

What are the key opportunities for funders seeking to support civil society under attack?

Drawing on desk research and in-depth interviews with funders, this latest paper from the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) highlights and explores emerging trends in closing space grant-making – from addressing the threats and opportunities of the digital age, to strategies that help build solidarity across sectors, and many more.

Established in 2016, FICS brings together private philanthropy from around the world to help ensure that the space for civil society is free and open, with engaged citizen participation that is free of restriction from governments.

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Funders'  
Initiative for  
Civil Society

at  
Global Dialogue

# Go big or...?

Trends in closing  
space grant-making



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Cover image: Protest in Budapest's Heroes' Square, April 2017. Pethe Attila, for Civilizáció.

## Executive summary

Over the past several years, activists, civil society organisations and funders have been on the front-line of a growing number of attacks, facing threats, intimidation and more. FICS – the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society – was founded in 2016 to create a more strategic response by private philanthropy to what has been labelled 'closing civil society space.'

This paper brings together desk research and in-depth interviews to take stock of our sector's response to this closing space. We look at how funders are supporting civil society to thrive in spite of attacks, what the barriers are to more concrete action, and how, as a sector, we can help to sow the seeds for a more enabling environment for civil society.

### The big picture

- 1. Funders are having a hard time.** 93% of our online respondents said that grant-making had become either slightly or significantly more challenging in the past 18 months.
- 2. There continues to be a focus on diagnosis rather than action.** We've seen a plethora of reports coming out in the past two years, but 78% of our respondents also felt that their organisations weren't paying enough attention to closing space.
- 3. There is a growth in dedicated grant-making programmes, but much of this remains below the radar** (in some cases by design). This means that civil society groups are often unaware of opportunities to seek support.
- 4. Organisational barriers are the biggest barrier to action.** Common issues like risk-taking or lack of capacity were identified as being the key issues for funders, rather than lack of ideas about how to combat closing space.
- 5. Fortunately, it's not all bad news.** In spite of what dominates the headlines, there are many positive cases of civil society space expanding, or of successful efforts to hold the line against attempts to close space.

### The big changes

- 1. The pace of change, especially technology, has increased.** Elections, such as in Brazil recently, or the US, can change the landscape overnight. Rapid reaction social media makes keeping up with the changes even more difficult.
- 2. Hyper-nationalism and growing militarism** are rapidly closing down civil society, as people find the need to feel secure more important than basic freedoms for civil society. People's fears can be exploited.
- 3. Conservative civil society is growing.** Conservative civil society, often supported by governments, is very successful at using 'freedom of speech' arguments in favour of giving themselves a voice while closing down those of others.
- 4. Civil society is the new enemy,** as groups or causes that used to be highly trusted, including in the west, are now vilified, targeted and criminalised.
- 5. Philanthropy is starting to rise to the challenge,** taking more risks, innovating new forms of funding, or engaging in direct advocacy with governments.

## The big trends

- 1. Going local.** Both civil society and funders argued that solutions are more likely to be found at the national, or even sub-national, level. But connecting to the grassroots can be challenging for funders, and it's important not to let international norms fall by the wayside. New support for constituency building, supporting local convening spaces, and domestic giving, were identified as areas to focus on.
- 2. Driving digital.** The digital arena is the new frontier for the battle of civic space, from internet shut downs, surveillance, to arrests and detentions of bloggers. More funders from the 'offline' worlds are looking at digital to progress their civic space strategies – from support for low-hanging fruit such as digital security, to advocacy where populations are being targeted by mass digital surveillance.
- 3. Telling stories, drawing pictures.** Narratives, 'framing', 'artivism' are all seeing growing investments by funders as a specific strategy to challenge closing civil society space. These strategies take time and impact is as-yet unclear. Nonetheless, helping civil society tell their story is considered to be a key need in defending civic space.

## 4. Broadening civil society.

- As traditional CSOs come more and more under attack, funders are looking to other ways to support groups and activists working for social justice or environmental causes – from social movements, to individuals or social enterprises. Identifying and reaching different actors is challenging, and increasingly relies on in-the-know local funding networks who have a better understanding of who is working at the grassroots. Funders can also resource the capacity or expertise organisations need to transform.
- 5. Going deeper.** Funders are trying to be more deliberate about making connections between symptoms and causes of closing space. Anti-terrorism legislation, growing militarisation, religious fundamentalism, and corporate power were all identified as having a direct correlation on closing space for civil society. There are clear needs to support longer-term work in these areas.

## The big opportunities

- 1. Thinking big.** We need to start setting our own agenda. Taking a leaf from conservative funders, there are opportunities to invest more boldly in organisations that can reset

the agenda on our own terms, like think tanks who help to shift public opinion and policy.

- 2. New media strategies, local ownership.** Funders can catalyse investment in media – and can drive more local ownership to combat government- or corporate-owned media, one of the key drivers of closing space.
- 3. Building new allies.** Faith-based groups, trade unions, and the progressive business community are all possible allies that civil society can be reaching out to. Philanthropy can help to play a brokering role by convening new actors and building strategic alliances to protect civic space.
- 4. Expanding and innovating in philanthropy.** New collaborations, like public-private initiatives between philanthropy and government or new pooled funds, are emerging as ways to grow funding and ensuring it can be more directed to the local level.
- 5. Well-being funding.** There is a growing and legitimate need to nurture existing civil society actors, under the pressure of ongoing attacks. Helping sustain their work is, ultimately, more effective than starting from scratch.



Image: Land Rights Protest in Cape Town, South Africa, September 2018.  
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# I. Introduction

*“It’s not just a matter of whether funders are paying attention, but how are they acting as a result of this attention. I believe most funders now have the issue of closing space on their radar but the coordination and partnership between funders and ensuing coordinated actions are lacking.”*

**International funder**

Back in 2015, Trump hadn’t been elected, and nobody outside of South America had even heard of Brazilian president-elect Bolsonaro. Nonetheless, awareness of closing space by funders was already growing. As far back as 2013, restrictions spread beyond countries like Russia or China to include democratic countries such as Israel, Kenya, and India. By 2015, ‘closing space’ had touched Europe, too, with raids on Hungarian NGOs and growing threats to others across the continent.

The Transnational Institute reminded us that, in reality, the assault itself was nothing new<sup>1</sup>. LGBT+ and environmental activists, for example, have long faced the brunt of governments feeling under threat. However, the impetus behind FICS’ creation in 2016 was a recognition that the spread and severity of the attacks on civil society had increased rapidly. Funders, when they gathered at a meeting in June 2015, were not only seeing greater restrictions on their grantees’ operations but were themselves, for the first time, in the cross fires. ‘Soros’ was now a bad word in parts of the world, including the US, and progressive funders faced new operational barriers – with foreign funding increasingly being curbed by populist governments.

FICS has been fully staffed since early 2017. And, after two years of taking a strategic approach to the issue of closing space, there is certainly no let-up in the assault on civil society and those who support them. The concept of ‘closing civil society space’, though, is perhaps better understood – and with that comes a welcome rise in the conscious actions taken by the funding community to adapt to the ‘new normal’ or to fight back.

This paper draws on semi-structured interviews, an online survey, and desk research<sup>2</sup> to explore the broad trends emerging from funders supporting civil society under attack. Rather than a comprehensive review of grant-making in this space, we highlight some of the complex debates and dilemmas for funders seeking to develop specific strategies on the issue – like, for example, in drawing a line between symptom and root cause. And we talk about the new and emerging frontiers where funders and CSOs are experimenting to keep space open and enabling.

Now in 2018, the phrase that seems to sum up the funding community is: “Better to have tried and failed, than never to have tried at all.”

<sup>1</sup>Transnational Institute (2017), On “Shrinking Space”: a framing paper [tni.org/en/publication/on-shrinking-space](http://tni.org/en/publication/on-shrinking-space)

<sup>2</sup>More information about methodology is available at the back of the report.

## Positive developments

It’s not all bad! Yes, when you look at the macro-level picture it all seems pretty dire: civil society space continues to ‘close’ at a rapid pace and populism remains in the ascendant. But this doesn’t mean that there aren’t some success stories – showing how ‘push back’ can work, and that some governments are receptive to creating a more enabling environment.

### Holding governments to account, in spite of restrictions

*“In Macedonia, civil society played a critical role in documenting violations and engaging in protests – and in holding the new government to account on judicial and media reforms.”*

**International funder**

### Holding back repressive laws

*“We have seen civil society space being kept open (although contested) in Kenya and South Africa.”*

**International human rights funder**

*“The USA Freedom Act win was the first time there’s ever been a reduction in US government surveillance. Civil society, tech companies, and government champions worked together.”*

**International CSO**

### Staying active and above the radar

*“We might have anticipated more groups to take the approach of staying off the radar, but we’re actually seeing more groups trying to comply with the laws.”*

**International LGBT+ funder**

### Staying ready for change

*The role of funders supporting Malaysian civil society during the 2016-18 crackdown and getting funds to national groups on the ground ensured that civil society was able to survive and now play a key role in expanding civic space after the change in government in May 2018.”*

**International funder**

### Civil society on the front-foot

*“When CSOs rejected new restrictive laws on civil society, the government minister responsible proposed setting up a new committee with CSOs and officials to formulate an alternative.”*

**International human rights funder**

### Enabling laws for philanthropy on the rise

*“Over one third of pending initiatives [by governments on philanthropy] are more enabling [...] the data isn’t as bad, especially when it comes to global philanthropy, as newspapers would suggest.”*

**International CSO**

## II. The big picture

*“People have to be more creative. It’s not just about civic space, it’s about a large part of civil society invested in the wrong way of working. It’s completely misshapen.”*

**International funder**

Funders are having a hard time.

When asked if grant-making to civil society has become more challenging in the last 18 months, a staggering 93% of online respondents said that it had become slightly or significantly more challenging. They also said that, while increased attention was being paid to the issue of closing space, much more should be done. Seventy-eight percent of respondents felt that funders should be doing more or weren’t paying nearly enough attention to the subject.

Whereas initial funding for closing space focussed on funding organisations working internationally, in part to really understand the issue, most are looking for the ‘what now’ – practical steps funders can take to move the agenda forward, especially at the local level. But the ‘what now’, though articulated, isn’t necessarily matched by ‘ok, let’s do this’. Many interviewees argued that while there’s a lot more talk recently about practical solutions – like narratives or supporting local coalitions – putting their money where their mouth is has yet to manifest at any scale.

Some of the harder evidence backs this up. For one, funders themselves aren’t talking about closing space publicly, presenting a huge barrier to civil society groups seeking allies and resources. Few refer to it when describing their own grant-making strategies online, with references limited to a few blogs on the sidelines. Only a small handful of funders, such as Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Fund for Global Human Rights, or the African Women’s Development

Fund, have explicit reference to closing space grant-making strategies on their website. As one global civil society interviewee candidly said, *“If stuff is being done [by funders], I don’t think civil society knows about it.”* (International CSO)

Yet 40% of our online survey respondents said they had a unique grant-making programme or explicit strategy on closing space and a further 24% say they have ‘mainstreamed’ the issue. In some cases, being ‘below the radar’ is tactical: foundations that keep working in the most restricted spaces are able to do so because they haven’t been shouting about it from the rooftops. But there is a balance to be struck; civil society needs to know where to turn for support and – when under attack – for philanthropy to be vocal in its support of the rights of civil society.

A lot of what’s being done continues to focus on diagnosis, in spite of the appetite for concrete action. Funders themselves have produced at least 22 different reports on closing civil society space between January 2016 and July 2018. Add to this the 35 reports by networks, CSOs, and networks – all supported by the funding community – and we have a total of 57 reports.<sup>3</sup> Many of these have added more nuance to the debates: some have put a gender lens on the analysis, or an environmental focus, while others have unpacked a wider meta-analysis around power. Nonetheless, the recommendations are similar: civil society needs core.

long-term flexible funding, we should be supporting networks or informal organisation and strengthening responses to the toxic narrative around civil society.

So if we know about diagnosis, why hasn’t the action moved far enough? What we have learned is that context matters a great deal. While we can identify some key recommendations, implementation will need to be local and bespoke – and this isn’t easy.

The individual strategies discussed in the following pages show that there are positive, concrete ideas emerging – as well as some clear strategic gaps that funders could respond to. But it’s worth noting [...] that there are some barriers and risks associated with actions, both perceived and real.

For one, there are political risks: *“Risk taking is by far the biggest limitation we have”* said one funder. Another argues that caution is warranted: *“Funders need to engage very carefully as they can easily be dismissed as political, interventionist and non-legitimate [...] and that can undermine any efforts to address closing space, especially where populist narratives are prevalent.”* (International funder) Tax legislation, in countries such as Germany or the US, is also perceived to be a barrier. But, arguably, these are issues of perception; there are strong examples of funding to support civil society space from funders located in countries with more restrictive tax regimes.

Many of the challenges identified are organisational, which means they could be overcome. Several interviewees noted capacity within foundations as a consistent problem, especially as the developments are constantly changing. Others discussed problems of silos in foundations: *“We currently do not have sufficient alignment with our advocacy and communications departments, which might otherwise help to strengthen the response strategies we can provide.”* (International funder) Experience and understanding is yet another factor: *“We would like to fund more independent media but we have limited experience.”* (International LGBT+ funder) Lack of an independent media can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of closing space.

Lastly, there were also external challenges emerging from civil society itself: *“There is a lack of ambition and larger vision among civil society organisations and sectors when it comes to strategising around responses – many are too busy trying to meet donor demands.”* (International CSO) Another person argued that *“many funders have been funding the usual suspects – large, national-level civil society organisations using formal advocacy channels, which is of course critical but can exclude non-traditional civil society actors who have historically borne the brunt of closing civic space.”* (International funder)

*“Still using old, tired grant-making tools out of sync with need in terms of systems, strategies, tactics.”*

**International funder**

*“many funders have been funding the usual suspects – large, national-level civil society organisations using formal advocacy channels, which is of course critical but can exclude non-traditional civil society actors who have historically borne the brunt of closing civic space.”*

**International funder**

<sup>3</sup>This excludes regular reports issued at the country level.

## Resistance or resilience?

Where grant-makers are actively engaged in developing strategies to support the enabling environment, do they fund 'resistance' or 'resilience'? Through consultation and analysis, FICS has developed a typology of funder strategies to support closing space<sup>4</sup>. Resistance strategies are defined as those that support specific efforts to resist closing space or create a more enabling environment. Resilience strategies are those that help ensure civil society can function even if space is closed or closing. There is overlap, of course – resilience strategies are necessary to ensure civil society has the capacity to push back against closing space, now or in the future when opportunities arise.

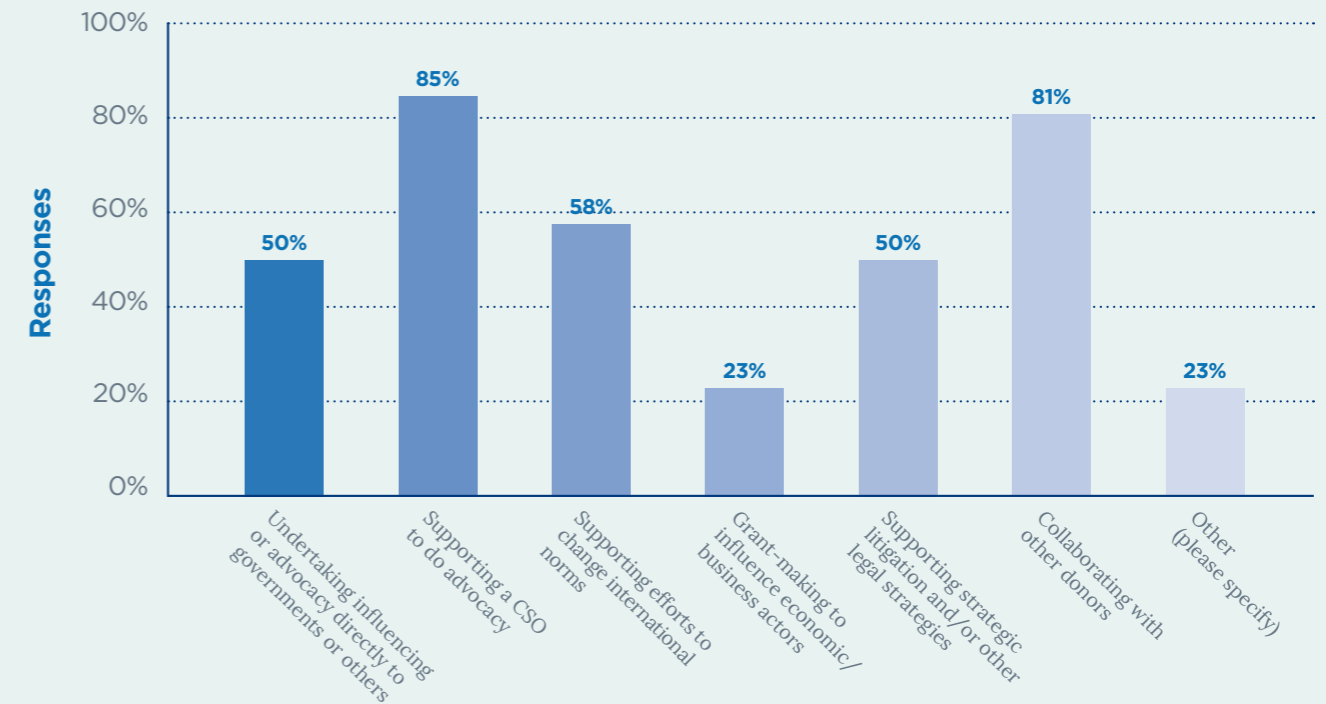
One funder who analysed their grant-making against FICS' framework found that they were only funding civil society resilience and that's what they wanted to consciously prioritise. To this end, they see prioritising core and flexible funding – over a very long term, anywhere from 7-21 years – as being critical. They also undertake significant capacity building and movement support with their grantees – for example, resourcing legal and administrative support in complex environments such as China.

Resistance strategies	Resilience strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Influencing</li> <li>Shaping public opinion</li> <li>International norms</li> <li>Coalition and alliance building</li> <li>Engaging economic actors</li> <li>Legal strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Civil society security</li> <li>Administrative compliance</li> <li>Strengthening CSO institutions &amp; constituency building</li> <li>Local philanthropy</li> <li>New organisational forms</li> </ul>

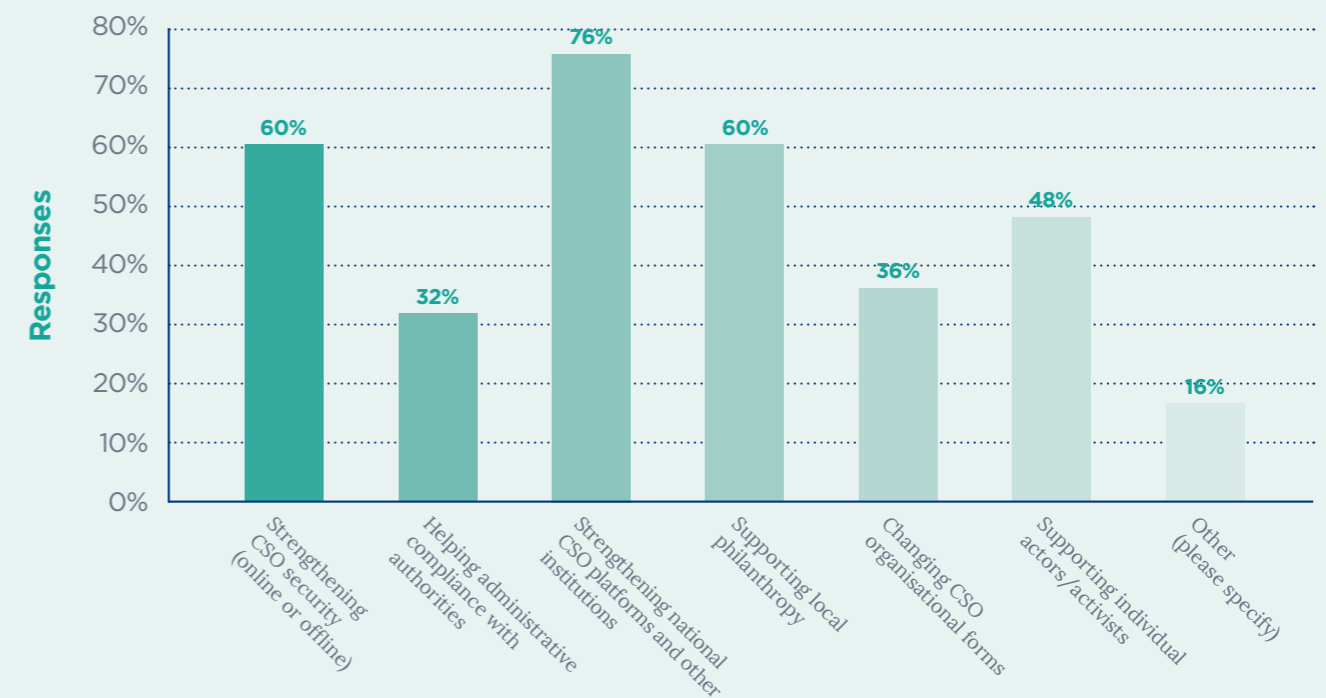
### Drivers of closing space include:

Threats to independent media • Counter-terrorism and anti-terrorism measures • Corporate power  
The aid effectiveness agenda • Religious fundamentalism • Populism

### What resistance strategies are you using to support civil society organisations in closing space environments?



### What resilience strategies are you using to support civil society organisations in closing space environments?



Data from an online survey of 34 grant-makers, conducted by FICS between July and September 2018.

<sup>4</sup>Funders' Initiative for Civil Society (2018), What is a closing space grant-making strategy? [global-dialogue.eu/funders-initiative-for-civil-society](http://global-dialogue.eu/funders-initiative-for-civil-society)

### III. The big changes

*“Elections change a lot. This wasn’t the case before. We were in a progressive mode and things seemed to change very little. Now things can change overnight.”*

National CSO

*“The armed forces are taking more and more space in almost every part of public life.”*

National CSO

#### 1. The pace of change, technology

Elections can act as a flashpoint. Interviewees pointed to Hungary, the US, and Brazil, where civil society has very quickly been made a focus for anti-progressive rhetoric – and instances like Ethiopia or Armenia, where civil society has been able to capitalise on incoming progressive governments: *“Elections change a lot. This wasn’t the case before. We were in a progressive mode and things seemed to change very little. Now things can change overnight.”* (National CSO)

The rise of fake news, bots and artificial intelligence present strategic challenges and are moving at a pace that few can keep up with: *“The speed of our response has changed. Every time there is a piece of fake news or propaganda put out by the government, there is an instant response in social media and new media.”* (Philanthropic infrastructure organisation)

**Funder response:** see [Driving Digital, page 16](#); [Broadening civil society, page 18](#)

#### 2. Hyper-nationalism, militarism, and a new world order?

The rapid erosion of internationalism has come out loud and clear; international norms have weaker currency than ever before. Trump’s casual dismissal of ‘globalists’, or Brexit’s pull back from the EU, are all signs of increasing nationalism and a retreat from finding multilateral solutions. Accompanying this trend comes growing militarism. This was

identified in our research as being directly linked to closing space throughout the world, as leaders promote the need for security and safety, taking advantage of people’s fears: *“The armed forces are taking more and more space in almost every part of public life.”* (National CSO)

**Funder response:** see [Going local, page 14](#); [Going deeper, page 20](#)

#### 3. The rise of conservative civil society

Enabled by governments, conservative civil society is finding its voice – and, in many ways, using it effectively against others. In the US, new anti-protest laws are being implemented under the guise of ‘freedom of expression’, ensuring space for conservative voices while restricting others: *“We’ve seen an alarming rise in attempts to challenge our fundamental democratic rights, like freedom of assembly, often backed by corporate-funded groups. As a funder, we’ve had to step back and determine how best to deal with this. We realised there was an utter lack of resources at the state and local levels, where restrictive laws were being introduced, so we’ve shifted our strategy in the last couple of years to address the onslaught, through things like advocacy and counter-narratives.”* (National Funder)

At the same time, the rise of GONGOS – government-sponsored NGOs with preferential access to government funding – is increasingly problematic in developing countries.

**Funder response:** see [Going local, page 14](#); [Telling stories, page 17](#)



Image: Protestors advocating for net neutrality in Philadelphia, January 2018. © Michael Candelori / Shutterstock.com

#### 4. Civil society is ‘the enemy’

Some activists, like those working on LGBT+ rights for example, have always come under attack, accused of bringing in ‘western values’. But criminalising dissent is now a mainstay of the anti-CSO toolkit, across issues and around the world. Bolsonaro quickly labelled human rights activists and environmentalists as terrorists and pledged to lock them up or force them to leave the country. At the time of writing, protestors in the UK fighting against forced deportations of migrants were on trial under anti-terrorism laws, while across southern Europe – in Italy, for example – even official civil society groups helping migrants were being criminalised: *“In Europe, we’re seeing a worrying trend towards the right. With this comes a monumental lack of humanity from both public discourse and the response to people on the move. As a consequence, humanitarian work and*

*volunteering is becoming vilified, and even made illegal in some cases.”* (European human rights funder)

**Funder responses:** See [Broadening civil society, page 18](#); [Telling stories, page 17](#)

#### 5. ... And philanthropy rises to the challenge?

Many respondents said that, while the pace here may seem slow, there are big changes afoot – from supporting new types of organisations and individuals, to exploring new joint funding mechanisms, like the European fund Civitates, or engaging in direct advocacy. We spoke to a German foundation who hosted a series of public panel discussions with their government: *“When we started this work, the word advocacy was anathema. Now there is much more.”* (International human rights funder)

*“When we started this work, the word advocacy was anathema. Now there is much more.”*

International human rights funder

## IV. The big trends

*“Protecting the digital environment is the key to protecting civic space.”*

**Digital CSO activist**

### 1. Going local

The first few years of closing space grant-making focussed on international action. This was partly because these groups were the ones looking at the macro-level trends, and partly because they already had relationships with international funders.

*“Until 2016, we focussed on elevating the issues and creating global conversations [...] But this doesn't give us the strategies to deal with the trend. They're more nuanced and best addressed at the national level. But we realised no funding was going to the national level.”* (International human rights funder)

*“We need to be more regional instead of global. The answer is in more country specific discussions.”* (National CSO)

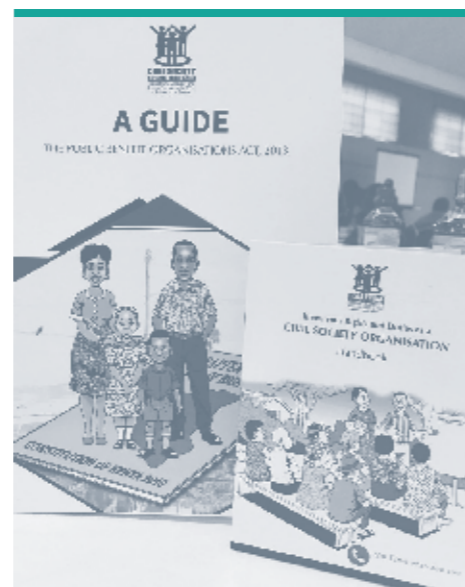
In practice, going local means a range of things, from supporting sub-national platforms and coalitions, to supporting groups to raise money locally through investing in philanthropic infrastructure.

#### Debates and challenges:

While our research shows a high degree of sentiment for ‘going local’, many express that they find it difficult to get to the local level or are concerned about accountability. Scale, funding restrictions, or not knowing local actors were all cited as barriers: *“There is a big disconnect at the community and grassroots level vs. funder support at the national level. They're not necessarily connected with the extent of the threats and challenges facing communities.”* (International environment funder)



**Sur 26: Reclaiming Civic Space**, a journal published by Conectas and the Fund for Global Human Rights



**A Guide to the Public Benefit Organizations Act 2013**, published by the Civil Society Reference Group in Kenya

Another challenge with going local is when and where to continue to support international work on the issue. ‘Going local’, one respondent argued, could see the withering away of organisations that have been integral in pressuring for useable, universal, international standards: *“There are players that have prioritised engagement in the international, countries like China, Egypt, or Cuba, that recognize that this is their time to reshape global norms. We can't leave the field entirely to them.”* (International CSO)

For others, *“it's exceptionally important for the global community to provide a moral compass on the direction their country should be heading. It's important in terms of solidarity and inspiration.”* (International CSO)

#### Gaps and opportunities:

##### i. Creating spaces to convene:

*“At local levels [subnational] there are several clever, tactical ways that organisations are navigating forms of crackdowns [...] we need more spaces for activists to share with one another at the regional level.”* (International human rights funder)

##### ii. Focussing on local narratives:

Local organisations need more resources to be able to communicate and advocate for civil society and their issues specifically. *“Durable, enduring change has to come from the local level. Ultimately this is about changing the mindsets and nurturing a culture of democratic values.”* (International CSO)

##### iii. Constituency-building:

Focussing on rooting support for civil society in communities. *“Establishing stronger accountability to the constituency is essential, not only to appeal to the constituency but also to encourage healthier functioning of civil society [...] The way forward in strengthening the legitimacy of CSOs in the context of the politically hostile environment is based on the combination of various strategies that include not only with whom CSOs work, but also who they are in terms of what values they stand for, how they work, what they do and what impact they have.”* (European funder)

##### iv. Domestic giving:

The idea of foreign funding is under widespread attack. Community philanthropy, raising support from middle class givers, or investing in wider local infrastructure for philanthropy are all new investment opportunities for private philanthropy. *“More domestic funding will make you more sustainable, have a broader constituency and therefore less vulnerable.”* (International funder) Though this comes with a health warning by several who fund this strategy: this is a long-term strategy that won't change things overnight. *“It'll take time, but in 5-10 years, you can have significant progress.”* (National funder)

*“More domestic funding will make you more sustainable, have a broader constituency and therefore less vulnerable.”*

**International funder**



“Protecting the digital environment is the key to protecting civic space.”

Digital CSO activist

## 2. Driving digital

“If you think about how the world is moving into the digital space, then civil society space is going to increasingly move into the digital environment. Therefore, protecting the digital environment is the key to protecting civic space.” (Digital CSO activist)

The convergence between the online and offline worlds is striking. Internet surveillance, shutdowns, and online intimidation are all experienced by civil society activists on the frontlines of closing space. Increasingly, digital activists are faced with the same restrictions as those in the offline world: threats and intimidation, spurious audits, or the closing down of funding sources.

Funders are now recognising this convergence. At RightsCon 2018, the conference for human rights in the digital age, there were at least 70 funders representing 30 institutions – with almost a third of the institutions represented new to the digital space.

### Debates and challenges:

Outside of RightsCon, collaboration between funders in the online and offline worlds to collaborate feels scarce. Moreover, traditional funders may perceive the online world to be ‘techy’ and not something they’re familiar with. Beyond funding digital security, there appear to be few moves from the offline to the online space.

Another challenge is the use of new digital technologies by conservative civil society. ‘Fake news’ has taken over the online space and spread like

wildfire. Some funders are supporting fact checking, but it isn’t yet clear if this is sufficient response – other clever techniques are needed to keep pace with changes in the ways technology is used, such as through bots and artificial intelligence.

### Gaps and opportunities:

#### i. Digital security, data and state monitoring:

Activists and journalists are struggling with surveillance and spyware – and there is also a need to look at how emerging technologies can be used against civil society.

There are still opportunities to support low hanging fruit around digital security and safety. There are a number of resources on how to do this well, but there is a huge gap in capacity to service the growing need and to implement the solutions. And new digital ID exercises, like India’s Aadhar or China’s system to rate citizens for being well-behaved or not, will most certainly be used as new tools of exclusion and repression. Organisations need the capacity to be able to do policy development and advocacy on the digital space – getting CSOs to be digitally savvy isn’t enough on its own. “Should we be supporting the tech civil society organisations to be working with other civil society groups to make sure we’re all thinking more strategically about the issue? How does digital technology impact freedom of association?” (International human rights funder)

Many funders are also behind the curve in implementing their own digital security protocols: “We’re walking out of the office and leaving the door open.” (International CSO)

#### ii. Supporting alternatives:

States will continue to block global platforms and promote domestic social media platforms that can be more readily controlled or monitored. This exposes people organising through these platforms to risk. There is innovation by digital activists in response – like the ‘Pursuant System’, which is an alternative mobiliser to corporately owned Facebook. Other forms of open source browsing software are also growing in popularity.

## 3. Telling stories, drawing pictures

‘Narrative’, ‘Framing’, ‘Storytelling’ are hot topics in grant-making: “We’re supporting a series of global labs [...] bringing human rights practitioners together with political strategists, communication and marketing experts, storytellers and funders, to develop testable and tailor-made narratives-based solutions to civic space issues in countries that are almost closed, closing, and open with indicators of closure.” (International human rights funder)

We used to talk about ‘counter-narratives’, but the trend now is toward being more proactive and propositional: “I see groups that are really coming out publicly trying to get the upper hand in the media about what they’re trying to do [...] saying

‘hey, we’re not trying to ruin the country’. Farmers in Peru, for example, carrying mangos and limes: they’re not terrorists, they’re economic producers.” (International environmental funder)

“We developed a communications frame to talk about coal funding, but always locate it in a context. Our phraseology is ‘support civil society participation in energy debates.’” (International environmental funder)

The trend is to fund workshops and ‘framing experts’ or research, such as Dejustica’s anti-populist ‘playbook’<sup>5</sup>. Other creative interventions include the rising trend of ‘artivism’ – from Hivos’ Vital Spaces experiment, asking how art can help to create spaces in new environments, to a rapping project in Cuba, puppet theatre and YouTube videos, or even creating a board game about civic space.

### Debates and challenges:

Like other responses, storytelling is also no quick fix. It takes time and money and is constantly evolving. One funder is investing two years of work on message testing: “You can’t have a strategic communications workshop then sit back and watch. It takes years.” (International human rights funder)

“With trolling, fake news, cyber crimes [...] in that context, narrative change may work but the ground is constantly shifting and there will be new attacks. Civil society will have to constantly keep pace.” (International human rights funder)

“I see groups that are really coming out publicly trying to get the upper hand in the media about what they’re trying to do.”

International environmental funder

*“We hear a lot of the need to work around the narrative, but not much work is happening yet. This needs a big step change and nobody is clear on what that really means.”*

**International human rights funder**

And because of this, it's still unclear what works: *“Donors have been talking about counter-narratives, but have they moved along from that? They're struggling with impact.”* (International CSO)

It has been asked whether activism is too niche and not scaleable enough. But, as a researcher on internet and society argues, even mainstream social media players aren't thinking about scale anymore. They're thinking about intensity of experience – individual experiences, that connect people to issues, as more powerful than mass-market bland messaging.

This is new territory for funders and civil society alike, which means getting out of our comfort zone. *“If our interventions are only about people who speak our language, then we're missing a big part of the picture.”* (International CSO)

#### **Gaps and opportunities:**

The sea of need here is great. *“We hear a lot of the need to work around the narrative, but not much work is happening yet. This needs a big step change and nobody is clear on what that really means.”* (International human rights funder)

#### **i. Understanding the power of the dominant narratives:**

Knowing who is behind negative framing around civil society is just as important as what is being said. There are opportunities for funders to help civil society groups to use tools like the JASS power analysis – resources like the Power and Protection report<sup>6</sup>,

co-developed by JASS and the Fund for Global Human Rights, which examines narratives and strategies around the protection of activists.

#### **ii. Framing as a useful lobbying and advocacy tool:**

One southern academic referred to creating a frame around what a good civil society environment looks like – and is using those principles to communicate to government.

#### **4. Broadening ‘civil society’**

Funders are increasingly talking about supporting individuals and social movements, or new organisational forms. This comes from a recognition that ‘NGO-ization’ may have resulted in a barrier to connecting with local communities – and in recognition of the fact that, when space is closing, civil society doesn't necessarily disappear but changes and transforms. In closed countries, activist groups often become service providers, staying below the radar, while others may shift to formal organisations, such as law firms or social enterprises.

Tactics to support movements, meanwhile, are incredibly varied. Funders are finding ways to sponsor individuals as a way of supporting social movements, or using networks of local funders who can more effectively connect with social movements on the ground. AJWS has developed a toolkit to help funders assess the strengths of social movements.<sup>7</sup>

Participatory grant-making structures are growing in popularity – offering ways to focus on supporting movements.

Supporting individuals can also help to bypass some of the challenges of funding organisations. Some are using this as a way to support better long-term leadership and change: *“We're doing a fellowship programme supporting individuals in their communities to promote neutral work about constitutional values.”* (National funder)

#### **Debates and challenges:**

As civil society is forced to duck and dive, the question is whether, in supporting this transformation, funders undermine our defence of the inherent value of civil society. *“Some CSOs are adapting by changing their organisational forms as they find it no longer possible to effectively operate as a traditional CSO [...] from a macro-level perspective, the shift is unfortunate, but I also understand it.”* (International CSO)

Most funders argue that they have restrictions on supporting non-charities. They also argue that, especially for larger funders, they have difficulty in reaching those grassroots social movements.

INGOs wanting to respond to closing space have also expressed frustration – they can be an important interlocutor between other allies, and have critical research and convening power themselves, but they can be left out of the funding mix:

*“We need to think about the wider eco-system. Donors love using our thinking, but they won't pay for the service.”* (INGO)

The biggest challenge is probably more about risk aversion than it is about the practicality of changing tactics: *“Donors have to move away from the idea that the world is organised as it used to be in the 1990s.”* (Human rights activist)

#### **Gaps and opportunities:**

#### **i. Supporting local, national or regional grant-makers:**

Working with these networks – often referred to, rightly or wrongly, as ‘intermediaries’ – has a tendency to reach the grassroots more effectively, while meeting accountability and risk-management needs of funders. *“We're more thoughtful about what group would be a good fiscal sponsor, based on their relationship with either the state or civil society – and groups are more creative in terms of how they access funding, from activists to diaspora.”* (International funder)

#### **ii. Supporting individuals:**

As organisations become difficult to support, finding ways to support more individuals to enable them to be active is a large gap in the funding landscape.

#### **iii. Getting out in front and rethinking who needs to be supported and how:**

*“I think that in 15 years, the NGO-ization culture will be irrelevant.”* (Human rights activist)

*“Some CSOs are adapting by changing their organisational forms as they find it no longer possible to effectively operate as a traditional CSO [...] from a macro-level perspective, the shift is unfortunate, but I also understand it.”*

**International CSO**

*“We have to walk and chew gum: respond to the immediate threats, but also create democratic political systems or empower and catalyse those who are committed to that.”*

**International CSO**

## 5. Going deeper

There is a difficult line between cause and consequence in closing space. But many funders are looking more long-term, and are trying to address those root causes that have a direct correlation to civil society space: “Work to try to change the political dialogue is very important. We’ve funded more work to push against things that give government impunity – the license to kill law in Peru, for example.” (International environmental funder)

*“We’re trying not to focus on immediate threats. How do you push back against these [restrictions] while recognising that it’s not about the restrictions, but it’s about the mindsets that are behind the various barriers that are being erected. That’s our challenge.”*  
(International CSO)

Earlier in 2018, Global Philanthropy Project (GPP) hosted a meeting to look at the issue of religious fundamentalism – a clear driver of closing space – and its impact on LGBTI groups. Others, both in the human rights and environmental arenas, see holding corporations to account as part of a closing space grant-making strategy.<sup>8</sup>

There is ongoing investment in supporting groups to challenge heavy handed or unequal implementation of counter-terrorism measures, such as advocacy towards the Financial Action Task Force by philanthropy and civil society groups. Labelling civil society as ‘terrorists’ continues to be a rising theme, across the north and south alike.

When space is closed, long-term thinking addressing root causes seems even more important. Funders have supported CSOs to do work on basic civic education, for example, in a number of countries – seen as critical to building a long-term future, without overtly challenging power.

<sup>5</sup> Dejustica (2018), Rising to the Populist Challenge: A New Playbook for Human Rights Activists [dejusticia.org/en/publication/rising-to-the-populist-challenge/](http://dejusticia.org/en/publication/rising-to-the-populist-challenge/)

<sup>6</sup> JASS, FGHR (2017), Power and Protection: Defending Rights in Hostile Contexts [jass-fghr.org/power-and-protection](http://jass-fghr.org/power-and-protection)

<sup>7</sup> AJWS (2016), Assessing the Strength of Social Movements [ajws.org/our-impact/assessing-the-strength-of-social-movements-a-strategy-tool-for-funders/](http://ajws.org/our-impact/assessing-the-strength-of-social-movements-a-strategy-tool-for-funders/)

<sup>8</sup> Global Philanthropy Project (2018), Religious Conservatism on the Global Stage: Threats and Challenges for LGBTI Rights [globalphilanthropyproject.org/religiousconservatismreport/](http://globalphilanthropyproject.org/religiousconservatismreport/)



Image: Courtesy Fund for Global Human Rights

### Debates and challenges:

Many of the root causes of closing space are also root causes of the broader spectrum of issues with which funders are concerned – it’s difficult to draw a line between root causes and the closing space phenomenon, so it’s unclear if these are part of closing space grant-making strategies or other areas of work.

### Gaps and opportunities:

#### i. Militarisation and closing space:

This has been identified as a key issue in some countries, such as Brazil or Thailand. Militarisation that serves to exclude civil society could be seen as an early warning sign, but little is currently known amongst CSOs about the implications or how to counter this: “It was a big step for us to realise that militarisation was a part of closing space. We’re starting to monitor, articulate and map the consequences.” (National CSO)

#### ii. Systems thinking:

There are connections between inequality, insecurity, populism and closing space, and systemic thinking is required. But balancing between immediate work and the long-term requires more secure resources: “We have to walk and chew gum: respond to the immediate threats, but also create democratic political systems or empower and catalyse those who are committed to that.” (International CSO)

*“How do you push back against these [restrictions] while recognising that it’s not about the restrictions, but it’s about the mindsets that are behind the various barriers that are being erected. That’s our challenge.”*

**International CSO**

## V. The big opportunities

*“We have supported one [popular online media organisation] that is now 40% funded by the community. Our goal is to get this 100% funded. Philanthropy can catalyse that.”*

**National funder**

Not to belittle the moment, but, in every crisis, there lies an opportunity – or several. Our research showed no shortage of opportunities to fund pushback against closing space. Here, we highlight some of the larger and more ambitious opportunities identified by our interviewees, including some ideas that are only just getting started, to build a stronger progressive movement globally.

### 1. Thinking big

Now is the time to think ambitiously and boldly, starting to set our own agenda: *“Many of us are too focussed on the current news cycle and we’re allowing others to set the agenda for us. What we all need to do as a community is to have a discussion on where we want to be in 20 years. It has to be long enough that we can’t easily imagine it and predict it and we need to think of the future of global philanthropy and civil society and democracy [...] we need to focus more on creating the dream of the future.”* (International CSO)

Conservative civil society invested big money in think tanks, over many years, to help shift policy and public opinion. One progressive think tank activist compared his own funding model – cap in hand, small, project-based funding, to one of his conservative peers: *“They have 250 high net worth people on their board, all of whom give \$250K (USD) funding every year as core funding. So they have over \$62 million in core, unrestricted funding every year as a starting point.”*

### 2. New media strategies, local ownership

Old media is playing a defensive game. And much of it lacks independence from restrictive governments. Investing in new media and local ownership is a new and emerging frontier: *“We have supported one [popular online media organisation] that is now 40% funded by the community. Our goal is to get this 100% funded. Philanthropy can catalyse that.”* (National funder)

### 3. Building new allies

We often talk about it, but concrete opportunities to create new alliances with others – faith-based groups, trade unions, and the business community – are hugely under-explored. Business, for example, has proven to be a useful alliance in pushing back against restrictive online regulation, and emergency funding has also come from the corporate internet community when digital CSOs have been under attack: *“When you have civil society and a company working together, they’re a much more united force.”* (International CSO)

Several funders mentioned opportunities to convene different actors to build relationships. But working across sectors requires relationship-building and time. Trade unions were high on the priority list: one human rights funder is looking at creating alliances with the trade union movement in a number of countries, while another mentioned how environmental activists on the

ground were working with trade unions to counter civic space restrictions – even though these groups are sometimes at odds: *“We need to identify the bridge organisations between trade unions and civil society and try to identify more robust programmes on freedom of assembly.”* (International funder)

Funders themselves will have access to allies where CSOs don’t. Mapping and exploring these, and taking advantage of these less obvious opportunities, is a new frontier.

### 4. Expanding and innovating philanthropy

Supporting civil society groups is becoming more problematic in many parts of the world, especially for more high-profile funders who are now directly under attack. But funders themselves can catalyse new ways to overcome this challenge – from supporting local funding entities, to investing in philanthropic infrastructure. But there are also new models of funding that have yet to be widely explored: *“If moving money is a problem, then let’s move credit. If donors can’t get money to help with training or support services [...] give organisations 10K worth of credit that they can use to buy services locally.”* (International CSO)

*“Very small numbers of people are needed to sustain local civil society. In a large country, you need 50,000 supporters to open up their purses, not 5 million.”* (National funder)

*“Funding ways to be better coordinated is also an opportunity. It may risk looking like funders funding funders, but “we don’t have our finger on the pulse in terms of the overall picture [...] when a funder pulls out of a country, we could be helping to plug the gaps [if we were better coordinated].”* (International funder)

Civitates, a pooled fund to address closing space in Europe, shows how funders can work together regionally. Regionally-defined solutions of this sort can help overcome working in silos.

There are also some emerging examples of hybrid private-public funding partnerships at regional level, which combine the resources and experiences, of philanthropy and government. These new grant-making entities can bring innovation by, for example, brokering new relationships between for-profit actors (journalists, software developers, artists) and conventional activists, or by placing greater emphasis on convening.

### 5. Well-being funding

We don’t often think about care when we’re on the defensive. But some funders, many of whom were helping individual activists when they were under threat, are identifying opportunities to look beyond immediate risk to a more systemic approach: *“We’re trying to build collective healing and wellness strategies [...] Our main and first objective is to keep them going. We think it’s more complicated for a movement to start from zero.”* (International funder)

*“If moving money is a problem, then let’s move credit. If donors can’t get money to help with training or support services [...] give organisations 10K worth of credit that they can use to buy services locally.”*

**International CSO**

BY ENTERING THE ZONE CREATED BY THIS DRAWING, AND FOR THE PERIOD YOU REMAIN THERE, YOU DECLARE AND AGREE THAT THE US CONSTITUTION WILL NOT APPLY TO YOU.



Image: Declared Void. Carey Young, Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery New York. Photo: Cameron Wittig

*“Our main and first objective is to keep them going. We think it’s more complicated for a movement to start from zero.”*

**International funder**

Creative funding to give civil society individuals or groups time to breathe, think, and build their reserves, is critically important both in the short and the long-term.

And a bonus opportunity (with a challenge):

We’ve focussed this paper on new or emerging strands of work by funders and CSOs. But things like legal strategies remain an important feature of push-back. NGOs, for example, successfully challenged the suspension of their right to receive foreign contributions in both India and Kenya, and we were told by many that the courts are reminding the government that, in a democracy, dissent should not be muzzled. In the US, fighting back against SLAPP lawsuits – strategic lawsuits that aim to exclude public participation – is very clearly a growing need. Transparency and Accountability Initiative, a donor

collective, notes the importance of raising civil society and activists’ awareness of legal resources: not just lawyers, but local laws they could use to fight back against closing space.<sup>9</sup>

Many interviewees argued that the legal piece is hugely under-explored, but they also noted that lawyers are expensive and legal recourse time consuming and relentless. Governments often refuse to implement court orders, and it’s virtually impossible to overturn restrictive laws once enforced. Legal strategies aren’t new, but finding more affordable ways to pursue legal recourse, or embark on strategic litigation, seems to be important – especially in existing democracies.

<sup>9</sup>Transparency and Accountability Initiative transparency-initiative.org/resources/

## VI. Conclusion: Go big or...?

The theme ‘Go big or...’, is a call to action for the funding community to think about being braver, bolder, and not to shy away from the issue of closing space. For several years, when space has closed to civil society and funders who support it, the reaction has often been to step away apologetically and move on. We believe this is self-defeating. It leaves civil society bereft of critical resources, while implying that as funders we’re guilty for wanting to support just causes. And it seriously diminishes the power of civil society over time.

Pushing back against closing civil society space requires creative solutions and, in some cases, big shifts for the funding community. Philanthropy has a pivotal role to play as part of the eco-system that can help civil society thrive. It brings resources, convening power, and strategic capacity, and often has access to decision-makers where civil society may not. But we’re only really beginning to shift gears, away from reaction to building solutions. Our paper identifies some of the more prominent of these solutions, though there are many more out there.

One of the key insights we took home from our research preparing this paper was the fact that many of the barriers to action are internal.

Yes, governments around the world are seeking to contain or control civil society. But civil society, with adequate resources, is also incredibly creative and resilient.

And there are a broad range of initiatives starting to take shape to help them adapt and push back. We can build on many of the ideas and initiatives emerging to help foster a more enabling environment in which a healthy civil society can get on with its job – supporting marginalised communities, standing up for a healthy environment, holding governments to account, or fighting for rights and justice.

But it requires us to focus on the conditions of an enabling environment. Failure to recognise this, and to apply some direct resource to this challenge, will become an ever-larger barrier to seeing progress on all the other issues civil society addresses. The ongoing trend that sees civil society space closing isn’t going away anytime soon. But we can be more proactive in how we respond, and more strategic in how we confront it.

Let’s be clear: this is a long-term endeavour. Short-term measures, like emergency funding or legal recourse, are still very much needed to support groups under attack, but there is no quick fix to closing civil society space. We need to see this as systemic and ongoing. And, in our view, we need to be brave and ‘go big’ on our commitment to a free and open civil society. Because the alternative doesn’t bear thinking about.

*“This isn’t the time to leave money in the bank or to focus on savings.”*

**International CSO**

## Methodology

*“What we all need to do as a community is to have a discussion on where we want to be in 20 years. It has to be long enough that we can't easily imagine it and predict it and we need to think of the future of global philanthropy and civil society and democracy [...] we need to focus more on creating the dream of the future.”*

### International CSO

The paper is not intended to be a comprehensive empirical review of grant-making in this space.

The drivers behind closing space are often broad, systemic challenges on which funders are already active, so it is difficult to define the full universe of activity that serves to combat closing space. We do, however, seek to signpost some parameters about what we mean by 'closing space grant-making', drawing from a number of FICS' funders and others who are creating specific strategies on the issue.

Our analysis is informed by research conducted between July and September 2018, including:

- Semi-structured interviews with 20 funders and civil society experts, aiming to represent a cross-section of issues and geographies.
- A wider online survey of grant-makers, which provided further qualitative and quantitative input and insights. There were 34 respondents in total. Of these:

- 82% fund human rights, 55% fund environmental protection, 40% fund international development, 40% fund culture or the arts, and 69% fund other categories including humanitarian action, LGBT+ rights, education, media, and others.

- 12 are based in the United States, 5 in the UK, 4 in Germany, 3 in the Netherlands, 5 in wider Europe, 2 in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the remainder preferred not to be identifiable by their location.

- 70% fund in Sub-Saharan Africa, 58% fund in Latin America, 48% fund in each of North America, Western Europe, South Asia and Asia Pacific, 45% fund in the Middle East or North Africa, and 12% fund in other geographies including global programmes.

- Desk research, including a review of the websites of 39 funders, four donor networks, and a selection of civil society organisations, alongside a review of published research and online dialogues about closing civil society space.

For more information on scope and methodology, please contact [FICS@global-dialogue.eu](mailto:FICS@global-dialogue.eu)



### Further support and resources

There are a wide range of tools, resources, and analysis that can support grant-makers seeking to develop their response to closing space. A small number are signposted below.

- **What is closing space grant-making? An emerging framework from the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society** [global-dialogue.eu/funders-initiative-for-civil-society](http://global-dialogue.eu/funders-initiative-for-civil-society)
- **Gaining Ground: a framework for developing strategies and tactics in response to governmental attacks on NGOs**, published by INCLO [inclo.net/pdf/gaining-ground.pdf](http://inclo.net/pdf/gaining-ground.pdf)
- **Sur 26: Reclaiming Civic Space, a journal published by Conectas / FGHR** [sur.conectas.org/en/home/issue-26/](http://sur.conectas.org/en/home/issue-26/)

- **Why Shrinking Civil Society Space Matters in International Development and Humanitarian Action**, published by FICS and the European Foundation Centre [efc.be/programmes\\_services/operating-environment/development-and-closing-space/](http://efc.be/programmes_services/operating-environment/development-and-closing-space/)
- **What Does Closing Civic Space Mean for Development? A Literature Review and Proposed Conceptual Framework** [ids.ac.uk/publications/what-does-closing-civic-space-mean-for-development-a-literature-review-and-proposed-conceptual-framework/](http://ids.ac.uk/publications/what-does-closing-civic-space-mean-for-development-a-literature-review-and-proposed-conceptual-framework/)
- **ICNL Civic Freedom Monitor** [icnl.org/research/monitor](http://icnl.org/research/monitor)
- **Freedom House Freedom in the World Index** [freedomhouse.org](http://freedomhouse.org)
- **CIVICUS Monitor** [monitor.civicus.org](http://monitor.civicus.org)

Peer support is available through the online **Donor Community on the Enabling Environment for Civil Society**: a private space for funders to share intelligence and new strategies for taking action in support of civil society.

This community is jointly supported by FICS, Ariadne: European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights, Human Rights Funders Network, and the European Foundation Centre. Email [FICS@global-dialogue.eu](mailto:FICS@global-dialogue.eu) to request access.