

Scotland's International Development Alliance response to the International Development Committee call for evidence on FCDO and civil societies

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Scotland's International Development Alliance is the membership body in Scotland for everyone committed to creating a fairer world, free from poverty, injustice and environmental threats. Our membership brings together a diverse range of over 200 organisations and individuals, including NGOs, businesses, academic institutions and public sector bodies that operate in over 100 countries.

More information on the SIDA's work is available at www.intdevalliance.scot

In our recent paper [From talk to transformation](#) we discuss the need for the UK Government to offer meaningful mechanisms for engagement from civil society, and to push back on the closing of civic space globally.

The government should be funding opportunities that support civil society, particularly those representing traditionally marginalised communities, to take part in global climate, peace and economic negotiations, as well as summits around international affairs topics such as on emerging technologies¹. When hosting such fora, the UK Government also needs to be much more proactive in enabling civil society groups to get visas in a timely and affordable way, perhaps learning from the role the Swedish Government played on this front when supporting the Yemen International Forum in Stockholm². Many activists were bitterly disappointed by the lack of diverse representation and the power imbalances at COP26 in Glasgow, with Lukka, Stanford-Xosei and Muchhala arguing that much of this came down to seemingly "mundane practicalities" around vaccinations and visas that meant countries and activists on the frontlines of the climate crisis were excluded³.

Supporting meaningful engagement, however, goes beyond merely ensuring that marginalised groups are present in the room. At international fora and dialogues, the Government should advocate for inclusive decision-making and participatory coordination structures⁴ and more civil society observer spaces, as well as talking with civil society and marginalised groups about what would make it safe - both physically and psychologically - for them to participate fully, and have open discussions about how power imbalances in the room can be addressed, and also conversations about how conversations at high level fora can be better linked with civil society actors at a local level. The UK government should also work to make sure that topics that address power and inequality - such as gender, disability and colonialism - are prioritised on the agenda for discussion, and acknowledge that those with lived experience are the ones with the technical expertise needed to find solutions. The issue of overrepresentation of individuals and bodies with financial or corporate power should also be addressed - for example, Global Witness reported that 2456 fossil fuel lobbyists were granted access to COP28 in Dubai⁵.

¹ *AI Safety Summit: Open Letter to the UK Prime Minister* (2023). <https://ai-summit-open-letter.info/> (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

² (2022) *The Yemen International Forum*. <https://sanaacenter.org/yif/2022/> (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

³ Lukka, P., Stanford-Xosei, E. and Muchhala, B. (2021) *It's time to decolonise our multilateral system for climate justice*, OpenDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/its-time-to-decolonise-our-multilateral-system-for-climate-justice/> (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

⁴ *Tip sheet #10: - feminist movement building* (2018) Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM). <https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/TS10-Feminist-movement-building-Taking-a-long-term-view.pdf> (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

⁵ *Record number of fossil fuel lobbyists granted access to cop28 climate talks* (2023) Global Witness. <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/record-number-fossil-fuel-lobbyists-granted-access-cop28-climate-talks/> (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

Furthermore there is an opportunity for the UK to play a vital role in defending global civic space.

Across the globe - including in the UK – we are seeing a shrinking of space for civic activism, a growing backlash to social justice approaches from anti-rights and populist movements, and a rise in authoritarian and regressive approaches to rights and equality from governments. Women’s and LGBTQI+ rights are particularly under attack⁶. Some examples of this include the US overturning national legislation protecting women’s access to abortion (with global ramifications⁷) and increasing numbers of states enacting anti-transgender laws⁸, Turkey withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention, and the mobilisation of populist narratives which mix misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia across Europe⁹. In China, the Government has imposed strict censorship policies, including by banning feminist terms and content they see as “harmful speech” or “inciting conflict between the genders”¹⁰. As one participant in our online discussion groups described, “in the last five to eight years, we’ve seen the rise of authoritarianism across the world, whether it is... anti-women’s bodies, anti-abortion, anti-sex education, anti-[trans]gender laws... and most of this is coming from the Global North.

According to the Civicus Monitor, civic space is under attack in 111 countries and only 4% of the world’s population live in countries where fundamental freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression are respected and enabled¹¹. Many countries, including the UK, have heightened government surveillance and policing of marginalised groups¹². Globally human rights defenders, activist groups and civil society organisations find themselves increasingly under threat. In 2022 alone, over 400 human rights defenders were killed because of their human rights work. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that the shrinking of civil society space has entailed severe attacks on women’s rights activists, groups and movements in particular, at risk “precisely because of their work to challenge gender norms and power structures”¹³.

In some countries, such as Egypt, governments are also placing economic sanctions, asset freezes and travel bans on rights activists, with the intention of making it challenging for them to sustain their movements and initiatives. Further, corporations - particularly in the extractive industries - are

⁶ *Countering backlash: Reclaiming gender justice* (2023) Institute of Development Studies. <https://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/countering-backlash-reclaiming-gender-justice/> (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

⁷ Singh, S. and Sedgh, G. (2022) *Global implications of overturning Roe v Wade*, *The BMJ*. <https://www.bmj.com/content/378/bmj.o2025> (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

⁸ *2024 Anti-Trans Bills: Trans legislation tracker* 2024 *Anti-Trans Bills: Trans Legislation Tracker*. <https://translegislation.com/> (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

⁹ *Countering backlash: Reclaiming gender justice* (2023) Institute of Development Studies. <https://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/countering-backlash-reclaiming-gender-justice/> (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

¹⁰ Bergsten, S.S. and Lee, S.A. (2023) *The global backlash against women’s rights*, *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/07/global-backlash-against-womens-rights> (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

¹¹ Frier, S. (2022) *7 Ways Civil Society is under attack globally*, <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2019/09/7-ways-civil-society-is-under-attack-globally/> (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

¹² Hakima Abbas, Co-Executive Director of AWID, said, “Authoritarian forces have used the current pandemic as an excuse to deepen surveillance and militarized responses.” with authoritarian regimes target women and LGBTQ bodies and lives “as the primary rallying site to establish control and power.” *Dialogue 7: Is global south feminism the antidote to rising authoritarianism?* JASS. <https://justassociates.org/women-transforming-crisis/dialogue-7-global-south-feminism/> (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

¹³ *Donor support to Southern Women’s Rights Organisations* (2016) OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/donor-support-to-southern-women-s-rights-organisations.htm> p6 (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

increasingly using aggressive legal tactics to silence critics, as well as wielding significant political influence on governmental policies towards civic space, through lobbying efforts, campaign contributions and revolving door relationships with government officials.

Civil society organisations and groups, particularly women's organisations and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), are also struggling with funding scarcity. Despite the fact that there have been a number of global commitments to financing gender equality through women's and feminist organisations, in actuality very little funding is reaching local women's organisations. Instead, argue Mama Cash and the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), more than 99% of official development assistance (ODA) funding for gender equality has consistently supported large, more mainstream organisations, gone to governments, or stayed within development agencies themselves¹⁴.

The UK can play an important role in helping to pushback on this closing of civic space by:

- Engaging in dialogue with authoritarian states to push for a re-opening of civic space and ensuring an enabling environment for civil society groups
- Using their voice in international fora and multilateral spaces to defend and uphold the rights to freedom of association, freedom of speech and press freedoms, and amplify pressure on governments to uphold their obligations under human rights law
- Work in collaboration with human rights defenders and their networks to identify strategies for addressing attacks on rights and civil society¹⁵, including supporting access to collective bargaining skills-building through international trade union movements¹⁶

Funders Initiative for Civil Society suggest that for areas where civil society is at risk “just keeping civil society alive and functioning would be a success”¹⁷.

Other potential avenues that the UK could consider include holding corporate entities accountable for placing activists in danger¹⁸, including through supporting independent mechanisms to monitor and investigate corporate conduct overseas, and asserting extraterritorial jurisdiction to prosecute MNCs for crimes and human rights violations committed.

The recent white paper is clear that support to civil society is high on the agenda of the FCDO. However, historically other donor countries have been more willing to tolerate the risk of damaging relationships with partner country governments by speaking out about human rights violations¹⁹. At domestic level, the UK Government is also pursuing a number of legislative moves towards reducing

¹⁴ Staszewska, K., Miller, K. and Lever, E. (2020) *How bilateral and multilateral funders can resource ...* https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/MovingMoreMoney_FINALFINAL.pdf p6 (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

¹⁵ Yoshida, K., Bond, H. and Kezie-Nwoha, H. (2021) *Defending the future - London School of Economics*. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/assets/documents/2021/Defending-the-Future.pdf> (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

¹⁶ *What Works: Strengthening Delivery Capabilities of Women Non-Government Organisations and Civil Society Organisations in Jordan* (2023) *Women Peace and Security Helpdesk*. https://wpshelpdesk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/WPS034-Strengthening-capabilities-of-women-NGOs-and-CSOs-in-Jordan_FOR-PUBLISHING.pdf p32 (Accessed: 05 March 2024).

¹⁷ *Funders Initiative for Civil Society* (May 2016) *Challenging the Closing Space for Civil Society. A practical starting point for funders*. p13

¹⁸ Yoshida, K., Bond, H. and Kezie-Nwoha, H. (2021) *Defending the future - London School of Economics*. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/assets/documents/2021/Defending-the-Future.pdf> p9 (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

¹⁹ *The UK's approach to democracy and human rights* (2023) *ICAI*. <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/review/the-uks-approach-to-democracy-and-human-rights/> (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

civic space, with moves to restrict protest among others²⁰ leading the UK to be downgraded on Civicus's civic freedoms index. The UK often supports authoritarian governments overseas through the export of surveillance technologies and counterterrorism and policing training²¹. For the UK Government to really commit to civil society support overseas, it needs to reverse a number of these policies at home.

We now address, more specifically, the questions set in the call for evidence:

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the FCDO's approach to strengthening civil society in aid-recipient countries as part its wider development strategy?

Strengths:

- The FCDO has shown commitment to supporting civil society in its agenda, as highlighted in the recent white paper.
- Collaborative efforts and commitments to engage with women's groups and persons with disabilities are positive steps.
- Acknowledgment of the importance of meaningful engagement with diverse civil society, women's rights organisations (WROs), and civil society organisations (CSOs) demonstrates awareness of the need for inclusivity.

Weaknesses:

- Despite commitments, there are concerns about the lack of detailed plans on how to institutionalise, monitor, and evaluate meaningful consultation and participation. There remains a strong concern that the relationship between local civil society actors and FCDO is "transactional" rather than genuine partnership. This needs to be constantly evaluated in a way that intentionally puts a locally led approach at the forefront.
- There are conflicting actions such as restrictions on protest domestically and export of surveillance technologies and counterterrorism training abroad, which undermine the FCDO's support for civil society.
- Limited funding is reaching local civil society organisations, particularly women's organisations, despite global commitments to financing gender equality, this suggests gaps in implementation.

What is the role of UK diplomats and staff in supporting civil society and civil society organisations?

- UK diplomats and staff can play a crucial role in advocating for civil society at the international level, defending freedom of association, freedom of speech, and press freedoms.

²⁰ Butler, P. (2023) 'Hostile, authoritarian' UK downgraded in Civic Freedoms Index, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/16/hostile-authoritarian-uk-downgraded-in-civic-freedoms-index> (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

²¹ *Exporting repression: How Britain is supplying surveillance ...* (2019) *Global Justice Now*. <https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/resource/exporting-repression-how-britain-supplying-surveillance-technology-human-rights-abusing/> (Accessed: 03 March 2024).

²² *Increasing our security exports, a new government approach* (2014) *UK Trade & Investment*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cffd9e5274a2af0ae2c17/UKTI_Security_Exports_Brochure_update.pdf (Accessed: 03 March 2024).

- They can engage in dialogue with authoritarian states to push for the re-opening of civic space and ensure an enabling environment for civil society groups. This can also be by investment in and ensuring the coordination of local civil society mechanisms.
- Collaboration with human rights defenders and their networks would help identify strategies for addressing attacks on rights and civil society.
- Supporting access to collective bargaining skills-building through international trade union movements would demonstrate a commitment to empowering civil society.
- Encourage open dialogue on the internal as well as external barriers that are stopping staff/those with reasonability in country posts from developing equitable partnerships, that empower civil society interaction and progress.

Are the current processes for acquiring and reporting on funding enabling or preventing smaller civil society organisations as they seek to secure support?

- Challenges such as limited funding reaching smaller civil society organisations, indicate that current processes may be preventing their access to support.
- Concerns about stringent registration requirements for NGOs and restrictions on foreign funding may hinder smaller organisations' ability to secure support.
- There's a need for transparent and accessible processes that prioritise the needs of smaller civil society organisations and ensure equitable distribution of funding, that supports as many diverse and truly local organisations as possible. Making the process flexible and fair and in addition simplifying funding management and reporting processes, that has a greater level/or change to attitude towards "risk" that enables rather than restricts locally led civil society initiatives.
- A suggestion for improvement would be to enable direct unrestricted funding, which includes core funding and overhead costs, that seek to strengthen civil society actors - with the design, implementation and evaluation of the programmes being funded as locally led, with capacity building assistance being offered.

Do commitments made in the recent international development White Paper provide a sufficient foundation for the FCDO's work on promoting civil society across aid-recipient countries?

- While the commitments in the white paper indicate a positive direction, much depends on the implementation of these commitments.
- Detailed plans outlining how these commitments will be institutionalised, monitored, and evaluated are necessary to ensure effectiveness.
- Reversing conflicting policies at home, such as restrictions on protest and export of surveillance technologies, is crucial for the FCDO to truly commit to supporting civil society overseas and to have credibility as an exponent of civil society.

At UK level, there are some potential positives around the collaborative development of the civil society fund, and the commitments to meaningful engagement with women's groups and persons with disabilities into their respective women and girls and disability inclusion strategies. However, it is now "crucial that the FCDO outlines details on how it intends to institutionalise, monitor and evaluate meaningful consultation and participation and ensure it includes meaningful engagement with diverse civil society, WROs and CSOs so that their perspectives inform agendas"²³. This should

²³ GAPS response to the launch of the UK's International Women and Girls Strategy (2023) GAPS UK. <https://gaps-uk.org/gaps-response-to-the-launch-of-the-uks-international-women-and-girls-strategy/>. (Accessed: 01 March 2024).

include the publishing of delivery plans, drawn up in consultation with civil society, to enable transparent accountability to those whom the commitments have been made.

To what extent has FCDO support for improving the enabling environment for civil society, and direct support for civil society organisations, aided progress towards reaching Sustainable Development Goal 16 - "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions"?

- FCDO's support for improving the enabling environment for civil society and direct support for civil society organisations could contribute significantly to achieving SDG 16.
- By advocating for inclusive decision-making structures, defending human rights, and supporting access to justice and accountable institutions, FCDO efforts align with SDG 16 objectives.
- However, the impact may vary depending on the effectiveness of implementation, including monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

What role can the FCDO's work on improving civil society play in broader UK international policy?

- FCDO's work on improving civil society can enhance the UK's international reputation as a champion of democracy, human rights, and sustainable development.
- It can strengthen diplomatic relationships by promoting dialogue and cooperation on issues related to civic space, freedom of expression, and human rights.
- Supporting civil society aligns with broader UK foreign policy objectives of promoting stability, peace, and inclusive development.

What wider benefits can be harnessed from strengthened civil society?

- Strengthened civil society contributes to more inclusive and accountable governance, fostering democracy and respect for human rights.
- It enables grassroots participation in decision-making processes, leading to more responsive, sustainable, legitimate and credible policies and programs.
- Civil society serves as a watchdog, holding governments and corporations accountable for their actions, thereby promoting transparency and social justice.
- By addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges, strengthened civil society contributes to sustainable development and poverty reduction efforts.