



Key practices are taught to civil society actors at a "Training of Trainers" (ToT) session in Bago, Myanmar.

THE ROLE OF BILATERAL COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIP IN RECLAIMING CIVIC SPACE

A prerequisite for democracy is a free civil society that can impact political, economic and social decision-making. To achieve this goal, civil society actors need accessible civic spaces. Civic space can be defined as a safe digital and physical environment in which formal and informal groups and actors can act collectively, defend common interests and rights, and freely express their thoughts. Helvetas promotes effective and inclusive governance and conflict transformation to enhance spaces for individuals and groups to participate in developing and assessing public policies, supporting democratic governance, and safeguarding individual liberties.

POLITICAL CONTEXT OF SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Populism and authoritarianism are on the rise globally. In this political context, local civil societies are increasingly under pressure. Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), social movements, and other key players who engage in controversial public dialogues and stand up against authoritarian governments face severe attacks. The trend of shrinking civic space has become a global phenomenon.¹

Authoritarian regimes:

- impose restrictive legislation, registration procedures and administrative requirements on CSOs.
- resort to forced disappearances and extra-judicial killings of human rights defenders and independent journalists.
- disrupt the flow of international funding to local civil society and weaken their ability to counterbalance power.
- drastically reduce the political voice by censoring, restricting freedom of expression, and limiting civil society to work on non-controversial, charitable projects instead of defending others' interests.

Civil society organizations face increasing pressure and restrictions on their fundamental human rights. They are often seen as challenging governmental power and hindering economic growth. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this trend. Meanwhile, service-providing organizations are less affected.

The private sector drives innovation, generates wealth and income, and mobilizes resources to reduce poverty. However, their role in supporting civil society to reclaim civic space seems unfruitful thus far. When CSOs attempt to influence policymaking, some large corporations are often motivated by profits. They have little interest in supporting or working with civil society to promote actions that benefit social justice. Instead, their decision-making is often based on a give-and-take and profit-margin approach rather than what is in the public's best interest.

¹ [Global State of Democracy Report 2022: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontent](#) | [The Global State of Democracy \(idea.int\)](#)

RELEVANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

For international cooperation programs and projects to be successful, they must have the support of national and local governments, civil society and private sector actors in partner countries. Swiss NGOs and local organizations work together to reduce poverty, improve access to social and economic institutions, promote social justice, strengthen democratic spaces, preserve global public goods and enhance cultural diversity. All these efforts aim to support sustainable development and peace.

Collaborating with local civil society is essential for international cooperation. Switzerland collaborates with local Swiss or third-country NGOs depending on the context within the international cooperation framework, which includes development cooperation, humanitarian response and peacebuilding. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and its implementing partners, such as Helvetas, work closely with local civil society, governments, NGOs and citizens by supporting their efforts to contribute to a just society.

Civil society is crucial in North-South international cooperation partnerships' governance mechanisms. It has become an integral part of the development agenda, not only as a means of oversight but also as an avenue for people to assert their rights, promote rights-based approaches, shape development policies and partnerships, and monitor their implementation.

Donors and partner countries have collaborated to grant more responsibility and self-determination to recipient countries in aid design, targeting, and evaluation. These agreements serve as the basis for development cooperation initiatives, including:

- The [Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness](#)
- The [Accra Agenda for Action](#)
- The [Istanbul CSO Development Effectiveness Principles](#)
- The [Busan partnership for effective development cooperation](#)
- And, more recently, the [Grand Bargain](#)

While promoting horizontal partnerships and weighting the role of partner countries in bilateral cooperations, these agreements aim to maintain civil society actors as a driver for change, supporting them to shape national policymaking, development cooperation, peacebuilding and humanitarian response.



A training on decentralization and municipal support for public spaces in Prishtina, Kosovo.

MAIN APPROACHES

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of functioning governance systems. Fostering good governance and protecting human rights takes time – especially in regions of the world marked by fragility, conflicts and humanitarian disasters.

Helvetas works with local governments, CSOs, the private sector and citizens to promote effective and inclusive governance.

With its international programs, Helvetas:

- Helps citizens engage in decision- and policymaking to influence and hold local governments to account.
- Strengthens the capacities of local governments to provide quality public services in a gender-responsive, pro-poor and efficient manner.
- Works with forcibly displaced persons and supports the most disadvantaged internal and international migrants seeking a better life by protecting their rights, minimizing migration risks, and maximizing the impact of migration on local social and economic development.
- Fosters peaceful relationships and social cohesion at the community level, and works to reduce inequality and strengthen social justice to prevent and reduce conflicts and the radicalization of youth, which is often fueled by scarcity of resources and unresponsive governments.

CHALLENGES THAT LIE AHEAD

Regarding the aim of strengthening the local civil society within international cooperation, Helvetas observes a couple of challenges:

- Despite existing mechanisms in the development, humanitarian and peacebuilding sectors aiming to promote flexibility and self-determination of civil society actors, funding mechanisms remain inadequate, short-sighted and restricted. Civil society actors thus struggle to adequately fund their projects, programs and initiatives.
- Official Development Assistance (ODA) is typically given directly to recipient countries or facilitated through international and multilateral organizations. This perpetuates the power dynamic between ruling parties and multilateral actors vis à vis CSOs and social movements.
- One challenge donors and international NGOs face is connecting with informal civil society movements that lack proper organizational structures and compliance mechanisms. Donor support tends to go to formal CSOs familiar with the language of ODA rather than the grassroots movements that are often more effective.
- National legislation may also hinder local CSOs from receiving funding from abroad. There is very little CSOs and international NGOs can do about it.

- Generally, the utilization of ODA is becoming an increasingly influential political tool. Donor countries are leveraging the threat of sanctions and the suspension of development assistance for geopolitical reasons and to promote reforms that benefit their interests.
- The BRICS members (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are leading a South-South partnership emerging as a competitor to the traditional North-South development approach of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). The core members strive to expand the partnership to more countries², mostly authoritarian ones. Thus, in terms of protecting and supporting civil society, BRICS is unlikely to do better than ODA by DAC members.
- In the context of rising autocracy, both DAC ODA and BRICS seem to be failing to address the role of critical civil society actors and the flexible funding model supporting the fight for democracy.

Therefore, Swiss and international NGOs and donors must revisit the concept of cooperation and question power structures and funding relationships in existing partnerships.

² [Les BRICS intégreront six nouveaux membres en 2024 : l'Iran, l'Argentine, l'Égypte, l'Éthiopie, l'Arabie saoudite et les Emirats arabes unis \(lemonde.fr\)](https://www.lemonde.fr)



Citizens take part in a municipal meeting in Ahuri, Ethiopia.

THE WAY FORWARD...

To promote civic space and counteract authoritarianism, several levels must be addressed at the same time:

- Switzerland's international cooperation needs to maintain its strength in the areas of peace and governance. In the future, resolving conflicts and promoting peace, supporting democracy and the rule of law, as well as upholding human rights should remain a critical thematic focus of international cooperation. A strong multilateral commitment that is focused on global challenges such as peace, security and climate change is necessary for achieving these goals.
- Switzerland should promote the UN Sustaining Peace Agenda, which underlines the important role of peacebuilding for sustainable development – reflected in Sustainable Development Goals 16 of the 2030 Agenda – and should increase funding for peacebuilding worldwide. The Peace Agenda focuses on conflict prevention measures, particularly at the local (community or grassroots) level. In this endeavor, SDC and the Peace and Human Rights Division must be complementary, according to the nexus approach.
- To promote participatory democratic processes and institutions and fight injustice and corruption, cooperation with Swiss and country-based NGOs is as central as supporting and strengthening other relevant local civil society actors.
- Active participation of disadvantaged social classes in political processes should be a priority to advance inclusive, sustainable development and social justice.
- To enhance “civic space,” international cooperation should strive to combat all forms of discrimination and the causes of exclusion and support gender equality, especially in access to resources, state services and decision-making processes.
- In fragile contexts, Swiss and international NGOs and donors must be politically astute and adaptable. They should enhance the civic space while deepening their understanding of the political, social and economic environment to prevent the creation or aggravation of risks that could lead to retaliation against grassroots community organizations.
- Organizations, particularly those advocating for women's rights, may encounter political backlash and intimidation that hinder their work toward achieving social justice. Acknowledging that human rights should not always be perceived equally is crucial. Addressing these challenges requires an acute examination of how human rights activists in the Global South approach these issues within their nations and remain receptive to learning from them.



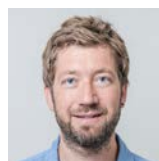
Flora Beatriz Cabrera Lorenzo teaches other women in her community how politics works and how to make their voices heard in Chiquirichapa, Guatemala.

- When those in power, both politically and economically, gain control over various forms of media, it can lead to cyberbullying, political intimidation, extortion and media manipulation. These tactics limit civic rights and ultimately undermine the principles of democracy. It is crucial for media outlets and artists to play a vital role in amplifying the voices of marginalized communities. By doing so, they can help balance the influence of authoritarianism on political agendas and national policy discussions. To better combat centralized power, autocracy and authoritarianism, it is imperative to support these individuals and create platforms that allow their voices to be heard.
- Donors should provide flexible funding mechanisms, enabling technical support and strengthening collaboration with non-traditional movements fighting for democracy.
- The private sector should play a more significant role through investment in physical or digital civic space, making it easier for civil society actors to voice their concerns. While they continue to generate wealth and mobilize sustainable resources, their actions should not undermine the fight for a more inclusive, peaceful and just society.



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