Civic Space – Movements for Hope and Change

Photo by Colin Lloyd on Unsplash

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Learning and recommendations on Catalysing, Convening and Collaborating in civic movements for hope and change 2025

January 2025 Workshop Presenters:

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Christian Aid exists to create a world where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty. We are a global movement of people, churches and local organisations who passionately champion dignity, equality and justice worldwide. We are the change makers, the peacemakers, the mighty of heart.

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Defining 'civic space'

The structures, processes and legal instruments – and the absence of restrictions – that make it possible for citizens to associate, organise and act on issues of interest to them in the space outside the family, the state and the market.

Civic space allows people and groups to express and negotiate their interests, values and identities; to claim their rights and hold power-holders accountable; and to engage with others in a peaceful way.

Aisha Yesufu addressing an #EndSARS protest in Abuja, 2020.
Photo: Victor Odiba

1. Introduction and purpose

Photo: Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona on Unsplash

Across Bangladesh, Guatemala, Kenya and Nigeria, there has been a recent resurgence in youth-led, democracy and transparency movements – with attempts to suppress these movements by increasingly authoritarian and autocratic behaviour. At the same time, many European countries, including the UK, are experiencing increasingly restrictive legislation and police powers.

These countries are not alone. Around the world, civic space is becoming more restricted. In response, new civic protest models are emerging – ranging from youth-led waves of demand that are reshaping and reforming civic voice, to informally organised student action and digitally organised activism, characterised by new forms of civic collaboration, challenges to traditional protest and civil society, and a growing emphasis on the role of faith-based actors exercising prophetic voice and critiquing governance models.

As a global movement, we can learn from the mass civic demonstrations and protests in 2023 and 2024 demanding justice and accountable governance in Kenya, Nigeria and Bangladesh, along with progressive change movements in countries such as Honduras and Sierra Leone, and examples of civic challenge to restrictive legislation in the UK – all of which highlight the critical role of open civic space and active civil society.

As a faith-based justice organisation, Christian Aid convened a group of organisations to better understand and support these movements as a pathway to change in challenging injustice, defending human rights and strengthening accountable governance. Christian Aid staff from around the world joined in person and online with ActionAid Nigeria, Msingi Trust Kenya, Bangladeshi academia, ACT Alliance EU, Civicus and CAFOD to take stock of what has happened, learn from the successes of the protest movements and chart possible next steps for action to open up or defend civic space. This paper reflects those discussions.

2. Country-level examples of protest and response to attacks and degradation of civic space

Kenya has seen a series of Generation Z (Gen Z) anti-budget protests, along with a growth in protest and debate within civil society related to economic justice issues, elite wealth and lack of democratic accountability. Young people are aware of their constitutional rights and freedoms under the 2010 Constitution, which they regard as unfulfilled. Young protesters are casting off former cultural divisions and asking how they can build a people power movement that can reach and influence the holders of power in business, government and elite cirlces. This is a new civic voice that seeks to be heard and influential – before protest becomes the only option – through smart and strategic networks of coalition building and collective action across different areas of civic activism.

Faith-based agencies such as Christian Aid and Msingi Trust have helped organise the broad coalition. Some church leaders have been slow and hesitant to join – and often seen as 'only providing an opening and closing prayer' and being too closely linked to government figures. For example, some churches have recently been shamed into returning large donations from political figures attempting to buy favour. The extent to which the church should be leaders of dissent, exercising prophetic voice and building a grassroots movement for change and support has become an important question for faith leaders – and powerful church figures have taken different positions. Some faith agencies, such as Msingi Trust, have worked with protests including the Occupy Churches movement. The power dynamics and the realigning of youth with the church are discussed further below.

Kenyan protesters carry the body of a peaceful demonstrator, wrapped in a Kenyan flag, who was killed by police during the Anti-Finance Bill 2024 protests in Nairobi, Kenya.

Photo: Handout

Taken from: https://kenyanforeignpolicy.com/washington-pressures-kenyan-president-ruto-on-police-accountability/

Nigeria has seen a rise of social movements led by young people, professionals and social media influencers. These were triggered by the 'EndSARS' movement (the Special Armed Robbery Squad was accused of abuses and extrajudicial killing) and centre around inequality, corruption and dissatisfaction with inadequate public services. The protests featured feminist groups, youth leaders and celebrities and were organised on social media platforms such as X. Protestors took significant risks in standing up to government security forces, while community and church groups provided food and other support. SARS was eventually disbanded (though it is suspected to have rebranded) but the major outcome was the political galvanising of youth to demand accountability and a new wave of political awareness. ActionAid Nigeria saw the power of youth-led movements and reviewed its strategy to reflect the rise of civic demand for transformation – setting up power spaces like the 'Motion Movement for Transformation' as a coalition and platform to fight together and offer protection. While some faith leaders and churches moved away from the popular protests – drawing criticism for their reticence – others such as Christian Aid Nigeria and interfaith partners offered more progressive voices in support.

DJ Switch for protest ground.
Photo: Instagram/@DJSwitch

In **Bangladesh**, the student movement of July 2024 reacted to the January 2024 elections. These excluded many opposition voices, but the government was supported by India (among other countries) and seems to have ridden out the criticism. However, building on a history of student protests in Bangladesh and in the wake of the elections that highlighted the exclusionary job quota system (often seen as nepotism), students

Photo: Arild Engelsen Ruud

demanded reform and the right to have a job. Protests by students from public universities led to violent crackdowns with many students killed by the army – following which private students came out in support and the protests spread. School children joined, parents led the way, and even the police started to dissent, asking 'How many more do we need to kill?' – as the protests continued. This led to the fall of the government and some rancour in civil society, as not all civil society organisations (CSOs) had joined the protests, leading to discontent with them now.

In **Guatemala**, the surprise victory of the Social Democrat candidate Bernardo Arévalo in the August 2023 election resulted in the Public Prosecutor trying to overturn the result – leading to mass indigenous protest. In the second round, the Prosecutor attempted to seize the ballot boxes and papers to avoid the results carrying through. Nevertheless, Arévalo was sworn in as president. The pressure brought about by the mass protests – alongside support from the US – ensured that the election was certified. Political elites continued to work together to obstruct and undermine the new government – demonstrating the degree of elite state capture. Meanwhile, the CSO Plataforma International supported indigenous groups and helped draft laws to support human rights defenders and the Universal Periodic Review.

Bond (the UK network for organisations working in international development) has noted that the UK is experiencing a declining civic space environment with increasing control over protest and freedom of speech. Indeed, the UK's civic space rating was downgraded from 'narrowed' to 'obstructed' in the 2023 Civicus Monitor survey. This is set against the background of a raft of anti-protest legislation (directed at environmental organisations like Just Stop Oil as well as Black Lives Matter protests), and fuelled by a largely right-wing media which has significantly ostracised protest action. Bond, in coalition with Quakers in Britain, Friends of the Earth and Liberty, has built a coalition to oppose this trend, to show solidarity with disproportionally impacted marginalised groups such as Gypsy and Traveller communities, and to lobby the new Labour government – which has not so far taken significant steps towards changing this.

3. Global trends in closing civic space and responses from civil society

Civicus' State of Civil Society Report 2024 shows a deteriorating global picture, despite some significant gains:

- **Harassment and intimidation** of journalists, environmental activists, human rights defenders, economic activists, and land rights and natural resource defenders on the front line.
- **Restrictions on freedom of association** – governments managing CSOs with restrictive laws – demanding operating licences, high registration fees, donor funds processed through central banks and government approval of work plans. In Ethiopia, for example, governments increasingly control CSOs' working practices, with suspensions or limited time to work allowed.
- We need to counter negative narratives and avoid working in silos. Collaborating with faith-based agencies and communities at grassroots level can help build a more effective response. Civicus can support its members in building capacities.
- **Trends in lawfare** – governments are using law instrumentally to attack CSOs – how to support?
- How is citizenry opinion changing? Populists can rally large swathes of opinion behind them. Are there any groups working on this? What is the role of faith-based agencies?
- Faith agencies are diverse in political views – there is clear need for theological education, especially grassroots liberation. Some faith leaders have only ever been exposed to a prevailing theology which has not emphasised social or climate justice. They have accepted their place in giving opening and closing prayers with no voice in between. Yet national councils of churches have a clear space: they have the power to counter narratives: churches are everywhere, in every community.
- Role of armed actors and armed resistance – contention between armed and civic roles/freedom fighters as liberation movements and those labelled terrorists.

The above trends highlighted in Civicus' 2024 *State of Civil Society Report* illustrate the fast-changing and challenging context for civil society. Since that report was completed, the global environment has faced further challenges. For example, in the US, the second Trump administration poses significant risks to CSOs both in the US and globally.

Furthermore, European donor policies are increasingly shaped by geo-economic objectives, such as access to critical raw materials, which risk undermining rights-based approaches and shifting the focus away from addressing the needs of people and groups in the most vulnerable positions. New geo-economic policies and the instrumentalisation of aid to control migration flows into the EU, alongside the growing trend in Europe of tying aid to strategic interests, are deeply concerning.

Against this backdrop, faith alliances, including ACT Alliance EU, are playing an important role in bringing diverse actors together to counter growing populism and authoritarianism.

ACT Alliance has been called to recognise the deteriorating conditions and environment for CSOs across Europe and the world – noting the rise of fascist governments in Europe. ACT Alliance agencies such as Brot für die Welt are working to provide civil society with evidence by surveying and measuring changes to this environment.

The role of faith-based organisations

The challenge for faith-based organisations in the civic space environment is maintaining strong links with movements, groups and their members as our constituents. They are the source of our political legitimacy as CSOs – which is being questioned. How can the church relegitimise itself in wider civic movements where it has been challenged? And can we expect faith agencies to have a strong advocacy voice when some are very hierarchical?

Strategies of repression

Civic space in autocratic states

Christian Aid Ireland's new research on civic space in autocratic states highlights the dynamic of state oppression and civil society coping strategies.

1. Strategies of oppression:

- Surveillance – digital and non-digital
- Confiscation of devices containing sensitive data
- Outright banning of protests
- Lawfare:
  - Audits
  - Invasive reporting requirements
  - Restrictions on access to resources
- Physical violence and intimidation

2. Coping strategies:

- Avoiding confrontation
- Reworking programmes to take a more local approach
- Self-censorship
- Building networks with other organisations – and the intersectionality of these movements is vital to bear in mind

4. Key trends and issues

Faith activism and lack of action

Kenyan youth voices are critical of the churches' lack of support for the protests. Meanwhile in Nigeria there is a divide between progressive, liberal churches and faith-based organisations that take a stand against injustice and others which try to remain politically neutral. There are less visible divisions in Guatemala and Bangladesh, but civil society grapples with mistrust of state institutions and alignment of wealthy elites with faith institutions. Still, there are some examples of more radical faith groups joining local protest movements.

When leadership and prophetic voice call out injustice and abuse of power, this can be termed 'faith activism'. For example, Msingi Trust equips local faith leaders to be centrally involved in these movements, with its strapline: 'Faith. Social Justice. Advocacy'. This can connect faith to activism and shift churches from being passive and neutral to being local and national centres of social justice.

Experience of councils of churches and inter-faith councils that have a lot of influence and are heard in spaces – can we imagine a model where churches find common routes of action? So not just the top-down church hierarchy but also churches at local level as mobilisers and organisers.

In Bangladesh, the students in *Madrasas* (Islamic schools) were also very involved in protests and there may be more examples of religious students or students in faith-run institutions who are engaged in or driving movements for change and opening civic space. Bangladesh has a wide array of CSOs that play a key role representing the most marginalised groups – including faith actors. But are there structures there to allow this representation to flourish? ACT Alliance hosts communities of practice to develop capacity and solidarity.

How social media shapes civic space

Distraction: In Nigeria, social media has been used to distract people from poor governance practices.

Misinformation

- ActionAid in Nigeria has picked up on the issue of Gen Z's reluctance to read reports or lengthy accounts by independent media – thus exposing people to government misinformation, denial of facts and distraction tactics. Training is needed on social media literacy and how to use it – Digital Defenders Partnership
- A UK-based digital literacy group, Cyber Peace Institute, provides a service to NGOs whereby it searches for them on the dark web.

Social media advocacy

- Some pictures and images in social media can go too far and create negative reactions – eg, coffin images in Kenya. There is a lack of clear standards for social media accountability and civic education. Should faith-based agencies be a guiding light here to ensure effectiveness?

Digital activism

Social media has become the place and space for activism, especially for young people making use of digital tools.

- Three 'weapons' of street protest in Kenya – the phone, flag and water bottle
- Songs – gospel songs are being converted to liberation sounds
- Youth are moving away from tribalism.

Social media is increasingly being used to organise protests. While WhatsApp was previously the favoured app, due to its vulnerability, civil society is now moving at large to Telegram and Signal. In Bangladesh, Facebook was the tool of choice with large private university Facebook groups being key to organising the protests. During periods of change, as recently seen in Kenya and Bangladesh, there is a risk of backlash against certain groups (such as Islamic groups), – and often the danger of online harassment, and a lack of strategic use of social media.

Colonial legacies and repressive legislation

Many repressive laws date from colonial era penal codes and laws that were used to enforce British rule, so there is advocacy in various countries for law reform and review of out-of-date police and state emergency laws. Meanwhile neo-colonial malign influence over countries is seen to be challenging stability and economic interests. Faith agencies are part of the colonial structure to some extent – but in other ways form part of the progressive reform narrative and prophetic voice/scrutiny and critique of harsh state behaviour (see also the section on faith-based organisations).

Student, youth and Indigenous-led protests against corruption

These movements are from groups who do not traditionally hold power, yet they are now claiming power and finding spaces and opportunities to advance their protests.

The protests in Bangladesh have their roots in nepotism and quotas for government jobs, but most students protested because of a general fatigue with the wider corruption of the status quo, and without the intent to topple the government. Indeed the major economic

powerhouses had supported the government, so protests were not in their interests and the students and youth now have to find common ground with business.

Pop singers/rappers and celebrities joined in, for example, the song *Speak Up* – and this was part of a sea-change that even reached school children.

Civil society's role in organising protest and activism – and how to support it

Civil society was not and is not united – government co-opts various actors into dialogue or influencing fora – and there is a role for faith-based agencies to bring people together and coalesce around key justice issues. In Guatemala, various types of Christian churches offer powerful organising spaces for civil society.

LGBTIQ protest and actions in civic space

The US has halted all gender-diverse aid programmes and many people have lost their jobs.

The transgender community in Bangladesh now has fewer organisations lobbying and campaigning for its rights and wider societal acceptance, and faces societal obstacles such as cultural ostracisation, death threats and violence. There is a huge gap in the political left in Bangladesh since the Awami League was ousted – this had been somewhat protective of the transgender community.

Within the student movements and CSOs in Bangladesh, there are pushes for greater inclusivity, but questions around what this looks like. For instance, while there is more sympathy for 'third gender' people, transgender people remain an extreme taboo in wider society.

In Kenya, civil society is divided on issues such as abortion, gender justice and LGBTIQ rights. This is especially the case with faith actors, which tend to be socially conservative and in turn stringent on these issues. This has resonance in other countries too – including those where faith actors such as Christian Aid, DanChurchAid or CAFOD might want to work to support their rights.

Ways to defend civic space

Social media

- Tactics of repression
- How to better use social media
- Use of arts and media as alternative and youth-led/ Gen Z

Law reform/countering lawfare and litigation – defending human rights defenders

- Strategic litigation is very useful eg, Colombia
- Civicus examples of law reform

Solidarity and peer-to-peer exchanges

- Sharing of methods and materials – what was used and how

Political economy analysis of civic space and faith actors

- Potential to develop this idea as a research and analysis project over the coming months

UK government and global civic space funding

There is a clear opportunity to influence the UK Government on CSO and civic space engagement across the globe. It has worked closely with the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which has laid out civic space recommendations for member countries. Foreign Office Minister David Lammy has expressed concerns about the decline of civic space and has stated that the government intends to dedicate funding to supporting CSOs and civic space. Bond is pressing the government to take a more strategic approach and publish guidelines on supporting human rights defenders to be made available in various languages, and disseminated to embassies.

Donor and aid cooperating states are moving towards self-interest and business transactional relationships with increasing cuts to rights and civic space funding. This means that rights groups and youth movements – among others – will need to seek internal/national funding for their activities.

International NGO cooperation, such as with ACT Alliance agencies and other faith-related organisations, will be crucial in this.

Potential support strategies by Christian Aid and other international actors

- Support global alliances and movement building among civil society.
- Support advocacy to overturn repressive policies.
- Build digital protection support.
- Prioritise deeper organisational and country programmes, considering how to integrate mental health support into partnerships in a sustainable way.
- Provide flexible support that allows for adaptive programming and can keep up with changes such as student protests.
- Provide flexible support for civil society – putting in place safeguards such as diplomatic staff who can provide digital protection.
- Help provide sophisticated support and protection resources and systems to civil societywhere these are lacking.

Mr Macaroni and protesting youths in Lagos (Newsguru).

taken from https://www.pulse.ng/articles/entertainment/celebrities/mr-macaroni-declines-gov-sanwo-olus-walk-of-peace-2024081904564158459

5. Recommendations – areas of cooperation and next steps

1 Support youth and student-led protests:
Continue supporting the protest movements of 2023 and 2024 with flexible support for human rights defenders and faith and church-based organisations.

2 Protect freedom of association and assembly: As operational risks have increased, we must support the new methods of organising that have emerged to combat this. This includes catalysing and supporting work, and offering flexible funding.

3 Strengthen grassroots organising: Faith-based groups should participate in broad alliances between the most vulnerable groups as a key strategy for defending civic spaces. This includes strengthening skills for greater inclusion, expanding reach, and providing civic and theological education opportunities.

4 Strengthen digital work:
Develop specific programmes to defend civic space online, while also addressing digital inequalities.

Protesters laid on the ground and used their bodies to spell 'ENDSARS'.

Phto: This day media

5 Build on existing research:
Use research from ACT Alliance, Civicus, DanChurchAid, CAFOD, Christian Aid (eg, on the impact of Covid-19 on civic space and research on autocratic states). Create compelling new pieces of research in partnership with and supporting broad alliances of actors, and engaging with the most vulnerable groups.

6 Promote faith-based activism: Local faith-based groups, churches, mosques and allied faith-related community agencies and social movements should be supported to develop confidence, capacity and activity as centres for justice and for promoting progressive civic space. ACT Alliance and its members should continue to coordinate advocacy eg, Together for Justice and position faith-based actors to critique the increasing restriction of civic space and the drift towards authoritarianism.

7 Work with the UK and other governments:
to promote measures to protect civic space, enable environmental and human rights defenders, and dismantle legal structures that are regressive and restrict civic space.

8 Support coalition building among partners:
this is a key element for advancing civic space and human rights – more so than capacity building, though it can be hard to find a common cause at macro level.

Priorities for cooperation in networks

- Challenging dominant narratives through locally led approaches
- Long-term, flexible funding
- Crisis response funds available to civic movements
- Targeted support for conflict-affected areas and crises
- Collective action against lawfare
- Recognition of the complex role of civil society – it is not homogenous and formal actors play diverse roles
- Better strategic use of social media

Abu Sayeed.
Photo: Collected photo

Nigerian Singer Falz for protest.

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THE UNSTOPPABLE POWER OF HOPE