for those activists in exile to continue to work for human rights transformation and civic activism.

In Zimbabwe, organisations formed consortiums and networks to defend against state attacks and donor fluctuations. One respondent noted that she asks the question 'what is doable?' and this led to investing in community-level actors who can make small but important changes. This also meant not one, singular intervention but a variety of small, locally focused ones. They noted that '*this approach had the chance of decreasing the government"s appetite of dismissing the civil society activities as "Western-driven" and refuse to engage with or, worse, actively oppose locally-led interventions or reform agendas*.' (CSO head, Zimbabwe).

Key case from YWCA, West Bank:

"The most prominent example of repression is the arrest of colleague Rami Obeidat by the occupation forces, as he is a community activist and writer on social media. The organization"s team is still facing diFculties in movement due to arrest and long waiting at checkpoints and other diFculties and risks, such as con5scating cars during 5eld work, con5scating solidarity 5eld campaign materials, storming community training sites, interfering with institutional and community 5nancial support mechanisms, obstructing the interventions and activities of the Community Protection Committees (CPCs), negative impact on plans and obligations of the contractors, exposure to the organization"s team and pressure on it by requesting security interviews by the occupation authority, imposing the necessity of obtaining permits for some interventions, such as paving roads in marginalized areas"

In Gaza and the West Bank, the building of '*interactive linkages" locally and globally is seen as important so as to "mobilize the institutional and societal resources of other international partner organizations, developing strong mechanisms for networking and communication, understanding and analysing power dynamics at the targeted work levels, as well as the targeted groups locally and globally.*' (Activist, Gaza). International solidarity campaigns provide an opportunity and an appropriate and motivating environment for local partners to interact directly with communities and advocacy organisations abroad. This illustrative quote from an interview with the Women's Affairs Centre helps to understand why this is important, '*we also do not forget the position of many international institutions in advocating the rights of the six Palestinian civil society organizations that were closed by the occupation authorities, these global solidarity positions undoubtedly give us a sense of safety and strength, and that there are those who stand with us and support us in diFcult times, and this is a source of strength and the steadfastness of our team also in the community 5eld.*'

CPCs as resistance tools: The CPCs centre the community members, community leaders and other relevant stakeholders as key to discussing the risks the community faces and the ways to manage these risks. Establishing CPCs and providing these committees with the outcome of the community-based risk assessment means they can take the lead in mitigating risks and educating the community on how to do the same. External research noted that similar mechanisms are set up by the UN in Gaza and also the DRC and this may be a model to emulate in other places.

The head of the YWCA also spoke about the importance of sharing materials, media/resilience stories and interactive reports that can be used in strategies and campaigns of influence and advocacy, as well as facilitating interaction with

the challenges of the local community in the most marginalised and exposed areas. Other organisational leads highlighted the importance of Community Protection Committees (CPCs) for empowerment and capacity building locally, thus building up a kind of mass movement response.

A frequent point raised across the board in the interviews in Gaza and the West Bank was also the importance of educating team members about risks and working with international actors on the ground who can advise on risk or provide protection to local team members.

4.1.3 Strategy of response 2: Digital Spaces

According to several research participants, digital social platforms (SM) are becoming an important tool in the 'fight back'. For example, in Zimbabwe, to survive the pressures of the difficult state and the pandemic, a majority of respondents agreed to go digital with their beneficiaries. Respondents agreed that virtual platforms were the only viable option for conducting meetings and trainings, and that it was possible to reach beneficiaries at very local levels through platforms like Signal. Some noted the benefits of digitising programming using 'YouTube dramas, skits, or TikTok's', as the public was already familiar with these formats.

While our external research also notes how the internet is a major tool of repression it is important to pay attention to the fact that respondents did feel that these platforms have revolutionised the space of work, allowing people to communicate with those outside and those inside and to have access to information. Connections are also important for building solidarity and resisting psychological weariness. **Any digital platform carries with it a high risk for suppression and surveillance so use of such platforms must always be subject to a risk assessment.**

'COVID-19 has rapidly transformed a large number of people into internet users, and it is now simple to convince even our own beneficiaries to migrate to digital platforms.'

Activist, Zimbabwe

4.1.4 Strategy of response 3: Negotiating

Several of those interviewed talked about **adopting different stances**, or **changing the course of their work**, and, in general, being as flexible as they could to survive regime repression. These responses were most prevalent in Burundi and Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe, some respondents talked about how they tried not to attract the attention of the government. They advised their staff to avoid confrontation or hide in technology as ways of avoiding the government. In Zimbabwe and Burundi, there were also discussions on attempts to build dialogue with state actors to reduce risk. It should be noted, however, **that not all respondents in Zimbabwe agreed with this tactic of avoiding confrontation**, describing it as a weakness. Two human rights defenders that we spoke to said that they preferred to work and think politically, and thereby accept that one was always at risk of being an enemy of the state. Holding this space, and being a visible form of the opposition, **was as important** as negotiating around repression.

'The first strategy is that of survival. (Silence…) is self-censure: we don't say whatever, avoid touching the sensibilities.'

HRD, Burundi

In Burundi, in particular, many respondents emphasised the fact that they did their best to find ways to avoid confrontation using 'adaptive' strategies, such as 'reworking' programme design so that it does not aggravate the state actor or provoke investigation. The sense of compromise and adaptation is also an attitude of trade-off with the government and administrative authorities. The second category of response is that of respect of the law and (self)-censure. The third category is what respondents termed as being silent, and prioritising self-protection. What is meant by this is that they are careful how they phrase something, or frame an argument, or choose not to engage at all with an issue. As one respondent noted, 'Tactically, we try to work, some in exile, others locally in the country'. There was also hope expressed in these conversations. A few noted that they still see a way in which space is opening up as 'fear is decreasing with the current context, because everybody recognizes the truth and the necessity of the civil society especially the need to work together.' (CSO head, Burundi).

4.2 The impact to mental health and the challenges of funding

Funding, particularly structures to funding, was another key discussion point in all country contexts. **Funding that is either limited, 'in retreat' or becoming increasingly conditional is an issue across the board.** This is not only related to government surveillance, the misuse of counter terrorism legislation to target and undermine civil society and curtailment of funding, but also to changing donor patterns. Most organisations completely depend on foreign funding and are subject to donor practice and requirements in a neo-liberal development context, while also navigating the restrictive measures imposed by the state. It should be noted that most of these discussions on funding come from the IOPT and Zimbabwe case studies, whereas in Burundi, the discussion on funding came out of the conversation on how to negotiate with the state. A few respondents noted that they were reliant on external funding as there is no culture of civil society funding internally in the country. However, as the government can easily restrict these donor relationships, the Burundi CSOs' main concern was a strategy of adaptation and self-censure used to attract and keep funding.

In IOPT, for example, respondents highlighted the significant problems caused by conditional funding and occupation-related repression towards Palestinian CSOs. In interviews, respondents directly requested that organisations like Christian Aid advocate to international donors and NGOs on their behalf for more unconditional funding. One individual explained that the implementation of their programme (activities) is linked to the availability of funding opportunities for short- and medium-term humanitarian projects, and therefore they are in urgent need of flexible and/or unconditional funding for their work. They noted that the existence of annual funding for protection is very important if they are to effectively respond to cases of protection, psychological and social support and well-being. Regular funding needs to have a good margin of flexibility, responsiveness and scope to fill protection gaps when/if needed.

'At the institutional level, the restrictions put pressure on individuals who led the entities as they faced the reality of grant cuts or funding withdrawal entirely, made them suffer. … No one had planned for this possibility in their project designs, and we were caught off guard. The budget cuts would mean a reduction in operations, as well as a reduction in civic space foothold.'

CSO leader, Zimbabwe

The head of the YWCA encouraged field visits by donor partner organisations to learn about the challenges and to listen directly to people about their suffering and challenges. She felt that this would facilitate the building of solidarity and advocacy plans that could include written and illustrated stories and reports that could be used in the international media and influence policies. The emphasis here is that, especially for Palestinian organisations, it is international solidarity and pressure that is fundamental to effectively resisting the repressions caused by occupation. This, she felt, would not only help to build alliances, but would also provide the case for the transformation of current funding patterns. She particularly noted the importance of funding to support community-led initiatives to enhance the resilience of Palestinian vulnerable communities in crisis/at risk.

'What relieves us of the burdens of facing these great challenges is the availability of a state of internal social solidarity among the organization's team, and this internal solidarity also helps to reduce the degree of psychological, mental and social exposure.'

YWCA head, West Bank

In Zimbabwe, too, respondents agreed that the restriction of funding (where donors or autocratic states are placing restrictions on how their funds are accessed or used) had a direct correlation to the closing down of civic spaces. All respondents reported indirect and gradual restrictions on funding making it more difficult, especially for those working on good governance, to advocate for their cause. They also noted difficulties in securing additional funding. Restricted funding led organisations to form civil society consortiums, coalitions and networks for fund-raising. Some also diversified their programme of work to be able to apply to available grants and funds. This is a strategy of adapting their work according to the interests of high-level donors. While this does bring in funds, it also means that some necessary work has to be done in a limited capacity, or folded into another programme, or abandoned altogether.

Two respondents separately suggested that being a Zimbabwean NGO and a small organisation undermined all efforts to obtain funds or even have a funding proposal read by the donor. One participant felt that Zimbabwe is no longer 'desirable' to donor assistance, hence Zimbabwean NGOs are not considered for funding on a worldwide scale, despite their eligibility. In addition, a number of respondents decried what they termed as cronyism in funding, that affected the ability of all organisations to receive high-level funding. They feel that some organisations are seen as more 'donor worthy' than others. Thus they are compelled to rely on limited and unpredictable grant lines that were narrow and few in number, and/or build consortia of the type described above. Respondents also noted that the majority of the grants did not cover core expenses, causing organisations to lay off qualified employees or lose them to other sectors. As with IOPT, Zimbabwean organisations advocate for funding that can be more flexible or more broadly provided, rather than being provided only for certain key issues or topics. Many agreed that strengthening international alliances was key to attracting more high-level funding.

'For those of us who continued to work online, we were vulnerable to cyberattacks as well,' one respondent recalled. We received anonymous calls in order to undermine our legitimacy. We experienced the times our ZOOM meetings were interrupted by insane material such as pornography. Imagine what it does to the host?'

CSO respondent, Zimbabwe

4.2.1 Mental health

Across the board, there is significant discussion on psychological weariness and the effect on mental health, especially where an individual's family has been targeted or where harassment or restrictions have been experienced over a long period of time.

In IOPT, respondents discussed the importance of helping to **develop institutional and individual capacities** especially for women staff. They note that the effect on mental health is part and parcel of living long term under a state of occupation. They requested the inclusion of a programme of psychological and social rest and relaxation outside the Gaza Strip in one of the neighbouring Arab countries. Over the past years, the Women's Affairs Center has carried out many sessions of psychological relief and social and mental support for the team at different levels, especially for female workers in projects that have direct contact with the local community, and these sessions included some teams of volunteers in the community. However, respondents noted that the initiative needs further development to rise to the challenges and needs of the organisation's team, and was not always sustainable. Respondents noted that doing these sessions outside of Gaza was important because those who facilitate these activities are usually from Gaza and often suffer the same circumstances and pressures, therefore it is a case of the weary tending to the weary.

Similarly, the YWCA respondents noted that while they do employ a specialist in the field, there were still distinct needs to be met. Part of their ongoing work to mitigate mental health effects is to organise awareness sessions about work risks and threats in vulnerable rural areas. They also provide a field team with summaries of security risks in those areas through coordination and cooperation with relevant international institutions like the UNDSS.

Both organisations also noted the importance of 'meeting together' to alleviating mental health issues. Here, they noted that what would be useful would be strengthening and enabling strategies and mechanisms for digital safety and awareness, due to the fact that a significant amount of stress to mental health also occurs due to the harassment an activist might receive in the digital space. They also noted the importance of communication spaces and forums for women activists at the national and regional levels. They felt it would be important for organisations like Christian Aid **to support interactive regional and global networks, forums and in-person meetings. They felt that being together in this way** contributed to high levels of well-being. As one of the respondents noted, *"When we meet face-to-face and interact with each other, we become stronger, more con[5]dent, feel more protected, and safer."*

In Zimbabwe, respondents noted that they had not received any training on how to mitigate or cope with mental health effects, despite the adverse conditions they work under. It is clear that mental health impacts are significant, especially on those who have been subject to prolonged surveillance from the state. For many, the pandemic brought a new source of anxiety, unpredictability and insecurity to their already demanding daily lives. In this period, government agencies committed human rights violations with significant impunity, and this led to mental health issues for some members. According to one respondent, some of his employees developed anger issues, and others were diagnosed with high blood pressure, depression, fatigue and burnout.

Organisation leaders also faced mental health challenges that were exacerbated by state surveillance. *"We knew we were being watched,"* said one of the participants. Some people reported seeing cars parked at their gates. '*The state wants us to drop it [their work],"* said the other. *"Possibly they knew our resources predicament, and that the communities were caged under lockdown, so putting pressure on us would break us up".* Another respondent stated that this had an impact on their mental wellbeing, work and even their families. Most respondents in Zimbabwe agreed that more needed to be done, especially in terms of **ensuring ways to mitigate impacts to mental health** prior to any traumatic event.

In Burundi, a key part of the discussion regarding the effect on mental health was to note that the long-term regulations, and the fight to keep organisations alive or 'unnoticed', caused psychological weariness. The tactic described above of 'humbling' oneself, or trying not to be noticed, can be argued as also something that has occurred due to the psychological impacts of ongoing repression. Respondents also noted the trauma that they were still navigating due to Burundi's social history. In that sense, in a similar vein to IOPT where we have a polity constantly affected by a decades-long occupation, actors in Burundi are not only affected by the repressions under which they work, but are also negotiating generational affect. This they also link to why there is such a rift between civil society and state. Their solution to this is to build better dialogue between the CSOs and the state, and to achieve some kind of reconciliation. There is very clearly tension between civil society and state, but also between certain civil society members due to the historical conditions in which some were founded, and also in terms of what occurred in the aftermath of 2015. Some, for example, lost their leaders to forced exile.

This heightens the need for dialogue and repair in the Burundian context. Some respondents noted that organisations like Christian Aid could assist with these dialogues. The respondents suggest a round-table of all stakeholders including government, local civil society, international financial institutions and academics to work towards some form of reconciliation between civil society and the state. While the work they do is psychologically wearing, respondents spoke of the work they did as being part of a kind of vocation, and therefore they are filled with courage and passion to continue their work, even if they have to adapt or change it to survive. They indicated that they would appreciate more financial support as well as capacity-strengthening training that could help to navigate the psychological challenges they were facing. They also felt that advocacy training, as well as support on how to work with repressive governments without compromising one's work, would be greatly appreciated.

'The (political) opposition ran away. The civil society fell in a trap of behaving as the opposition....and kept that opposition line. Certain members of the civil society understood themselves as political actors... They could not draw a demarcation line between the civil society and political parties. When 2015 Christian came, it found them in that situation. They could not take a necessary distance from the current problematic situation.'

Respondent 1, Burundi

5.0 Recommendations

The recommendations provided below were collated following a process of workshopping the findings with key colleagues. It is suggested that stakeholders use power and political analysis to frame ideas around tactical response activities and overall strategy to respond to the specific context. It is important that in doing this work, international partners ensure that we do not 'push down' risks to the local organisations.

All work must be context driven, consultative and include a risk-mapping plan. The most overarching recommendation arising from this study is the need to support local and global alliance and movement building.

INGOs like Christian Aid can help to complement and open up global spaces, while local NGOs enable community voices and link them with global actors.

Table 2: Key findings and recommendations.

Key challenge/tactics of repression	Strategic response from local organisations	Potential support strategies by international actors
Intentional targeting of local organisations by governments who use a variety of regulatory and administrative control mechanisms to repress civil society.	Local organisations frequently rework programme design or adapt plans of work to bypass such controls. Others discuss the importance of building global and local alliances. Some organisations also speak about the importance of being visible and doing their work regardless.	Organisations like Christian Aid can support local and global alliances and movement-building among civil society. Support civil society links to in-country diplomats as well as global networks. Funding and programme support must be flexible enough to support local partners as they frequently adapt to repressive measures. Enlist the assistance of groups like faith councils who may be able to support local organisations. Co-develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) with partners to support and protect human rights defenders (HRDs) and other local activists who are putting their lives at risk for this work. A useful guide to protecting HRDs can be found here: A guide to protecting Human Rights Defenders - Christian Aid

Key challenge/tactics of repression	Strategic response from local organisations	Potential support strategies by international actors
Many governments enact key legislation that restricts the movement and work of civil society. Such repression is 'baked in' to national policies.	Advocacy for policy reform. Creating interactive linkages between global and local actors for awareness raising on repressive policies	INGOs like Christian Aid can support such advocacy that overturns repressive policies. In-country support to partners can extend to advocacy and international network support. Provide targeted capacity-strengthening programmes and resources to civil society organisations and HRDs to enhance their skills, knowledge and resilience in terms of responding to authoritarian governments. This includes specific supports for HRDs. Please see full list of recommendations for more detail on this last point.
CSO/NGOs being labelled as 'foreign agents'	CSOs/NGOs formed consortiums and alliances to defend against such attacks. Others noted that they made it clear they were investing in community-level actors to push back against being labelled as a 'Western' or 'foreign' entity. Others noted that they shared materials and resources locally to prove their localised investment.	This again speaks to the need for INGOs like Christian Aid to be flexible in terms of funding and programme design. Programmes should ensure all work that is done is consultative, context driven and does not put our partners at risk. It is important that in all instances we ensure that we do not appropriate partners' work and thereby undermine local ownership.
Civil society actors observe that a lot of funding is becoming more and more conditional, restricted, or unavailable across the board. The restriction of funding has had a direct correlation to the closing down of civic spaces.	Once again organisations are adapting or redistributing work to navigate funding issues. There is also sharing of resources across organisations to mitigate impacts based on funding loss. International alliances are key to staying attractive to high-level funders.	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. INGOs like Christian Aid may wish to advocate that international donors become more flexible and open in their approach to funding.

Key challenge/tactics of repression	Strategic response from local organisations	Potential support strategies by international actors
The digital space is a space for both resistance and also repression. Local organisations use platforms like Telegram and Signal to communicate to their grassroots, but spaces like Whatsapp, Zoom and the internet more broadly are means through which civil society can be vilified or harassed. Civil society may be subjected to online defamation, loss of sensitive data, the confiscation of devices containing sensitive data by authorities, and targeted online attacks. The state can carry out long-term surveillance and/or restrict CSO/NGO activity.	Many local organisations do use Telegram and Signal to circumnavigate restrictions on physical movements. It can also be a space through which education on key issues occurs or meetings are held. However, this is risky. Telegram and Signal are platforms that are encrypted and thus safer than platforms like MS Teams or Zoom.	Christian Aid programmes can build digital protection support into project design, including support for partners' digital security capacity. Christian Aid programmes can adapt their own communication methods with partners to strengthen the chain of communication security, such as using secure and encrypted messaging services, and explore supporting partners to do the same. Christian Aid can explore options with regards to using open source software. There may be a need to move away from proprietary software such as MS Teams. We also may wish to discuss with global activist networks how they have developed secure digital networks, and also consult with the extant literature/ toolkits on this issue. Key resources to consult include: https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/programme/digital-protection and https://securitylab.amnesty.org/digital-resources/
Across the board, local CSOs and NGOs experience significant psychological weariness, whether linked to living long-term under occupation, being at the receiving end of long-term surveillance, or as a result of constantly facing the possibility of violence due to the work that they do.	Broad alliances of solidarity assist with relieving these pressures and stresses. In Zimbabwe, some mental health support was being provided, 'after the fact' and in Colombia, Christian Aid facilitated expert-led discussion spaces among partners on the issue of mental health. In Burundi, some organisations try to stay under the radar to mitigate the psychological impacts of repression.	Any and all mental health support must be context driven and place partner 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 as an organisation. There is a clear need for Christian Aid to take on further study on mental health and providing mental health support. We must consider carefully how to integrate mental health support into our partnership approach in a sustainable manner.

Table 3: General recommendations arising

Recommendation	Key stakeholders
Engage in international advocacy efforts to raise awareness about the shrinking space for civil society organisations.	Christian Aid global, Christian Aid Ireland, Country teams. In country- diplomats, global human rights networks, faith partners, other INGOs.
Undertake an advocacy risk assessment and plan, to inform when to take on advocacy and when not to.	Christian Aid global, Christian Aid Ireland, Country teams. In country- diplomats, global human rights networks, faith partners, other INGOs.
International donors and INGOs must find ways to commit to flexible core funding and not insist on overcompliance as it is clear that local organisations need the space to adapt programmes and work when faced with restrictive legislations. This can be done at 2 levels: i) either as fully flexible core funds to contribute (often with other funders) jointly to a partner's own strategic plan, or ii) as a semi-flexible project to enable more flexibility and allow adaptive programming that permits changes in content and budget and time-line. INGOs like Christian Aid may wish to advocate that international donors become more flexible and open in their funding schemes.	Christian Aid global and Christian Aid Ireland, other INGOs, international donors.
Provide targeted capacity-strengthening programmes and resources to civil society organisations and human rights defenders to enhance their skills, knowledge and resilience to respond to authoritarian governments. Consult partners to identify specific needs. Integrate capacity strengthening into project design in contexts where there is a closed civic space. Identify and earmark related funding.	Christian Aid global and Christian Aid Ireland, Country teams, Country partners.
Connect civil society partners to in-country diplomats and missions/embassies to enhance partners' protection. Refer to the EU HRD guidelines and the obligation of European Delegations to support HRDs. This support could include prison visits, attending court hearings alongside civil society actors. Refer to the guiding document: www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/our-work/guide-protecting-human-rights-defenders	Christian Aid global, Christian Aid Ireland, Country teams. In country- diplomats.
Conduct internal discussions with relevant Christian Aid departments to review Christian Aid's approaches based on solidarity, capability and influencing with regards to supporting partners in repressive settings.	Christian Aid global and Christian Aid Ireland, country teams.

Engage with local governments on some of these issues to find common ground and shared concerns. **Prospects of opening up of a dialogue with the government will depend on context.**	Christian Aid global and Christian Aid Ireland, Christian Aid country teams, Other INGOs based in such contexts, Diplomatic officers.
Some inter-faith and interreligious orgs are able to navigate repressive regimes and hold government confidence. Explore how to blend the skills of CSOs with this space and build alliances between such organisations, making strategic use of existing Christian Aid faith-based partnerships to strengthen civil society protection.	Christian Aid global and Christian Aid Ireland, Country teams, Country partners, Other faith-based INGOS, diplomatic partners.
Organisations and individuals that work on high-risk issues flag the need for change to occur at the policy level. INGOs like Christian Aid should support advocacy that overturns such policies, both nationally and internationally.	Christian Aid global and Christian Aid Ireland, Country teams, Country partners, other INGOs.
Develop support strategies for women HRDs and other marginalised groups experiencing intimidation. This includes facilitating network building with like-minded HRDs, activists for solidarity and advocacy. Developing such strategies must include consulting with these HRDs on the differential risks/threats they face as women or as marginalised groups, on what supports they require or already have in place and how to strengthen them.	Christian Aid global and Christian Aid Ireland, country teams, in-country feminist organisations, global feminist networks.
Community Protection Committees are working well in IOPT. Explore replicating this approach in other countries with high-risk human rights protection needs. This approach to collective protection also supports local movement building.	Christian Aid global and Christian Aid Ireland, Country teams, Country partners, other INGOs, related global networks such as ACT Alliance.

Endnotes

[1] https://www.christianaid.org.uk/our-work/research/doing-research-ethically

[2] Here we define civic space as the conditions that allow civil society and individuals to organize, participate and communicate freely and without discrimination, and in doing so, influence the political and social structures around them.

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