

State of Play: Autocratic States Research

How local civil society is responding to repressive regimes: Lessons from Burundi, Zimbabwe, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory

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Overview

The *State of Play* research, commissioned by Christian Aid Ireland in 2023, explores the ways in which local civil society actors are responding to or finding ways to continue their work under increasingly repressive regimes. The learning draws from empirical studies conducted in Burundi, Zimbabwe, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT). This brief focuses on the strategies of response deployed by local organisations and the key recommendations arising from these approaches.

The research in IOPT was carried out prior to October 2023.

Context

In Burundi, Zimbabwe, and Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (IOPT), long-term repression and rising authoritarianism by state and state-allied actors have led to shrinking space for civil society, increased human rights violations, and impunity for state actors. Repression takes various forms, including legal regulations, surveillance, administrative and regulatory controls, banning protests and public assembly, arbitrary detention, and physical violence. Respondents noted significant mental health impacts due to living under prolonged repression.

One mechanism of control is the restriction of funding or significant state oversight of where funding is allotted to civil society. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that high-level donor funding from international institutions is also becoming limited, in retreat or increasingly conditional. Less funding for civil society means fewer opportunities for human rights defenders to take action, thereby enabling autocratic states' oppression.

'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**

Key Research Question

How can solidarity, advocacy, and capability-building efforts be enhanced to support local civil society organizations (CSOs) working in autocratic environments?

Sub-questions

1. What are the strategies that local organisations are using to influence change/ advocate in autocratic and repressive states?
2. How is risk understood and interpreted? How are they responding to these risks (physical, mental etc.)
3. What are the strategies and gaps in Christian Aid's approach to supporting partners and local organisations to influence change in autocratic states?

Research Methodology

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.

Zimbabwe

Overview: 12 respondents engaged using a phenomenological interpretivism approach. The approach was used to gain insight into the CSOs' lived experiences as they recollected them.

Data collection: Unstructured interviews which were dialogic, conversational and open in nature. It also involved active listening, interaction and observation.

Respondents: Civil society actors operating at various levels - community-based organisations, resource governance organisations, anti-corruption organisations, and those devoted to broader human rights work and human rights defence.

Sampling: Purposeful, snowball sampling technique.

Burundi

Overview: An empirical study using a qualitative research approach.

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews using face-to-face interviews.

Respondents: Feminist organisations, youth organisations, journalist organisations, human rights and governance organisations, and local and international social development organisations.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory

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

Data collection: Key person interviews and reflexive and participatory learning and capacity building workshops.

Respondents: Executive Directors of two organisations that worked specifically on women's rights or women's issues and two leading civil society activists in the West Bank and Gaza.

Key findings - Repression and Response



Strategies of repression

'In 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 fight 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).

Burundi

- Repression tactics are focused on an intentional 'eradication' of local organisations.
- The creation of governmental civil society organisations, who are sponsored by the government and are therefore closely allied to the state, causing severe divides in civil society, and obstructing the ability to build a 'true civil society'.
- Stifling 'independent' organisations by placing a significant level of state oversight that is not placed on organisations that are happy to cooperate with the state.

Zimbabwe

- Intentional targeting of organisations.
- Administrative and regulatory control mechanisms and the labelling and stigmatising of organisations receiving foreign funding as foreign agents.
- A general erosion of democratic processes, including the marginalisation of parliamentary politics and the decreased consultation processes with all rights advocacy organisations.
- Legislative measures, such as the PVO Bill, threatened, stigmatised and criminalised noncompliant and foreign-funded NGOs.

IoPT

- Measures of occupation, siege, closure and the difficulty of movement disabled local organisations' ability to participate effectively and directly in solidarity campaigns.
- High costs of travelling abroad and the complications of travelling outside Palestine to participate in important activities.
- Scarcity of funding for advocacy activities.
- The constant impact of responding to emergency humanitarian aid projects.

Strategies of response: How local organisations are responding to such repression

1 Alliance Building

- Alliance building, whether among local organisations or through global linkages, is a key strategic response. This includes sharing materials and resources across groups and forming consortia to raise awareness on issues or present a united front against government attacks. Organisations may feel stronger and safer advocating in coalitions rather than speaking out individually. International alliances are crucial for raising awareness and attracting high-level donor support. For some, these alliances also help mitigate the long-term mental health effects of living under a repressive regime.
- Restricted funding led organisations to form civil society consortiums, coalitions and networks for fundraising. Some also diversified their programmes to apply for available grants and funds.

2 Utilising digital Spaces

- Many local organisations use encrypted platforms like Telegram and Signal to circumvent digital surveillance. They may also operate online to overcome restrictions on physical movements, such as being followed by state surveillance or being unable to pass through a checkpoint. Social media can also be a space for education on key issues or for holding meetings. However, due to the high risk for suppression and surveillance, the use of social media must always be subject to a risk assessment.
- 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 TikToks', as the public was already familiar with these formats.

3 Negotiating

- Local organisations frequently rework programme designs or adapt work plans to bypass controls. Some organisations emphasize the importance of being visible and continuing their work regardless. Others achieve success by working in piecemeal ways or focusing on very grassroots issues. Those who advocate for this approach often ask, 'What is doable?' and act accordingly.
- Several organisations noted the importance of work that goes beyond 'service delivery' or project implementation to include advocacy for policy reform. They highlighted various regulatory laws that hinder their efforts and stressed the need to focus on policy reform.

Key recommendations from this research

- All work must be context-driven, consultative with various stakeholders, and include a risk-mapping plan that identifies risks and mitigation strategies, guides decision making and does not put civil society partners at risk.
- International actors must engage in international advocacy efforts to raise awareness of the shrinking space for civil society organisations. INGOs can support local and global alliances and movement building among civil society.
- Funding and programme support must be flexible enough to support local partners as they frequently adapt to repressive measures. Local organisations need the space to adapt programmes and work when faced with restrictive legislations. International donors and INGOs must commit to flexible core funding and avoid insisting on overcompliance.
- INGOs can support advocacy to overturn repressive policies, and in-country support to partners can extend to advocacy and international network support.
- International actors need to provide targeted capacity-strengthening programmes and resources to civil society organisations and human rights defenders to enhance their skills, knowledge, and resilience in terms of responding to authoritarian governments.
- INGOs must continue to support civil society links to in-country diplomats and global networks.
- INGOs can enlist the assistance of groups like faith councils 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 put their lives at risk for this work. A useful guide to protecting HRDs can be found [here](#).
- Integrate digital protection support into project design, including enhancing partners' digital security capacity. Engage with global activist networks to learn how they have developed secure digital networks, and consult existing 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/>
- For organisations aiming to provide greater support for mental health impacts, it is crucial to ensure that all assistance is context-driven and prioritises the needs of local organisations. Recognise the complexity of mental health approaches and consider what it means to be more trauma-informed. Consult existing literature, toolkits, and experts to build sustainable mental health support strategies and understand the implications of certain forms of work.

‘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

[Download the full copy of the report.](#)

To request a presentation of this research please contact rel_support@christian-aid.org or RDevale@christian-aid.org



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The research project was funded by Irish Aid. 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.

