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# Supporting Civil Society in Acute Crises

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In efforts to mitigate violent crises, Western publics and policymakers usually agree on the need to 'support civil society'. Fostering political inclusion and accountability is clearly important for stabilization and peacebuilding, but to what extent can such support constructively influence acute crisis dynamics? Based on a systematic analysis of experiences in Belarus, Sudan, Lebanon, and Mali, this study finds that support to civil society actors in acute crises has rarely lived up to its promises. While outside support has helped civil society actors survive and develop under often difficult conditions, a common lack of strategic direction on the part of donors has limited its effectiveness toward better governance, greater stability or peace. Civil society support can be developed into an important element of the stabilization policy toolkit, but it will require donors to approach such efforts as part of a concerted, crisis-specific political strategy with realistic objectives that reflect local conditions.

# Acknowledgments

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## Acronyms

| | |
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| 3RF | Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework |
| AUB | American University of Beirut |
| BMZ | German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development |
| CCSC/PURN | Coalition Citoyenne des Associations de la Société Civile Pour la Paix, l'Unité et la Réconciliation Nationale |
| CNSC | Conseil National de la Société Civile |
| CNSP | Committee for the Salvation of the People |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |
| EMK | Espoir Mali Koura |
| EU | European Union |
| FFC | Forces for Freedom and Change |
| FOSC | Forum des Organisations de la Société Civile |
| GIZ | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit |
| IBK | Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta |
| IRI | International Republican Institute |
| KfW | Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau |
| MINUSMA | United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali |
| M5-RFP | 5 June Movement-Assembly of Patriotic Forces |
| NGOs | Non-Governmental Organizations |
| NIMD | Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy |
| NRCs | Neighborhood Resistance Committees |
| OSIWA | Open Society Initiative for West Africa |
| PAOSC | Support Program for Civil Society Organizations |
| SPA | Sudanese Professionals Association |
| TMC | Transitional Military Council |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |

# Key Points for Practitioners

## ! Why This Study Matters

In efforts to mitigate violent crises, Western publics and policymakers usually agree on the need to 'support civil society'. Fostering political inclusion and accountability is clearly important for stabilization and peacebuilding, but to what extent can such support constructively influence acute crisis dynamics? This study provides a systematic analysis of relevant past experiences in Belarus, Sudan, Lebanon, and Mali, as well as actionable recommendations on how future efforts can be improved.

## 🔍 What We Found

- Local civil society actors can be even more consequential political players in crisis environments than often assumed.
- Donors can provide critical support to civil society actors, but their short-term impact on crisis dynamics is often constrained.
- Donor efforts to support civil society tend to lack strategic direction.
- Limited real-time analysis and inflexible processes hinder rapid responses to dynamic crisis situations.

## → What Donors Should Do

- Engage civil society actors in fragile settings as part of a broader political strategy.
- Establish flexible funding and project approval mechanisms for crisis settings.
- Invest in (closer to) real-time, context-specific knowledge to inform civil society-related activities.
- Design measures to support civil society in crisis contexts at the country and/or portfolio level.
- Strengthen exchange and strategic coordination efforts on civil society activities across organizations from the same country as well as among donors with compatible objectives.
- Provide units and staff members involved in the implementation of civil society projects with pragmatic guidance on steps to take in case of sudden changes to the local situation.

# Executive Summary

Whenever a violent crisis gains international attention, 'supporting civil society' is among the few prescriptions that Western publics and policymakers easily agree on. Rightly so, since fostering more inclusive governance is an important element of stabilization and peacebuilding, and since civil society actors are key to holding their governments to account. However, we find that support to civil society actors in acute crises has rarely lived up to its promise. Donors have often failed to understand the diversity of local civil society and misjudged the importance of different civil society players in shaping the dynamics of a crisis and the way to peace. While outside support has been critically important to many civil societies, a common lack of strategic direction on the part of donors has limited its effectiveness toward better governance, greater stability or peace.

These findings and resulting policy recommendations are based on an analysis of the impact of donor support to civil society actors in four recent crisis settings: Belarus, Sudan, Lebanon, and Mali. In addition to the academic case study literature and publicly available sources, this study is based on almost 100 interviews with donor organization officials, civil society actors and experts across the four country contexts.

A note on key terms: We use 'civil society' broadly to capture actors outside of government or parliament (or business) who seek to influence political processes and decisions, whether or not they are formally registered. Thus, this term includes trade unions, media organizations, religious groups as well as various kinds of informal groupings and civic networks. We see 'stabilization' as inextricably linked to finding a road toward sustainable peace, not to preserving the ruling system. In fact, effective stabilization often requires change that may bring the risk of violence. Such situations present donors with difficult ethical decisions, and arguably a particular responsibility to protect local civil society partners from harm.

## Finding 1: Local civil society actors can be even more consequential political players in crisis environments than often assumed.

**1.1.** **Local civil society actors are relevant – sometimes even central – in shaping how crises play out.** In Lebanon and Belarus, mass protests driven by civil society actors challenged the respective regimes and created windows of opportunity for political change. In Sudan, the protests even toppled the regime. In Mali, the most influential civil society groups opposed the Western stabilization strategy, with important political effects. As civil society actors matter a great deal, donors need to actively engage them as part of stabilization efforts – even if civil society actors were more effective at disrupting the status quo than at achieving more sustainable political change in the examined cases. That said, there is no such thing as a single 'civil society' in any context: various actors pursue different strategies toward

distinct, if sometimes overlapping, goals. Without a basic understanding of who is who and who wants what, any attempt to engage with civil society is doomed to fail.

**1.2.** **The aims and strategies of civil society actors are rarely perfectly aligned with donor preferences.** In Lebanon, for example, prominent civil society groups wanted more and faster political change than donors were willing to support. In Mali, many civil society representatives criticized donor governments' focus on quick elections (even those generally in favor of democratic elections and reform), as they prioritized physical safety in the short-term in light of the severe security situation. Given such divergences, it is critical for donors to understand the local civil society landscape in sufficient depth to identify suitable partners. If donors struggle to find suitable partners or if important civil society actors openly oppose their strategies, this may also serve as an alarm bell as to whether those donor strategies are indeed viable.

## Finding 2: Donors can provide critical support to civil society actors, but their short-term impact on crisis dynamics is often constrained.

**2.1.** **Donor support can help civil society actors to survive and develop even under very challenging conditions**. Donor efforts across the examined cases have helped civil society actors to sustain and develop their activities in the face of challenging economic conditions, repression and even violence, contributing to longer-term processes of societal and political change. Even with regard to Belarus, where organized local activism became all but impossible after a drastic crackdown, donors eventually found ways to keep civil society groups alive, even if in exile. Further, donors have often provided support to civil society actors in a fairly pragmatic fashion and with sensitivity for local conditions.

**2.2.** **Donors' ability to influence acute crisis dynamics by supporting civil society is often constrained by factors beyond their control.** Security challenges (Mali) or a repressive state apparatus (Belarus) may severely limit civil society actors' room to manoeuver in the first place. Relatedly, political actors ultimately capable of defending their interests through armed force (Sudan and Lebanon) can block change in ways that no amount of international support to civil society can overcome – at least in the short-term. Moreover, civil society actors involved in crisis situations are often hesitant to accept foreign support due to reputational concerns as well as wariness of external interference with their agendas.

## Finding 3: Efforts to support civil society tend to lack strategic direction.

**3.1.** **Donors typically lack a clear political strategy to guide their actions on civil society support toward greater immediate impact.** Efforts to support civil society actors and protect civic space are commonly undertaken as an end in itself and a long-term contribution to a functioning democracy, rather than as

part of a political strategy to mitigate a crisis. Accordingly, none of the examined cases featured a concerted donor effort in which support for civil society actors was deliberately combined with other stabilization instruments and diplomatic initiatives to address incumbent political elites. Engaging with civil society actors without a crisis-specific political strategy can have positive long-term effects, but is unlikely to substantially influence acute crisis dynamics.

**3.2.** **Making programming decisions at the level of individual projects renders it difficult to gear portfolios toward a unified purpose.** In Mali, for instance, while donors saw the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement as central to their political strategy, only a fraction of their projects with civil society partners had a direct connection to this process. More generally, due to project-driven programming logics, resources are spread over various, often small initiatives that may each have a positive incremental effect, but do not combine for substantial impact on acute crisis dynamics. Opportunities for synergies across projects (for example, by fostering ecosystems of actors with complementary activities) remain under-exploited.

**3.3.** **Potential synergies between different donors with compatible political objectives are rarely leveraged effectively.** There is limited exchange and cooperation between different donors both in terms of strategic portfolio planning and with regard to sharing resources (e.g., local actor analyses). While the German model – with its distribution of responsibilities between the German Federal Foreign Office and its embassies, political foundations and other actors – has clear strengths, the various organizations tend to lack a detailed understanding of each other's activities in the same country, making it difficult to capitalize on complementarities. Across donor countries, this issue is even more apparent.

## Finding 4: Limited real-time analysis and inflexible processes hinder rapid responses to dynamic crisis situations.

**4.1.** **Limited or outdated donor understandings of local actor landscapes and socio-political dynamics make it difficult to identify relevant impact pathways and potential partners.** Many donors rely on infrequent mapping exercises that are easily rendered outdated by dynamic crisis developments. Especially in organizations with a dedicated focus on civil society support, such formal analyses are often supplemented with knowledge from individuals within their respective networks, which is a highly valuable resource that should arguably be used more systematically, ideally also across organizations (see below). However, given this knowledge base, donors tend to work with partners who are already close to them, and may overlook the most innovative or relevant actors.

**4.2.** **Despite considerable pragmatism and creativity at the ground level, donors usually take too long to adjust to changes in local circumstances.** In dynamic situations, lengthy and complex application processes and demanding reporting

requirements often hinder smaller and new civil society groups from obtaining support when they need it. Donor attempts to create flexible solutions on a case-by-case basis tend to be delayed (and so is the much needed support), as they do not have such solutions ready upfront. Critically, slow responses to changing circumstances can also expose local partners in ongoing projects to unnecessary risks. The latter was unfortunately the case in Belarus, where some activists were prosecuted in the post-election crackdown with the help of documents retained on account of donor reporting requirements. Steps such as the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy indicate that donors have recognized and begun to address these concerns.

## Recommendations to Donors

- **Engage civil society actors in fragile settings as part of a broader political strategy.** Carefully consider which overarching political goals will guide the overall approach to a given context, which plausible trajectories out of a local crisis situation appear politically desirable within this framework, and how support to specific civil society actors will make these trajectories more likely. To do so, consider options for civil society support in conjunction with engagement with incumbent elites as well as other instruments of stabilization policy. Ascertain that the strategy for supporting civil society resonates with local dynamics and priorities rather than imposing external templates.

- **Establish flexible funding and project approval mechanisms for crisis settings.** Consider reserving a budget share for new initiatives with civil society actors immediately related to acute crisis situations (with flexibility to use these funds in different countries, as needs and opportunities arise). Establish – ideally in dedicated civil-society-focused funding institutions – significantly simplified application, assessment and approval processes for projects funded through these resources. Regarding approval mechanisms, focus on ascertaining strategic relevance, mitigating the risk of major unintended effects on crisis dynamics and protecting the safety of civil society partners while reducing administrative requirements as much as possible.

- **Design measures to support civil society in crisis contexts at the country/ portfolio level.** To make the greatest possible difference with limited resources, select partners and projects in such a way that the overall portfolio reflects the defined strategic political aims. Ideally, identify bundles of initiatives that are complementary and mutually reinforce one another beyond an individual project. Initiatives that strengthen relations between different civil society actors can be highly valuable, but be wary of creating artificial institutional structures (such as umbrella organizations) that may hinder inclusion and dynamism. While it can initially generate additional work, strategic portfolio development can be supported by pragmatic tools, an example of which is provided along with this study. Designing portfolios in this fashion will also help streamline activities and reduce ongoing efforts on projects with low impact or unclear strategic relevance.

- **Invest in (closer to) real-time, context-specific knowledge to inform civil society-related activities.** In addition to the expertise of each organization's own staff, cultivate networks of (ideally local) experts to provide targeted input at key stages of program design and seek opportunities to share analyses with like-minded partners. Despite the importance of trusted key individuals, continuously broadening this network and ensuring diversity of perspectives is critical in order to avoid blind spots and biases.

- **Strengthen exchange and strategic coordination on civil society activities across organizations from the same country, as well as among donors with compatible objectives.** Beyond fostering informal networks, consider more structured formats for coordination to reduce gaps and duplications between portfolios and allow for greater resource sharing (e.g., strategic priorities, analyses of local actor constellations). In the German case, closer collaboration between the German Federal Foreign Office and the political foundations could generate synergies without compromising the latter's independence. Given that many projects with civil society involvement and relevance for political stabilization are conducted by development cooperation actors, interactions with development organizations should also be strengthened, particularly with regard to aligning on priorities and sharing relevant resources and knowledge.

- **Provide units and staff members involved in the implementation of civil society projects with pragmatic guidance on steps to take in case of sudden changes to the local situation.** This guidance should place particular emphasis on helping avert immediate threats to civil society partners such as violent repression or arrests that may arise from a sudden political crackdown, but also address opportunities that a dynamically changing situation may present. More detailed recommendations on the structure and content of such guidance are available in the final chapter of this report.

Supporting civil society actors in fragile environments to substantially advance crisis mitigation efforts is a challenging task for which donors will never have full control over the outcome. Future efforts in this area should therefore not be overburdened with excessive expectations and set realistic objectives in light of local conditions. While it is unlikely that more or different support to civil society actors alone will fundamentally change the trajectory of any crisis, the approach recommended here can help donors to develop civil society support into a much more promising instrument in the broader stabilization policy toolkit.

# Introduction

## Acute Crises and the Quest for Inclusive Governance

**A lack of sufficiently inclusive governance remains a key driver of many conflicts.**

Whenever a violent crisis rises to the surface of international attention, 'supporting civil society' is among the few prescriptions that Western publics and policymakers easily agree on. This unquestioned consensus is striking given the fact that there is little, if any, analysis of some of the key issues around such support: Who has and has not been empowered under the vague label of 'civil society' in past efforts? How have the inevitable risks and unintended consequences of external involvement played out? And ultimately, what has been achieved through such support in terms of democracy, better governance or greater stability and peace?

There are many good reasons to support civil society actors in acute crises. Though many policymakers have grown wary of linking crisis prevention or peacebuilding to ambitious democratic reform objectives, a lack of sufficiently inclusive governance remains a key driver of many conflicts. An approach that does not address this issue is therefore prone to failure and, at worst, can make external actors complicit with repressive regimes sowing the seeds of future conflict. Civil society actors rooted in the local context are important partners to drive progress in this regard.

However, the recent practice of supporting civil society in acute crises has taken insufficient note of a few basic questions and challenges that must be addressed in order for these efforts to be successful. First, advocates of such support in a given crisis rarely spell out what specific roles different civil society actors play and how their activities may affect crisis dynamics in concrete terms. All too often, the impulse to support civil society is based on a normative imperative in its own right, wrapped in the assumption that 'civil society actors are always the good guys' and that 'supporting the good guys will always yield good things' – an assumption that is not borne out by reality, as we discuss below. If, however, the point is to support civil society as a means of promoting conflict resolution and peacebuilding, then disentangling actors, motives and potential effects is critical.

Second, the context for civil society actors across the globe is increasingly challenging. Civic space – i.e., civil society actors' room to maneuver for organizing and pursuing their activities – has been shrinking in many places in connection with the broader trend of "democratic recession."[1] In addition to various other forms of

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1     See, for example: Hannah Smidt, "Shrinking Civic Space in Africa: When Governments Crack Down on Civil Society," *GIGA Focus Africa* 4 (2018), https://bit.ly/40JBmHC; Larry Diamond, "Facing up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): pp. 141–155.

repression and harassment, regimes increasingly restrict external support to local civil society groups. Thus, effectively helping civil society actors in places where such support is most needed is inherently difficult.

Finally, civic activism has increasingly taken the form of mass protests in recent years.[2] In some cases, such protests form a part of 'maximalist' campaigns aimed at toppling the respective regime from the outset. In others, the heavy-handed repression of emerging civic activism itself leads to growing popular support for revolutionary objectives. Where pro-democratic protesters face autocratic crackdowns, as most recently seen in Iran, such escalations tend to elicit strong political demand for support in Western countries. But this pathway to political change is clearly a particularly risky and uncertain one. Though Western governments regularly stress that 'stabilization' does not simply mean preserving the status quo, they usually engage with such situations with great hesitation, reflecting bruising experiences in, for instance, Syria and Libya during the Arab Spring. How donors can support civil society actors in ways that mitigate the risks inherent in such high-stakes confrontations – and may not even inadvertently increase them – is not obvious.

These fundamental challenges to the prevailing practice of civil society support make it all the more surprising how little its impact is understood. While research on political fragility and the prevention and resolution of crises has long engaged with the relationship between peace and democracy, it has focused mostly on elections and other formal democratic institutions rather than on the role of civil society actors and donors' attempts to support them. The literature on external assistance to civil society, in turn, has overwhelmingly engaged with the long-term effects of such efforts rather than with attempts to influence more immediate crisis dynamics. Within the practitioner community, lessons learned are often not fully documented or disseminated, especially beyond individual teams or organizations. All of this makes it difficult to assess the relevance and potential of civil society support as an instrument of stabilization policy, enhance its effectiveness, and reduce the risk of unintended consequences.

This study seeks to address these gaps through a qualitative analysis of the impact of donor efforts to support civil society in a diverse set of recent crisis settings. The analysis is based on four empirical cases: the emergence and crackdown of large-scale protests in Belarus since 2020; the overthrow of Omar Al-Bashir's autocratic regime and subsequent coup in Sudan since 2019; the economic conflagration facing Lebanon since 2019 that galvanized a substantial protest movement; and the twists-and-turns of Mali's political trajectory since the Tuareg rebellion in 2012. As a fundamentally practice-oriented contribution, the study places particular emphasis on how to improve donors' approaches and programming decisions. Though touching upon (often well-founded) deeper critiques of donors' engagement with civil society actors, including a failure to genuinely engage with their perspectives on major policy questions, these issues are not at the center of the argument.

Conceptually, the study understands acute crises as emergency situations of extreme political volatility and large-scale organized violence (or at least a significant

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2    Samuel J. Brannen, Christian S. Haig and Katherine Schmidt, "The Age of Mass Protests. Understanding an Escalating Global Trend," 2020, accessed January 23, 2023, https://bit.ly/3HNXcAZ.

threat thereof).[3] The study employs a deliberately broad understanding of 'civil society' as comprising actors who are not part of the government or parliamentary opposition (and also not economic actors primarily engaged in commercial activities) but who still seek to influence political processes and decision-making, relying on varying levels of formal organization. While formalized NGOs are often intuitively understood as the typical form of civil society organization, many more actors meet these substantive criteria: for example, trade unions and professional associations, journalists and media organizations, religious groups, as well as informal groupings ranging from local neighborhood initiatives to decentralized networks of online activists.[4]

The understanding of civil society employed here is normatively neutral and accommodates actors pursuing a wide spectrum of political objectives – which is important to avoid the tendency of labeling 'everyone we like' as civil society. Indeed, we argue that it is critical for donors to map both those actors who promote compatible goals to their own as well as those who do not as part of a strategic analysis concerning what kind of support will benefit whom and to what political effect. However, it is important to note that we do not focus on actors who mainly provide services, be it to society at large or to particular social groups. While undeniably relevant for mitigating crisis impact and often indirectly 'political' due to its distributional consequences, such service provision is of limited relevance to the questions at the heart of this study.

The term 'donor' – with its altruistic connotations – may generally be considered problematic in a political context such as external stabilization, but remains the most suitable shorthand for the variety of actors (including but not limited to governments) that provide funding and other types of support to civil society actors. In this regard, this study concentrates primarily on the efforts of Germany and like-minded partners within the broader context of the external players substantially involved in the given crisis environment. Where we employ the concept of 'donor organizations,' we do so in order to refer to the relevant ministries tasked with conducting a donor country's official foreign policy (in the German case, primarily the German Federal Foreign Office and the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development) and their implementing agencies, as well as independent organizations drawing on either public or private funds. Independent, government-funded organizations play a key role in the field of civil society support, with prominent examples including the German political foundations and the National Endowment for Democracy in the United States. While these organizations are not direct instruments of their home country's political leadership, their activities tend to be aligned with the broader thrust of the respective government's foreign policy. In this way, these organizations are indeed an integral part of their home state's efforts toward democracy promotion.[5] A joint declaration of the

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3    For a detailed discussion of key concepts in stabilization policy from which we have drawn our definition of acute crisis, see: Philipp Rotmann, "Toward a Realistic and Responsible Idea of Stabilisation," *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 5, no. 1 (June 15, 2016): p. 5, https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.414.

4    Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, eds., *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000).

5    Jonas Wolff, "Democracy Promotion and Civilian Power: The Example of Germany's 'Value-Oriented' Foreign Policy," German Politics 22, no. 4 (December 2013): pp. 477–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2013.8530 43; James M. Scott and Carie A. Steele, "Assisting Democrats or Resisting Dictators? The Nature and Impact of Democracy Support by the United States National Endowment for Democracy, 1990–99," *Democratization* 12, no. 4 (August 2005): pp. 439–460, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340500225947.

German political foundations describes the objective of their international engagement as "contributing towards the establishment of democratic, liberal and constitutional structures, which are committed to human and civil rights," and does not refer directly to aims like stabilization, crisis prevention or conflict resolution.[6] Still, these foundations regularly emphasize their commitment to advancing peace and security, rendering the questions addressed in this study also highly relevant for their work. The same also applies to private organizations like the Open Society Foundations.

Overall, this study emphasizes that donors' ability to exert constructive influence over crisis dynamics through support to civil society actors is often limited and highly contingent upon factors beyond their control. These include the stances and repressive capabilities of other crisis actors, the pre-existing capacity and popular legitimacy of civil society actors, and those actors' willingness to work with foreign donors. Still, even in cases where conditions are favorable, significant changes to donors' approach would be needed for their efforts to make a substantial difference from a stabilization perspective. In addition to better preparedness to react to changing circumstances in highly dynamic environments, the key factors for achieving greater impact include connecting civil society support to an overarching political strategy and designing civil society engagement as a coherent portfolio rather than on a project-by-project basis. To support the implementation of these central recommendations in practice, this study is accompanied by a practical step-by-step guide for strategically designing project portfolios for civil society support in crisis settings.

## Stabilization, Democracy and Civil Society: What Do We Know?

The role of democratic governance in the peaceful resolution of political conflicts has long been at the heart of discussions around crisis prevention, post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding. When this issue first gained salience due to the termination of a large number of conflicts and a shift away from the pre-occupation with great power confrontation after the end of the Cold War, the efforts of Western states were broadly informed by the concept of 'liberal peace.' While the extent to which this constituted a unified and dominant school of thought should not be overstated, there was a discernable consensus among relevant actors at the time that sustainable peace was best pursued through far-reaching institutional reforms and a transformation of political cultures toward democratic norms.[7] This transformative ambition was reflected in the mandates of numerous complex peace operations and UN-led transitional administrations in places like Kosovo and East Timor.[8]

Liberal peacebuilding faced substantial criticism almost as soon as it was put into practice in the 1990s, often hinging on the inherent contradictions of advancing

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6   Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung et al., "Joint Declaration on the State Financing of Political Foundations," n.d., https://bit.ly/3XnmVWG.

7   Dominik Zaum, "Beyond the 'Liberal Peace," *Global Governance* 18 (2012): pp. 121–132.

8   James Mayall and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, eds., *The New Protectorates: International Tutelage and the Making of Liberal States* (London: Hurst, 2011); Simon Chesterman, *You, the People the United Nations, Transitional Administration, and State-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Richard Caplan, *International Governance of War-Torn Territories: Rule and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

self-governance through international intervention.[9] Critics of the approach gained further prominence in light of failed reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, advocating against the imposition of democratic templates and in favor of arguably more locally embedded forms of political order.[10] Meanwhile, even observers who were fundamentally supportive of external actors playing a substantial role in peacebuilding processes noted that rapid political liberalization in the absence of sufficiently consolidated institutions could exacerbate political conflict and, at worst, trigger relapses into violence.[11] This recognition gave rise to an important debate about the merits and drawbacks of 'sequenced' and 'gradualist' approaches to democratic reform in fragile environments.[12] The result was a heightened sensitivity to the risks of winner-takes-all dynamics and a reinforced emphasis on the importance of sound institutions.[13] While quick elections after crisis episodes are also widely viewed with great trepidation, donors have struggled to find alternatives that ensure that government interlocutors enjoy sufficient legitimacy to justify supporting them with large-scale aid.

Overall, the sobering record of past interventions has clearly led donors to scale back their commitments to drive democratic reform in crisis settings – indeed, a repetition of the transitional administrations of the 1990s and early 2000s would be quite unthinkable today. At the same time, while some researchers have highlighted the existence of a substantially different, 'illiberal' approach to peacebuilding linked to processes of authoritarian regime consolidation, few if any democratic donors have openly entertained such trajectories as normatively palatable.[14] Thus, institutions that provide for meaningful participation and accountability, underpinned by a supportive political culture, remain central to the 'theories of change' espoused by most political decision-makers and practitioners for consolidating peace in the long term.

It is within this context that support to civil society actors has become a widespread form of donor engagement in crisis environments. A recent evidence review on the topic of non-violent action suggests several ways in which civil society

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9    For an early example in this vein, see David Chandler, *Bosnia: Faking Democracy after Dayton* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

10   Oliver P. Richmond, *A Post-Liberal Peace*, Routledge Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution (Milton Park, Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2011); Roger MacGinty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), http://site.ebrary.com/id/10481693.

11    Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

12   Thomas Carothers, "The Sequencing Fallacy," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 1 (2007): pp. 12–27, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0002; Francis Fukuyama et al., "The Debate on 'Sequencing'," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 3 (2007): 38–52, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0055.; Karina Mross, "Democracy Support and Peaceful Democratisation after Civil War," *Briefing Paper* 7/2019 (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2019), https://doi.org/10.23661/bp7.2019.v1.1.

13   See also Jeroen de Zeeuw, "Projects Do Not Create Institutions: The Record of Democracy Assistance in Post-Conflict Societies," Democratization 12, no. 4 (August 2005): pp. 481–504, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340500226036; Burcu Savun and Daniel C. Tirone, "Foreign Aid, Democratization, and Civil Conflict: How Does Democracy Aid Affect Civil Conflict?," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 2 (April 2011): pp. 233–246, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00501.x.

14   Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, "Illiberal Peacebuilding in Angola," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 49, no. 02 (June 2011): pp. 287–314, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X1100005X; Jeremy Weinstein, "Autonomous Recovery and International Intervention in Comparative Perspective," *Center for Global Development Working Paper* 57 (2005); Giulia Piccolino, "Winning Wars, Building (Illiberal) Peace? The Rise (and Possible Fall) of a Victor's Peace in Rwanda and Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 9 (September 2, 2015): pp. 1770–1785, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1058150.

activities may contribute to peacebuilding: first, by fostering 'positive peace' in the sense of pushing for improvements in deficient institutions around participation, representation and accountability; second, by leading people to withdraw their support from violent groups; and third, by addressing the grievances contributing to conflict.[15] However, there is little systematic research on the significance of civil society activities for crisis trajectories, let alone on the impact of external support for such actors. Existing analyses of civil society actors' role in conflicts tend to call for a differentiated and highly context-specific appraisal of their potential contributions. While civil society actors may be able to provide capabilities and assume roles that other actors cannot, their activities can also give rise to concerns and risks, for instance, due to a lack of representativeness and broad societal legitimacy.[16] Overall, it remains unclear under which conditions different forms of civil society activities can help mitigate crises and how these prospects may be affected by external assistance.

Of course, efforts to externally promote democracy and civil society are by no means unique to crisis settings, but are pursued in a wide range of countries across the globe. These efforts are therefore the subject of a large body of literature that contains some relevant insights for the purposes of this study.[17] However, much of this attention focuses on long-term trajectories and effects, which have a limited bearing on the shorter time horizons in focus here – except to raise the expectation that short-term interventions will not have much of an impact, since one of the most widely confirmed conditions of success in democracy promotion is long-term commitment.[18]

Meanwhile, scholarship on the financing of political activism and protest movements has traditionally focused on the effects of different sources of funding (e.g., from foundations, governments and corporations) within Europe and the United States, the regions from which most of this literature has emanated. Relevant contributions have highlighted the potentially problematic consequences of support from foundations and charitable institutions, which include diverting movements from their initial goals in response to donor pressure. The effects of government and corporate funding are not as well researched.[19]

Research on large-scale protest movements has engaged to some extent with the issue of foreign support, but relevant systematic contributions are mostly recent and

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15    Jaime Jackson, Jonathan Pinckney and Miranda Rivers, *External Support for Nonviolent Action* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2022), p. 4.

16     Kristian Harpviken and Kjell Erling Kjellman, "Beyond Blueprints: Civil Society and Peacebuilding," (Oslo: Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), 2004); Martina Fischer, "Civil Society in Conflict Transformation. Strengths and Limitations," in *Advancing Conflict Transformation: The Berghof Handbook* (Opladen/Framington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2011), pp. 287–313; Roberto Belloni, "Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 2 (March 2001): pp. 163–180, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343301038002003.

17    For an overview, see: Timm Beichelt et al., eds., *Civil Society and Democracy Promotion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014); Peter J. Burnell and Richard Youngs, eds., *New Challenges to Democratization*, (London/ New York: Routledge, 2010).

18    See, for example: Fletcher D. Cox, "Democracy and Peacebuilding. A Resource Guide," International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, https://bit.ly/3YDU9SC; Gerd Schönwälder, "Promoting Democ-racy. What Role for the Democratic Emerging Powers?," German Development Institute, 2014, https://bit.ly/3Ib490n; Nicole Bibbins and Nicolas Bouchet, "Holding Steady? US Democracy Promotion in a Changing World," Chatham House, 2014, https://bit.ly/3Yk2wDl.

19    For a summary of the development of the key research debates, see: Catherine Corrigall-Brown, "Funding for Social Movements," *Sociology Compass 10*, no. 4 (2016): pp. 330–339, https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12362.

small in number.[20] A 2022 review notes that "while there is an extensive literature on nonviolent action and social movements, the literature specifically focused on external support is rife with gaps."[21] A notable exception is one study examining external support to non-violent civil society campaigns with 'maximalist' political goals (i.e., seeking far-reaching political reforms or even regime change), which highlights both the significant constraints facing external actors working with civil society in dynamic situations and the extent to which their activities may still make a difference.[22] On the one hand, its authors find that external support is always secondary to the efforts of local actors in explaining the outcome of non-violent campaigns. The main contribution of external support tends to be the long-term strengthening of civil society actors and institutional structures, not the short-term assistance provided during particular campaigns. However, the study did find evidence that targeted trainings prior to peak mobilization moments can increase the likelihood of successful mobilization and that external actors' political engagement with state authorities can influence the extent to which the latter resort to repression, demonstrating that external actors can have an impact on short-term dynamics. This second point is also corroborated by contributions showing that the anticipation of external support changes the likelihood that protests and uprisings will occur as well as the particular strategies adopted by civil society actors.[23]

While these findings suggest that donor efforts to support civil society in crisis settings may indeed affect crisis dynamics, what precisely this impact looks like in different cases and whether it contributes to sustainable reductions of violence has remained an open question, which this study seeks to address.

## Method

The analysis developed in this study relies on four qualitative case studies on donor efforts to support civil society actors in crisis settings. This approach has the clear merit of capturing a high degree of contextual specificity, thereby doing justice to the complexity of crisis dynamics in any given case. Plainly, it was also without clear alternative, as there is little readily available empirical material, even on the ways in which donors have attempted to support civil society actors in different environments (let alone on the impact of this support). Thus, gathering evidence from a range of primary sources was necessary.

To establish the impact of donor activities, this study only very limitedly draws on comparisons across cases, which are inherently problematic due to the large number

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20   Here, we do not consider the historical literature on covert support for regime change efforts during the Cold War era, which was arguably antithetical to inclusive governance and tended to rely on instruments that would be considered unacceptable in stabilization efforts.

21   Jackson, Pinckney and Rivers, *External Support for Nonviolent Action*, 3.

22   Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?* (Washington, DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2021).

23   Jaime A Jackson, Belgin San-Akca and Zeev Maoz, "International Support Networks and the Calculus of Uprising," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 5 (September 2020): pp. 632–247, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319885181; Julia Grauvogel, Amanda A. Licht and Christian von Soest, "Sanctions and Signals: How International Sanction Threats Trigger Domestic Protest in Targeted Regimes," *International Studies Quarterly*, January 18, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqw044.

of variables at play and the resulting difficulty of attributing differences or similarities in outcomes to any particular factor. Instead, it focuses primarily on establishing the effects of activities within each case. This requires dealing with the same methodological challenges practitioners face when reflecting on the extent to which observed outcomes were indeed attributable to a given project. In line with prevailing academic perspectives on causal inference in qualitative case study research, we attempt to trace the specific mechanisms that link donor support to civil society and the observed crisis dynamics within each case. Moreover, where relevant, we also explicitly contrast the observed course of events with how the respective crisis would likely have unfolded in the absence of such support, making our reasoning as transparent as possible.[24]

An obvious limitation of this empirical approach is that it can only establish the impact of the support measures that donors actually adopted in the respective context. Assessing whether these measures realized the full extent to which support to civil society actors could have contributed to stabilization, in contrast, requires further counterfactual reasoning. As this aspect is highly relevant for judging the potential of civil society support as a stabilization instrument and for developing recommendations on how donors' approaches could be improved, each country case chapter includes a section that engages in such considerations. Building on the preceding empirical account, these sections assess what difference realistic alterations to donors' approaches could have made and what it would have taken for the respective crisis to unfold in a substantially different manner.

Corresponding to the analytical logic outlined above, cases were mainly selected with an eye to covering a diverse set of contexts and crisis types (see Table 1). The selected case studies on Belarus, Sudan, Lebanon, and Mali represent different trajectories of challenged authoritarian systems, an instance of politically-induced economic crisis and state failure, and a multi-dimensional emergency involving center-periphery dynamics, inter-communal conflicts as well as jihadist violence. In addition, these cases vary in respect to the spread and intensity of physical violence as well as the levels of human development. They also all represent recent crises in order to contemplate current trends and challenges, such as the general democratic decline and the global COVID-19 pandemic.[25] Reflecting the project's practice-oriented character, the substantive importance of each case in the context of Germany's foreign policy was also taken into account in the selection process.

Each case study is based on a range of publicly available sources, notably including academic literature on the broader crisis context, reports from non-governmental organizations and other practice-oriented analyses, as well as local and international media coverage. In addition, semi-structured interviews with representatives from donor organizations, civil society and relevant experts constituted a key source of evidence for the case studies. For Belarus, Sudan and Mali, we conducted roughly 20

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24   For example, see: Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Dietrich Rueschemeyer, "Can One or a Few Cases Yield Theoretical Gains?," in *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Bent Fly-vbjerg, "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (April 2006): pp. 219–245, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363.

25   Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege," 2021, accessed October 13, 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege.

interviews per case, most of which were held remotely (with some exceptions for individuals physically present in Germany). For Belarus, the remote character of the interviews was mainly due to the flight of most civil society activists into exile, as they have become targets of a violent government crackdown. For Sudan and Mali, the decision to refrain from on-site fieldwork resulted mainly from logistical and security considerations. Regarding Lebanon, two members of the research team conducted approximately 30 in-person interviews over the course of a three-week field trip, mostly focused on Beirut.

The sampling of interviewees for each case study combined aspects of purposive, stratified and snowball sampling. As such, there was a deliberate effort to gather perspectives from different types of respondents in order to ensure a substantial representation of voices from donors and local civil society and to adequately capture the diversity of actors within each of these categories. For this purpose, we researched and actively contacted relevant individuals and organizations. In addition, we often followed up on recommendations from interviewees and other experts regarding further individuals who could offer interesting perspectives and insights.

Table 1: Key Features of the Cases Selected for Analysis

| | BELARUS | SUDAN | LEBANON | MALI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Core Crisis Period Considered** | 2020 – to date | 2019 – to date | 2019 – to date | 2012 – to date |
| Political context | Protests against autocratic regime followed by a crackdown | Popular uprising and overthrow of autocratic regime followed by a period of transitional government and a coup | Economic crisis and breakdown of the provision of public goods followed by protests against the elite coalition that was widely perceived as unaccountable | Tuareg rebellion, spread of jihadist groups and a coup against democratically-elected government (2012) followed by an attempted restoration of civilian government and two further coups |
| Character and intensity of physical violence | Violent repression of protests by security apparatus, reduction of violence after the flight of key activists into exile | Violent repression during the 2019 uprising as well as against subsequent protests, ongoing conflict between government forces, militias and rebel groups in Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile region | Some violent repression during the peak protest period (2019), since then limited and localized violence but widespread concern about escalation risks | Fighting over territorial control in northern and central Mali, frequent attacks from jihadist groups and inter-communal violence |
| Human Development Index[26] | Very high | Low | High | Low |

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26  United Nations Development Program, "Human Development Report 2020: The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene," 2020, accessed October 13, 2022, https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2020.

# Overview of the Study

As the study's key findings and recommendations are provided in a substantial Executive Summary preceding this introduction, these points are not repeated here. Instead, we proceed directly into the four case studies, which all follow a consistent structure. Each case study begins with an outline of the crisis context and an overview of the country's civil society landscape. The chapter then discusses the goals and stabilization approaches pursued by relevant donors, followed by a deep-dive into their attempts to support civil society as the crisis unfolded. On this basis, each case study chapter presents an assessment of the impact of donor activities and engages in a discussion on whether donors could plausibly have achieved greater stabilization impact though measures in the area of civil society. Each chapter concludes with a summary of the broader implications to be drawn from the case.

The findings of the four case studies are compiled and discussed in an overarching Synthesis at the end of the study, which corresponds closely to the Executive Summary but develops each point in greater depth. In addition to highlighting the study's findings and recommendations, this Synthesis also discusses the limitations of the analysis and outlines avenues for further inquiry.

# Belarus

## Supporting Civil Society Against Insurmountable Odds



### Main Takeaways

Following fraudulent elections in August 2020, Belarus saw protests against Dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka at a scale that caught seasoned observers and even Belarusians by surprise. During the peak crisis, hundreds of thousands of people took to the street to demand new elections. Barring defections from the security sector, however, the protest movement had no chance of sparking a transition away from the authoritarian regime – and Russia was the external actor with by far the biggest leverage over the course of events. Thus, Western actors had very limited room to maneuver in Belarus. In the end, donor efforts to support civil society actors were unable to substantially influence the crisis' trajectory, though they did succeed in assuring the survival of civil society, even if outside Belarus. This case also serves as a cautionary tale: Despite donors' awareness of the authoritarian environment in which they were operating, contingency plans to protect their civil society partners from harm proved partly insufficient.

# Crisis Context

Belarus is commonly referred to as the "last dictatorship in Europe" by Western European observers. Whether or not this is true,[27] civic and democratic spaces in post-Soviet Belarus were small and, despite some periods of relative openness, Dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka held a firm grip on the country. Perhaps for this reason, observers were caught by surprise in 2020 when, following rigged elections, unprecedented and large-scale protests broke out. [28] The democratic upheaval in Belarus was a rather "'typical' example ... of protest mobilization occurring in political repressive contexts."[29] In that sense, it bore similarities to other contested elections, such as in Venezuela in 2018 and 2019,[30] and other so-called 'color revolutions' in countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. While typical in many ways, the democratic movement in Belarus contains an atypical feature: to this day, Belarus remains in a Union State – a supranational union since 1997 – with its neighbor Russia, an autocratic nuclear power. This heavily influenced both the trajectory of the protests and the reaction of Western European countries to the crisis.

**The governance crisis in Belarus became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, which the country's leadership decided to simply ignore.**

Researchers believe that an appetite for change in Belarus had been slowly building beneath the surface for some time.[31] For several reasons including the deteriorating living standard, the country's social contract – which was repressive and undemocratic, but more or less functional – was no longer satisfactory for the population.[32] However, as "society was changing ... Lukashenka was oblivious to this dynamic."[33] Belarus' governance crisis became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, which the country's leadership decided to simply ignore. Observers are nearly unanimous in their assessment that the pandemic was the breaking point at which Belarusian government and society parted ways.[34] In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens in Belarus began to self-organize in order to compensate for the

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27  On the nature of the Belarusian 'dictatorship' and the foundation of Lukashenka's successful control over the country between legitimization and repression, see: Maryia Rohava and Fabian Burkhardt, ""Diktatur ist unser Markenzeichen" – Belarus: Machtvertikale vs. horizontale Gesellschaft," *Osteuropa* 70, no. 10-11 (2020): pp. 127–146, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/70923; and Sofie Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society," *Nationalities Paper* 49, no. 5 (2021): pp. 808–819, accessed September 28, 2022, doi:10.1017/nps.2021.33.

28  Olga Onuch and Gwendolyn Sasse, "The Belarus crisis: people, protest, and political dispositions," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38, no. 1-2 (2022): pp. 1–8, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2042138.

29  Onuch and Sasse, "The Belarus crisis: people, protest and political dispositions," p. 3.

30  This example was invoked several times by policymakers and practitioners from Europe and the United States in interviews.

31  Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society" and Nadja Douglas, "Belarus: From the old social contract to a new social identity," ZOiS Report 6, November 9, 2020, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/belarus-from-the-old-social-contract-to-a-new-social-identity.

32  Rohava and Burkhardt, "Diktatur ist unser Markenzeichen" – Belarus: Machtvertikale vs. horizontale Gesellschaft" and Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society."

33  Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society," p. 813.

34  Stated by several interviewees for this case study and see also Alice Bota, *Die Frauen von Belarus*, (Berlin: Piper Verlag, 2021).

government's unwillingness to respond to the health crisis. One interviewee described this civic mobilization as the logical culmination of a longer process of societal change that turned a rather atomized Belarusian society into a "civic nation."[35]

The eruption of protests was triggered by Belarus' national elections in August 2020. In the run-up to the elections, surprise opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya decided to run for the presidency after her husband – blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, who had himself prepared to challenge Lukashenka on the ballot – was imprisoned. Together with Maryia Kalesnikava and Veronika Tsepkalo, she spearheaded a movement for change in the country. Not only did Tsikhanouskaya collect the 100,000 signatures necessary to put her candidacy forward: the three women also brought out record numbers to her public rallies – up to 60,000 people in Minsk – even before the elections on August 9.[36] Women would come to play a key role in the 2020 protests, starting with the fact that Lukashenka allowed Tsikhanouskaya to run in the presidential elections because he did not consider a woman to be a threat.[37]

When Lukashenka announced that he had won the elections with over 80 percent of the vote, protests claiming election fraud broke out in urban centers across the country.[38] The demonstrations were met with immediate repression: protestors were brutally detained and already on the second day – August 10 – the first person was shot. In the first week alone, 6,700 protesters were detained, many of whom were tortured.[39] Tsikhanouskaya herself was forced to leave the country on August 11. However, at this stage, the government's repressions only fueled the public's anger and brought more people out to the streets.[40] Within one week of the Belarus elections, on August 16, 2020, 100,000 people were protesting in Minsk alone and "over 100 localities mobilized, contributing to a truly nationwide protest wave."[41] By that time, Maryia Kalesnikava was the only of the three women who led the movement for change still present in the country, and she was eventually detained by police in early September. During the peak of the crisis, protests numbers reached as high as 200-300,000 participants in Minsk alone.[42] These mass demonstrations were usually organized via the instant messaging service Telegram. Importantly, "the protesters formed (even if temporarily) a cross-class and cross-cleavage coalition in the streets – with tractor factory workers and

35  Interview with international donor organization. See also Douglas, "Belarus: From the old social contract to a new social identity," p. 17: "All of this testifies to the break with traditional social isolation and lethargy ("ato-misation of people") and a shift towards a new form of collective reflection and the quest for a new common identity in Belarus — at least in urban settings."

36  Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society."

37  Alice Bota, *Die Frauen von Belarus*.

38  Fondation Robert Schuman, "Demonstration in Belarus: Chronology of a Revolution in Progress," accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/divers/Chronology_of_revolution_in_Belarus.pdf and Onuch and Sasse, "The Belarus crisis: people, protest and political dispositions."

39  Rohava and Burkhardt, "Diktatur ist unser Markenzeichen" – Belarus: Mactvertikale vs. horizontale Ge-sellschaft."

40  Félix Krawatzek and Gwendolyn Sasse, "Belarus protests: why people have been taking to the streets – new data," February 4, 2021, accessed September 28, 2022, https://theconversation.com/belarus-protests-why-people-have-been-taking-to-the-streets-new-data-154494.

41  Emma Matteo, ""All of Belarus has come out onto the streets": exploring nationwide protest and the role of pre-existing social networks," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38, no. 1-2 (2022): pp. 26–42, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2026127.

42  Onuch and Sasse, "The Belarus crisis: people, protest and political dispositions."

doctors staging strikes and walkouts and women, often with their children, forming human chains in all major cities."[43]

Though unprecedented on this scale in Belarus' post-Soviet history, the government's violent repressions and a lack of defections within the country's elite and security sector meant that the movement was not successful in ousting Lukashenka. In September 2020, protests changed from mass demonstrations to smaller "neighborhood walks," inspired by protests in Hong Kong, in order to make it more difficult for police to stop and arrest participants.[44] Between August and December 2020, 30,000 people were detained – most of them temporarily.[45] Hopes that protests might regain momentum in the spring and summer of 2021 were stifled when the Lukashenka regime began a campaign to persecute and permanently shut down nearly all registered civil society organizations and initiatives in the country.[46] After the first wave of activists were forced to leave Belarus in the fall of 2020, the large majority of the remaining activists and civil society groups fled in 2021. Over 1,300 political prisoners remain in Belarusian prisons today.[47]

During the peak of the crisis, Western governments – while displaying symbolic and rhetorical support – were keen to avoid the impression that they had initiated the protests, and instead gradually imposed sanctions on Lukashenka and his regime with great caution. However, they almost immediately announced more financial support for Belarusian civil society and victims of repression, and many of the donors active in Belarus (although almost none of them had representatives in the country) assisted activists in leaving the country and identifying new partners for support. Russia's President Vladimir Putin, after an initial wait-and-see period, decided to provide full support to Lukashenka by propping up his security forces, state media and economy, using the opportunity to complete the Lukashenka regime's dependency on Moscow.[48]

Lukashenka's crusade against the opposition eventually started to directly affect the European Union in unforeseen ways. In May 2021, Minsk prevented a Ryanair flight from traveling Greece to Lithuania from leaving its airspace, instead using fighter jets to force the plane to land in Minsk in order to capture opposition activist Roman Protassevich.[49] In the fall and winter of 2021, Lukashenka engaged in human trafficking by smuggling migrants and refugees to the Polish-Belarusian border to blackmail the EU.[50] Further, since February 2022, Belarus has served as a staging ground for Russian

43   Onuch and Sasse, "The Belarus crisis: people, protest and political dispositions," p.3.

44   Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society."

45   Viasna, "Postcard campaign for political prisoners in Belarus," December 9, 2020, accessed September 28, 2022, https://spring96.org/en/news/100853.

46   Interview with a German civil society organization.

47   Viasna, "As of September 28, 1334 persons in Belarus are considered as political prisoners," 2022, accessed September 28, 2022, https://prisoners.spring96.org/en.

48   Onuch and Sasse, "The Belarus crisis: people, protest, and political dispositions."

49   Anton Troianovski and Ivan Nechepurenko, "Belarus Forces Down Plane to Seize Dissident; Europe Sees 'State Hijacking'," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2021, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/23/world/europe/ryanair-belarus.html.

50   Rikard Jozwiak, "Explainer: What is Lukashenka Doing On Belarus's Border – And What Can The EU Do About It?," *Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty*, November 10, 2021, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-eu-migrants-border-explainer/31555214.html.

forces in their full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[51] With the war against Ukraine still raging, hope for democratic change in Belarus in the near future is dwindling.

## The Role and Potential of Civil Society

**The newly emerging organizations and initiatives represented a different demographic than the traditional activists in Belarus.**

While cycles of relative openness and closeness have characterized Belarus' post-Soviet history, the role of civil society in the country has been constrained by the authoritarian rule it opposed and, consequently, confined to the margins of society.

Before 2020, civil society in Belarus consisted of a highly professionalized and small group of activists, since "in Belarus, being an activist was a conscious life choice."[52] As opposed to other contexts where people may sometimes volunteer on the side, being an activist or human rights defender in Belarus was a full-time occupation chosen by only a few. However, it is important to note that while their room to maneuver was limited, Belarusian civil society organizations were easily recognizable to Western donors and operated in a manner that largely fit with Western funding requirements. Some of these professional civil society organizations had received Western grants for years – if not decades – as part of "a certain 'controlled openness'" that characterized pre-2020 Belarus and "meant that, to a degree, activism and civic participation was possible – as long as it was not directly and explicitly political."[53] Most interviewees agreed that these groups had a low capacity to mobilize the general public, but were able to provide a face to the protests using their decades of experience.[54]

Many new civil society actors emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Belarus. Afterward, the protests saw an important "qualitative and quantitative change in the composition of civil society:"[55] no longer a phenomenon at the margins, new organizations and initiatives formed, often at the grassroots level in specific neighborhoods or backyards, using innovative means such as crowdfunding campaigns.[56] Research shows that these pre-existing networks stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic response were an important factor in whether protests occurred in a specific location.[57]

While "the protests of summer 2020 were widespread and cross-national from their onset,"[58] the newly emerging organizations and initiatives represented a different demographic than the traditional activists – a new 'class' of activists, often working

51  Gabriel Gavin, "Russia's war on Ukraine is becoming a battle for Belarus as well," *Euractiv*, August 23, 2022, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/russias-war-on-ukraine-is-becoming-a-battle-for-belarus-as-well/.

52  Interview with a German civil society organization.

53  Bedford, "The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society," p. 814.

54  Interview with international donor organization.

55  Tatsiana Chulitskaya, "Zivilgesellschaft in Belarus unter Repressionen", *Belarus-Analysen* no. 30 (2021): p. 3, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.laender-analysen.de/belarus-analysen/57/zivilgesellschaft-in-belarus-unter-repressionen/.

56  Ibid.

57  Matteo, ""All of Belarus has come out onto the streets": exploring nationwide protest and the role of pre-existing social networks."

58  Ibid, p. 27.

in the cultural or IT sector, which existed far away from the state.[59] Further, not all of these organizations were familiar with the concept of civil society.[60] At the outset of the protests, these activists displayed a high capacity to mobilize people, even if – or perhaps because – they were often not formal organizations but rather grassroots initiatives. Researchers have found that knowledge sharing and cooperation between long-standing and newly emerging civil society organizations was not systematic, but instead an ad hoc and not very widespread phenomenon.[61] Interviews conducted for this study revealed some cooperation and also competition between these two strands of civil society.

An important factor in Belarus' civil society landscape was the Belarusian diaspora. Large even before 2020, the country's diaspora was historically not very politically engaged. However, this changed to a certain extent in 2020, when – in addition to providing financial and IT support to protesters – the diaspora started to connect in their countries of residence and at times organize in favor of the protests.[62] Now that between 100,000 and 200,000 people have left Belarus,[63] many of whom are activists, the diaspora is much more politicized and invested – even if they are not always organized.[64]

In the spring of 2021, civil society organizations became the Lukashenka regime's main target. Many were dissolved, some of the new initiatives disappeared and other organizations started to work in a more covert, dissident-like manner.[65] Many of the elder civil society organizations faced repercussions due to the years of funding they had received from Western donors. This pressure and persecution led a large number of activists to flee the country and settle in the EU (especially in the Baltic states and Poland), Ukraine and the Caucasus. Today, many of these often-traumatized activists are burnt out, while others want to build new structures abroad and start working again.[66] Jointly with the democratic opposition figure Tsikhanouskaya, some activists are now engaged in creating something of a parallel diaspora state, and aim for its recognition – if not de jure, then de facto. To this end, they recently launched a "digital Belarus" service platform, where the vision is to create a fully digitized state outside of Belarus.[67]

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59   Elena Gapova, "Mobilisierung in Belarus", *Osteuropa* 70, no. 10-11 (2020): p. 216, accessed September 28, 2022, https://zeitschrift-osteuropa.de/hefte/2020/10-11/mobilisierung-in-belarus/.

60   Interview with a German donor organization.

61   Chulitskaya, "Zivilgesellschaft in Belarus unter Repressionen."

62   Interview with a civil society organization in Belarus.

63   France Diplomacy, "Situation in Belarus: France's position," 2022, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/belarus/news/article/situation-in-belarus-france-s-position.

64   Interview with a civil society organization Belarus.

65   Chulitskaya, "Zivilgesellschaft in Belarus unter Repressionen."

66   Interview with a German civil society organization. See also Chulitskaya, "Zivilgesellschaft in Belarus unter Repressionen" and an interview with civil society organization in Belarus.

67   Interview with civil society organization in Belarus and background conversations with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

## Donor Goals and Stabilization Approach

**The acute crisis and Russia's central role in it constituted a significant challenge for Western donors, destroying central pillars of their engagement with Belarus.**

The crisis in and following August 2020 caught even seasoned observers by surprise and found donors without a clear set of political goals to guide their engagement with civil society actors in Belarus. Indeed, the acute crisis and Russia's central role in it constituted a significant challenge for Western donors, destroying central pillars of their engagement with Belarus that, in most cases, reached back to the early 2000s.[68] Generally speaking, the donor community for Belarus was small, but those working in this context did so persistently.[69] Donors consulted for this study stressed that before 2020, the more or less unanimous goal of donor activity in Belarus was to increase societal capacity to engage with and shape the country's political future – the abovementioned conversion into a 'civic nation.' In short, the goal of donor engagement was to develop a sustainable foundation for an eventual transition to democracy.

Indeed, the developments in 2020 marked the end of the period of relative openness that had peaked between 2017 and 2019. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Lukashenka prioritized engagement with Western actors to avoid a similar scenario for Belarus. In this context, several donors and implementers pursued a dual-track strategy, cooperating with state institutions on the one hand and with civil society and opposition activists on the other. Belarusian state organizations usually focused on what one donor representative termed "vegetarian issues," such as the environment, culture, gender, and urban development, and spent less time on politically challenging topics like human rights, rule of law and anti-corruption.[70] While civil society organizations were not always happy about this engagement,[71] the situation allowed donors to support them fairly openly – even though getting funds into Belarus was a challenge even during the best of times, and many donors had to find creative ways of doing so.

**As repressions started to specifically target civil society organizations, donor goals shifted toward ensuring the survival of Belarusian civil society altogether.**

After the fraudulent elections and unexpected emergence of large-scale protests, this dual-track strategy was no longer tenable. Continuing a course of cautious cooperation with Lukashenka's government was largely off the table, but key Western governments were also careful to avoid appearing as instigators or drivers of the protests, as they were concerned about antagonizing Moscow and becoming embroiled in a geopolitical stand-off over influence in Eastern Europe. The interviews conducted for this case study conveyed a sense that as donors adjusted their goals for civil society engagement in Belarus to the new post-election setting, repressions were already mounting. This left donors with little room for formulating new long-term strategies other than helping their partners to escape to safety and avoid or recover from violent repressions.

Once there was time to develop such strategies, the nature of civil society support in Belarus had already changed: As repressions persisted in 2021 and started to specifically target civil society organizations, donor goals shifted toward ensuring the survival of Belarusian civil society altogether, often outside of Belarus and with the

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68   Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, "The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns."

69   Relative to 'donor darlings' like Ukraine or Mali; Interview with a German civil society organization.

70   Interviews with two international donor organizations and an interview with a German civil society organization.

71   Interview with a German civil society organization.

diaspora increasing in importance. Those international actors with physical presences in Belarus – who were very few to begin with – had to immediately leave, bring most, if not all, of their partners out of the country and help them find their footing abroad. The ultimate goal now, as one donor put it, is to get activists "out of depression and into a long-term planning mode."[72]

## Donor Support to Civil Society During the Crisis

 In the early days of the protests, donor organizations on the ground in Belarus were hopeful for change, but almost immediately switched to mitigating repressions while also identifying new partners that emerged as part of the protests. In this context, some of these civil society organizations proved quite reactive, adapting to changing needs on the ground. A donor representative described the period from roughly August to November 2020 as "firefighting mode," where donors' focus was on getting the most endangered people out of the country, bridging financial gaps in funding, as well as identifying and approaching new partners.[73] These adjustments built on a wave of adaptations which had already taken place in the months preceding the crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, some donors already changed the informal way in which they personally transported cash into the country when COVID-related travel restrictions were imposed, and had already begun to identify new partners among the civil society groups helping Belarusians deal with the pandemic.

Generally speaking, a hallmark of the most reactive organizations was that they did not have (or quickly dropped) requirements that could and did get Belarusian civil society actors in trouble with the authorities – for instance, requiring that partners be officially registered, provide paper-receipt proof of spending or compile participate lists for events. Donors without these requirements, including foundations and international non-governmental organizations drawing on home government funding, had the least trouble flexibly adapting to the changed circumstances of their Belarusian partners. They also claimed that identifying new partners was a rather organic process because they were well-connected on the ground, even if not all of these organizations were in favor of funding grassroots initiatives directly or right away (some claiming that "it's better to link them with existing civil society organizations than to feed them money").[74]

Other donors with ongoing activities in Belarus were slower to react and adapt, for both political and practical reasons. Some were waiting to see whether part of their work with state-run partner institutions (or those close to the state, like universities and unions) could continue, and were hesitant to immediately cut all their ties with the government in which they had invested for years. There were also practical problems, as some (government) donors were slow to realize that previously agreed-upon projects were not going to be fulfilled as planned. According to one interviewee, all governments doled out "donor super powers" after some months, which meant much more flexible funding and less reporting requirements.[75]

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72   Interview with an international donor organization.

73   Interview with an international donor organization.

74   Interview with a German donor organization.

75    Interview with an international donor organization.

Overall, donors' approaches to engaging with opposition and civil society actors after the emergence of protests in Belarus were far from uniform. Some organizations and governments decided to directly fund the opposition and its political leadership alongside their support for activists and civil society organizations, believing that "these are all key ingredients for a democratic Belarus."[76] One donor organization emphasized that Tsikhanouskaya's declared goal was not to attain power herself, but to create space for negotiations and dialogue, which in their view rendered support for her movement different from political party support.[77] Others opposed directly funding the opposition, and seemingly considered civil society support as an objective slightly separate from the wider political goals of a peaceful transition and national dialogue in Belarus.[78]

Meanwhile, civil society actors' positions on receiving external support also varied, with especially some of the informal neighborhood initiatives remaining wary of accepting Western funding – perhaps as part of an overall hesitance to bring geopolitics into the protests.[79] One Western donor representative stated that while connecting with new partners, their donor organization often had to explain that they were not trying to recruit for the CIA.[80] However, another interviewee also noted that established and well-known Belarusian organizations at times served as entry points for donors looking for activists to fund.[81] In the end, most interviewees agreed that there was no option besides accepting Western money for those civil society organizations that wanted to survive.

Despite positive examples of swift operational adjustments to a changing environment, Lukashenka's targeting of civil society actors with repressive measures in 2021 exposed shortcomings in donors' immediate crisis response. In particular, some long-term partners found themselves in trouble with the Lukashenka regime on account of stored documentation of their foreign-funded activities spanning the previous five years (a reporting requirement by many donors in case of an audit). When these documents were seized, they were frequently used to prosecute the activists. While some international organizations said that a degree of control over funds spent was necessary, it seems that the storage of such incriminating documentation was a rather foreseeable danger and an unnecessary requirement.[82]

Moving from civil society support to the more political level, an important step right after the elections was that Western governments did not recognize Alyaksandr Lukashenka as the legitimate winner of the presidency. To this day, non-recognition (and, in turn, recognition of the opposition structures) remains a main lobbying objective of opposition activism in Belarus.[83] European Union and other Western

**Lukashenka's targeting of civil society actors exposed shortcomings in donors' immediate crisis response.**

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76   Interview with an international donor organization.

77   Interview with a German donor organization.

78   Interview with a Western government official.

79   Interview with a German civil society organization; Olga Onuch and Gwendolyn Sasse, "Anti-regime action and geopolitical polarization: understanding protester dispositions in Belarus," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38, no. 1-2 (2022): pp. 62–87, accessed September 28, 2022, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2022.2034134.

80   Interview with an international donor organization.

81   Interview with a German donor organization.

82   Interview with an international donor organization.

83   Discussed at a confidential roundtable in Berlin in September 2022.

ambassadors also showed symbolic support by laying flowers where a protestor had been killed,[84] or by gathering in the apartment of Nobel Prize in Literature Laureate Svetlana Alexievich to protect her from arrest.[85] However, Western governments' apparent aim was to maintain a balance between supporting the demonstrations and avoiding the introduction of geopolitics into the protest agenda.

These broader observations also largely applied to attempts to support civil society actors at the European level and by Germany. In Brussels, EU "member states struggled to formulate a coherent response,"[86] with some states quickly supporting the opposition movement (e.g., Lithuania and Poland), while others tried to convince Russian President Putin to force Lukashenka to the negotiating table. Finally, EU member states imposed several rounds of targeted sanctions against Belarus starting in October 2020 after the number of protesters had already peaked – because, among other reasons, they had to overcome opposition from Cyprus, which had held the Belarus sanctions decision hostage to achieve unrelated demands.[87] Sectoral sanctions followed only after the Ryanair incident in May 2021, which resulted in some grievances among local civil society actors that these sectoral sanctions were only introduced when the crisis directly impacted the EU.[88] However, some German civil society actors argued that this was the correct strategy in order to offer Lukashenka an alternative to turning to Russia.[89]

Right away in August 2020, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a €53 million assistance package for Belarus, including €3.7 million for emergency support that was immediately mobilized for the victims of oppression and independent media. In December 2020, a further €24 million of this package was announced as the EU4Belarus program and set aside specifically for civil society, youth, small and medium-sized enterprises, and health care. In May 2021, the European Commission announced that it had earmarked up to €3 billion for a "comprehensive plan of economic support to a future democratic Belarus" to be spent once a democratic transition in Belarus begins. Civil society activists said that this was an important political symbol that gave them hope: a signal that someone was already planning for their future.[90]

In Germany, those quickest to react to the protest during the peak of the crisis were German civil society activists already engaging with Belarus. Some of these actors almost immediately formed the Belarus Working Group [*Arbeitskreis Belarus*].[91] This working group (successfully) lobbied the German government for increased support

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84  Voice of Belarus, "EU ambassadors left floral tributes at Pushkinskaya metro station, where the protester died," August 13, 2020, accessed September 28, 2022, https://dev.voiceofbelarus.org/?p=29733.

85  Andrew Rettman, "EU diplomats on guard at Belarusian writer's home," *EUobserver*, September 9, 2020, accessed September 28, 2022, https://euobserver.com/world/149386.

86  Onuch and Gwendolyn, "Anti-regime action and geopolitical polarization: understanding protester dispositions in Belarus," p. 64.

87  Alla Leukavets, "Crisis in Belarus: Main Phases and the Role of Russia, the European Union, and the United States," *Kennan Cable* no. 74, January 2022, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-74-crisis-belarus-main-phases-and-role-russia-european-union-and-united.

88  Interview with a German donor organization.

89  Interview with a German civil society organization.

90  Interview with a civil society organization in Belarus.

91  Interview with a German civil society organization.

for democratic actors in Belarus. The executive branches of the German government started to operationalize this commitment in November 2020 after the German Parliament passed a decision to engage more in Belarus and allocate additional funds.[92]

As a result, the German government created the Action Plan for Civil Society in Belarus (*Aktionsplan Zivilgesellschaft Belarus*) in January 2021, which included €21 million for civil society, including student exchanges and a humanitarian visa program. This Action Plan received mixed reviews: On the one hand, it was seen as a positive political sign of bundled support. On the other hand, some activists criticized it for being misleading, since the €21 million funding consisted largely of repackaged, pre-existing commitments – even though some new elements such as an international accountability platform to document and prosecute human rights violations were included or added at a slightly later stage.

Civil society actors in Germany and Belarus stressed that some government donors, including the German Federal Foreign Office, were slow to understand that partners could no longer fulfill funding requirements or plan ahead as in the past – or that new projects could not be set up with a year's planning span while developments on the ground rapidly changed almost every day. Interviewees familiar with the German context strongly criticized that the additional funds for Belarus stemmed from a highly inflexible funding program that had strict reporting requirements and a yearly deadline, after which point it would take several months to receive funding approval and several months more for funding to be disbursed. In short, this funding program was rather unfit for the dynamic situation in Belarus, where projects had to be adaptable and funds made available quickly. Other departments in the German Federal Foreign Office spent some limited funds to support new projects that were more adapted to the critical situation in which many Belarusian civil society activists found themselves, and one international implementer highlighted a great degree of flexibility on Germany's part. Overall, though, it remained somewhat unclear what the German government saw as its key political aims in Belarus after the protests, and to what extent its support to civil society was considered as a means to further these aims beyond protecting activists from repression.

## Impact of Donor Support for Civil Society Actors on Crisis Dynamics

For the vast majority of Belarusian civil society, there was and is little alternative to receiving support from the West, as no one else is spending funds to promote a democratic Belarus– even more so since almost all forms of social organizing have been punished and banned since 2021.[93] Most local organizations interviewed for this study emphasized that Western donor support positively impacted their capacity to handle the crisis. Interview partners also stressed that some donors were doing their best to understand the movement in Belarus, even if not all of them shared this desire. International actors have often lacked eyes on the ground – and so, increasingly, do Belarusian civil society organizations that are now almost all housed abroad.[94]

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92   German Bundestag, "Belarus – Politische Gefangene freilassen, freie und faire Neuwahlen ermöglichen, Zivilgesellschaft stärken und Verfassungsreform initiieren," November 3, 2020, accessed September 28, 2022, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/239/1923943.pdf.

93   Interview with two civil society organizations in Belarus.

94    Interview with a civil society organization in Belarus; discussion at a confidential roundtable in Berlin in

Certain aspects of civil society support worked better than others in both programmatic and political terms. On a practical level, some inefficiencies emerged that were specific to the crisis in Belarus. For instance, local partners would sometimes continue to implement programs that were no longer needed in order retain funding – a phenomenon which some donors tried to be upfront about and avoid by offering more flexible terms.[95] Coordination between donors and civil society actors was present to a certain extent, as the community was relatively small and closely knit: however, due to increasing security concerns, many resorted to a level of secrecy that made coordination difficult.[96]

Regarding the physical security of their partners, not all donors were able to provide the needed relocation support. The German government in particular was often criticized for failing to act quickly when it was sorely needed.[97] A part of Germany's Action Plan on Belarus included facilitating access to humanitarian visas for those facing political repression.[98] However, one year after the protests started, the German Embassy in Minsk had only allocated 69 visas on humanitarian grounds.[99] Donor's civil society support also had adverse effects on the security of their partners: as previously mentioned, reporting requirements demanded that civil society organizations keep participant lists and other sensitive information, which would eventually serve as the basis for their prosecution in some cases. Donors have since scrapped this requirements which endangered activists and are using alternative ways of funding and support that is provided inside the country, to the extent that this is happening at all.

In political terms, donor support played an important role in keeping Belarus on the international agenda (more successfully than in Venezuela, for example, as one interlocutor from the United States mentioned),[100] at least until February 2022. Since international attention is firmly focused on Ukraine at the moment, the Belarusian movement is struggling to receive the same amount of attention as before.

The societal changes in Belarus that preceded the 2020 protests were in part a result of persistent donor efforts to strengthen civil society – and indeed, their goal to build a "sustainable capacity to democratize when the time comes"[101] was realized. However, when that time came shortly following Belarus' national elections, it remained uncertain how outside donors should and could assist in achieving sustainable change under the given circumstances. It was clear to all actors involved that both Putin and Lukashenka would oppose any potential popular movement for change. Additionally, substantial defections from the security forces inside Belarus were improbably unless Russia permitted it.[102]

September 2022.

95   Interview with a German donor organization.

96   Interview with an international donor organization.

97   Interview with international donor organizations; interview with two German civil society organizations.

98   German Federal Foreign Office, "Against repression and violence: An action plan for civil society in Belarus," June 1, 2022, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/-/2441832.

99   Interview with international donor organization and see also Silvia Stöber, "Nur 69 Visa für politisch Verfolgte," *Tagesschau*, June 9, 2021, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.tagesschau.de/belarus-politisch-verfolgte-deutschland-visa-101.html.

100  Interview with an international donor organization.

101  Interview with an international donor organization.

102  Interview with a German civil society organization.

**Overall, Western donors were successful in ensuring the survival of Belarus' civil society – not more, not less.**

Overall, Western donors were successful in ensuring the survival of Belarus' civil society – not more, not less. This was clearly an accomplishment in its own right with important implications for the long term, as "the third sector remains a potential mediator for social and political transformations in the country."[103] However, these efforts do not constitute a meaningful impact on acute crisis dynamics in the sense of helping civil society actors to push for more inclusive and accountable governance in the interest of sustainable political stability.

## Could Support to Civil Society Actors Have Made a Greater Difference?

As already highlighted, efforts to support civil society in Belarus – while successfully pursued by a variety of donors in some regards – took place largely without a connection to a broader political strategy or a clear sense of what it could ultimately accomplish in a very constrained political environment. For the German government, for example, the case for supporting civil society in Belarus was seemingly centered on the conviction that civil society is part of any healthy, democratic society – essentially, the idea that 'you cannot go wrong' by providing civil society support, regardless of its significance within Berlin's wider political and diplomatic efforts. While it was difficult to foresee the extent of the repressions that Lukashenka would impose, the overall dynamic was not surprising and Western countries apparently had not prepared a response.

**It is questionable whether a more strategic approach to supporting Belarusian civil society would have made any decisive difference in terms of promoting political stability of democratic foundations.**

That said, it is questionable whether a more strategic approach to supporting Belarusian civil society would have made any decisive difference in terms of promoting political stability of democratic foundations. A review of plausible alternative crisis trajectories reveals that while civil society organizations, activists and the popular movement around Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya could have played a constructive role *within* some of the conceivable scenarios, their efforts were never in a position to decisively shape the crisis' basic direction.[104] This inherently limited the impact that donor support to such actors could achieve. As Lukashenka possessed an overwhelming repressive capacity as long as he could rely on Russian backing, the key questions were rather whether this backing would be sustained, whether he was ready to deploy these repressive means and whether he would be able to do so without substantial defections among the security forces.

At an early stage in the crisis, it seemed plausible for Lukashenka to remain in power while leading reforms just sufficient to keep the public quiet. In many ways, this would have been a continuation of how he had sustained his rule prior to August 2020.[105] In this scenario, opposition candidate Tsikhanouskaya and civil society organizations potentially could have mediated the public demands and acted as credible political

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103 Chulitskaya, "Zivilgesellschaft in Belarus unter Repressionen," p. 6.

104 See, for example, Olga Dryndova et al., "Four scenarios for Belarus by the end of 2022", *Policy Paper/Arbeitskreis Belarus* (2021), accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/76018# or András Rácz, Cristina Gherasimov and Milan Nič, "Four scenarios for the crisis in Belarus", DGAP Policy Brief no. 16 (2020): pp. 1–9, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/69725.

105 See Rohava and Burkhardt, "Diktatur ist unser Markenzeichen" – Belarus: Machtvertikale vs. horizontale Gesellschaft."

interlocutors to Lukashenka. However, it is debatable whether this would have been a realistic approach after the Belarusian government's botched COVID-19 response and the resulting loss in popular trust with subsequent societal mobilization. As repressions mounted, not only did this trajectory become increasingly unlikely, but so did the legitimacy of opposition and civil society actors to cooperate with Lukashenka under any circumstances.

Later on, the main contingency that could have significantly affected crisis dynamics would have been for the country's ruling elite, supported by Russia, to deem Lukashenka untenable and oust him through a palace coup. This could have potentially happened in combination with (semi-) staged elections legitimizing a compromise candidate that suited Russia. Such possibilities were highly dependent on dynamics within the inner circles of both country's ruling elites, making their likelihood particularly difficult to assess. For the purposes of this analysis, there is no clear indication that larger or more sustained protests – or any other civil society activities that donors could have supported – would have necessarily increased this probability. In any case, such developments would only have led to a reasonably stable, new political equilibrium if a presidential replacement could have been found that was acceptable to both the Belarusian public and the Kremlin. As this outcome is questionable, the scenario hardly constituted a clear stabilization trajectory toward which donors could have aimed.

The scenario most compatible with a model of political stabilization through democratic reform, as well as the one in which civil society actors could have played the most impactful role, would have been a civil society-led national dialogue requiring Lukashenka to step down or at least concede some of his power. However, this always remained a very unlikely trajectory, as Lukashenka gave little inclination that he was willing to voluntarily surrender power and an increasingly autocratic Moscow displayed clear intolerance to democratizing tendencies in its regional neighborhood.

Overall, given Russia's political and economic hold over the country as well as the intertwined nature of Russian and Belarusian security institutions, the key decisions shaping the crisis' trajectory were always taken above civil society's sphere of influence. Once repressions began with the immediate crackdown on protests, Belarusian security forces depended more (rather than less) on Lukashenka and his system – and the same was true for Lukashenka's dependency on Moscow.[106] All interviewees from local and international civil society as well as donor organizations agreed that, as one interviewee put it, "no amount of support could outweigh the repressions."[107] Relatedly, Moscow was and remains the primary external factor in Belarus. In terms of the crisis, Western actors lacked the instruments and leverage to change this reality.

The case of Belarus demonstrates that Germany and other Western donors do not have a blueprint for dealing with decrepit dictatorial systems that are dependent on and receive substantial support from powerful authoritarian patrons. The West's strategy of starting with 'softer' sanctions to allow Lukashenka a potential way out clearly did not work in this case, which begs the question whether a more unapologetic stance – e.g., the earlier implementation of sectoral sanctions – would have at least had

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106  Interview with a German civil society organization.

107  Interview with an international donor organization.

the merit of remaining credible to those Belarusian partners that the West wanted to support. Belarusian opposition activists emphasized that Western governments should have made greater use of the tool of 'recognition', and acknowledged Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as the Belarus' legitimate president. However, the recognition of Juan Guaidó in Venezuela is a cautionary tale in this regard, and the direct impact of such a move on Lukashenka is questionable.[108] In terms of instruments for civilian democracy promotion, there was none that would have dramatically changed the situation in Belarus.

While the long-term goal of a democratic transition in Belarus remains, it is increasingly uncertain how (and whether) this can be achieved. Certainly, civil society will play a role in a democratic power shift, but can only be one of several drivers of change. Funding civil society organizations on its own will not induce this change in the face an entrenched regime heavily reliant on its security apparatus, and was never going to have this effect in 2020. Still, Belarus is a case where, with its highly educated population inside the country and relatively wealthy diaspora, some of the key ingredients for civil society actors to take matters into their own hands were already present – and remain so to this day. External donors can and should support these actors, with contingency plans at the ready in case a movement for change is not successful.

**Certainly, civil society will play a role in a democratic power shift, but can only be one of several drivers of change.**

## Implications

With regard to the broader questions addressed in this study, the following findings from the 2020 Belarusian crisis merit particular emphasis:

**1.** While the potential role of civil society actors even in closed environments should not be underestimated, repression at the hands of other crisis participants greatly constrains what these actors can accomplish, especially in the short term. Once it became clear that the security apparatus was united behind the Lukashenka regime and received support from Russia, even widely popular and effectively mobilizing civil society actors were not able to force political change. We found no indications that more or different donor support would have been able to generate the missing leverage under these conditions.

**2.** Despite the connection between civil society support and efforts to resolve acute crises, many donors in Belarus did not address these issues in an integrated fashion. Even though civil society actors clearly played a central role in the crisis, only a few donors (for example, the United States) saw their civil society engagement as part of a political strategy toward crisis resolution. Others regarded support to these actors as a largely separate matter driven by general normative motives.

**3.** Cooperation with Western donors can expose civil society partners operating in repressive environments to significant additional risks. Especially if donors'

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108  International Crisis Group, "Venezuela's Opposition Is Clinging to a Failed Strategy," 2021, accessed January 20, 2023, https://bit.ly/3kt5J4j.

influence over broader political dynamics is limited to begin with, contingency measures to protect partners from harm require greater attention. Instruments should be designed in a way that does not force local partners to store potentially incriminating evidence of foreign funding. There should also be a feasible plan at the ready to move partners out of the country (fast) in case of grave danger. The Belarusian context had been sufficiently authoritarian for a long enough for donors to know that such a danger might occur, and precautions – particularly by government donors – proved insufficient despite the general adaptability shown by many donor organizations.

# Sudan

## The Limits of Donor Support to a Revolutionary Movement



### Main Takeaways

In 2018, people in Sudan were suffering from dire economic and social conditions due to kleptocratic governance and decades-long international isolation. Against this background, protests broke out toward the end of the year. A coalition of civil society groups that had organized secretly over the previous years despite restricted civic space managed to turn these protests into a large-scale, non-violent movement for regime change, which ultimately succeeded in ousting long-standing Dictator Omar al-Bashir. This came as a surprise to many Western donors, which had played a relevant political role in the country but had mostly refrained from attempts to influence immediate crisis dynamics through civil society support during the uprising. In the subsequent transition phase, donors engaged more actively with civil society – albeit as a subordinate part of a political strategy that completely relied on support to and the eventual success of the transitional government. Key civil society actors in Sudan also remained reluctant to accept foreign assistance. The case provides some indications about how donors could improve their civil society support efforts, but also shows the limitations of what such support can achieve in the short term: arguably no amount or different kind of external civil society support could have prevented another coup, as the Sudanese generals controlled the means of violence and had little interest in relinquishing power.

# Crisis Context

In 2019, massive and widespread protests toppled Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled Sudan for 30 years – to the surprise of many observers and donor organizations.[109] Initially, the protests were sparked by increasing food prices, representing the dire economic situation under which Sudanese suffered. Over the previous three decades, Sudan's regime had transformed the country's political economy into a kleptocracy in which the ruling elite ran important businesses and industries. The regime also failed to use the oil boom between 1999 and 2011 to invest in key sectors such as agriculture and livestock, and instead spent the oil income on their security apparatus and state administration.[110]

Sudan had been internationally isolated since the late 1990s, as the United States had levied sanctions against the Bashir administration due to its hosting of Osama bin Laden and its war crimes in Darfur.[111] Sudan's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism prevented it from joining the Heavily-Indebted Poor Countries process of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to clear its extraordinarily high external debt burden of $55 billion in 2020, which constituted more than double its gross domestic product (GDP).[112] The secession of South Sudan, which included three quarters of Sudan's oil reserves, and the subsequent stop of oil production further crippled Sudan's economy.[113] In addition, the Bashir regime brutally cracked down on rebel groups in the country's peripheries,[114] prompting the International Criminal Court to issue an arrest warrant for Bashir for war crimes committed in Darfur.[115] Over the last decade, economic grievances and unpopular austerity measures mobilized more and more Sudanese people to take action.[116] Slowly but surely, "[t]he regime's implicit social contract with civilians – acceptance of autocracy in exchange for economic stability – was fraying."[117]

109  Willow Berridge, Justin Lynch, Ragah Makawi, and Alex de Waal, *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy – The Promise and Betrayal of a People's Revolution* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2022). Interviews with several Western government officials; interview with a Sudanese expert.

110  Suliman Baldo, "Sudan's Self-Inflicted Economic Meltdown. With a Corrupt Economy in Crisis, the Bashir Regime Scrambles to Consolidate Power," 2018, Enough Project, accessed October 24, 2022, https://enough-project.org/reports/sudans-economic-meltdown.

111  International Crisis Group, "Time to Repeal U.S. Sanctions on Sudan?" 2017, accessed December 8, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/b127time-repeal-us-sanctions-sudan.

112  International Monetary Fund, "Sudan Joint World Bank-IMF Debt Sustainability Analysis," 2020, accessed December 8, 2022, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/739721606752413516/pdf/Sudan-Joint-World-Bank-IMF-Debt-Sustainability-Analysis.pdf.

113  International Crisis Group, "Improving Prospects for a Peaceful Transition in Sudan," 2019, accessed December 8, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/b143-improving-prospects-peaceful-transition-sudan.

114  For more information, see: International Crisis Group, "The Chaos in Darfur," 2015, accessed October 18, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/chaos-darfur; International Crisis Group, "Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I): War in South Kordofan," 2013, accessed October 18, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudan-s-spreading-conflict-i-war-south-kordofan; International Crisis Group, "Sudan's Spreading Conflict (II): War in Blue Nile," 2013, accessed October 18, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudan-s-spreading-conflict-ii-war-blue-nile.

115  International Criminal Court, "Al Bashir Case," accessed December 8, 2022, https://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur/albashir.

116  International Crisis Group, "Improving Prospects for a Peaceful Transition in Sudan."

117  Mai Hassan and Ahmed Kodouda, "Sudan's Uprising: The Fall of a Dictator," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): p. 98, accessed December 8, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0071.

**Despite the government's repression, Sudan has a rich history of civic activism and mobilization.**

**Spontaneous demonstrations sparked by increasing food prices began in mid-December 2018, first mobilized in towns other than the capital, Khartoum.**

Despite the government's repression, Sudan has a rich history of civic activism and mobilization. By deploying non-violent tactics, Sudanese protestors successfully deposed the military governments of Ibrahim Abboud in 1964 and Jaafar Numeiri in 1985.[118] In the context of the so-called Arab Spring between 2011 and 2013, Sudan also experienced a wave of protests against the Bashir regime that were sparked by a rise in fuel and food prices. The 2013 demonstrations painfully engraved themselves into Sudan's collective memory: In September that year, students, young activists and professional associations mobilized anti-government protests that security services shut down violently, ultimately killing 200 protestors.[119] After this traumatic experience, civil society groups temporarily focused their actions on local social and humanitarian issues rather than directly opposing Bashir or meddling in politics.[120] The so-called Neighborhood Resistance Committees (NRCs), which formed as loose networks during the 2013 protests,[121] also retreated to only engaging on the community level. Importantly, however, these structures did not wither away. The same is true for the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), which informal labor unions secretly formed in 2012, that initially focused on economic aims.[122] Notably, the SPA continued to concentrate on these economic goals during the 2013 protests, while also providing practical support to injured protestors.[123] In contrast, civil society groups, political parties and rebel groups formed an opposition coalition in 2014 – the Sudan Call, which aimed at "dismantl[ing] the one-party state regime and replace it with a state founded on equal citizenship," and thus more ambitious, revolutionary goals than the SPA.[124]

Spontaneous demonstrations sparked by increasing food prices began in mid-December 2018, first mobilized in towns other than the capital, Khartoum. Pictures of the protests were spread via social media and inspired more people to launch protests in new places.[125] The question of whether to stick to strictly economic goals or to add additional political demands divided the SPA. While one SPA member – the doctors' union – publicly supported the movement, others preferred to focus on less fundamental demands like better wages as they still had the brutal dispersal of the 2013 protests in mind. Other members wanted to capitalize on the opportunity to overthrow the Bashir regime, since they believed that no significant labor reforms could be achieved under the

118  Jawhratelkmal Kanu and Jonathan Pinckney, "42 Months on, How Does Sudan's Democracy Movement Endure?," United States Institute of Peace, 2022, accessed November 8, 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/10/42-months-how-does-sudans-democracy-movement-endure.

119  Amnesty International, "Sudan escalates mass arrests of activists amid protest crackdown," 2013, accessed October 1, 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2013/10/sudan-escalates-mass-arrests-activists-amid-protest-crackdown/.

120  Marija Marovic and Zahra Hayder, "Sowing the Seeds of Nonviolent Action in Sudan," United States Institute of Peace, 2022, accessed November 23, 2022, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/sr509-sowing-the-seeds-of-nonviolent-action-in-sudan.pdf.

121  Magdi El Gizouli, "Mobilization and Resistance in Sudan's Uprising: From neighbourhood committees to zanig queens," 2020, accessed November 15, 2022, https://riftvalley.net/publication/mobilization-and-resistance-sudans-uprising.

122  Mohamed El Agati, Omar Samir, Abdel Moneim Sayed Ahmed, and Zeinab Srour, "Sudanese Professionals Association: Structure, Evolution, Roles and Coalitions – Challenges and Future Prospects," Arab Reform Initiative, 2021, accessed November 21, 2022, https://www.arab-reform.net/pdf/?pid=20466&plang=en.

123  El Agati et al., "Sudanese Professionals Association."

124  Sudan Tribune, "Sudan Call Declaration," 2014, accessed October 29, 2022, https://sudantribune.com/article51948/.

125  Hassan and Kodouda, "Sudan's Uprising."

existing political elite. In the end, the SPA organized a demonstration on December 25, 2018. The SPA leadership used the protest to test the waters with regard to protestors' perspectives toward change. While they officially focused the protest on improving wages, organizers listened closely to the crowds – and when protestors called for Bashir to step down, the SPA changed course toward this political goal.[126]

The SPA played a central role in unifying different political parties, professional associations, rebel factions, and civil society groups that sought to overturn Bashir's regime. These diverse set of actors formed the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) coalition in January 2019, signing a joint declaration. The SPA popularized mass demonstrations and strikes organized by NRCs by distributing weekly schedules via social media and traditional flyers,[127] which increased the pressure on Bashir's regime. "Just fall, that is all" was the popular slogan that thousands of protestors chanted on January 9, 2019 in Sudan's capital city. Smaller demonstrations continued to take place all over Sudanese territory.[128] During these uprisings, the FFC made sure to repeatedly emphasize the importance of non-violent means in all protest activities.[129]

**Amidst the mass protests, key features that were supposed to 'coup-proof' the Bashir regime broke down.**

Amidst the mass protests, key features that were supposed to 'coup-proof' the Bashir regime broke down. Disagreements within the Sudanese government gained public attention when Sudan's Head of National Intelligence and Security Service Salah Gosh stirred up rumors that Bashir would also end his presidency in 2020.[130] Instead, Bashir announced a state of emergency in which he dissolved the government, replaced governors with military personnel and banned all demonstrations. On April 10, 2019, rumors circulated that Bashir was planning a brutal crackdown of Sudan's largest-ever sit-in outside of military headquarters. A day later, however, the Sudanese generals launched a collective coup against him. According to one narrative, the generals did so in order to avoid being lumped together with Bashir in the eyes of the Khartoum elite – whose close relatives were among the protesters – and thus remain able to maneuver themselves into powerful positions after Bashir's ouster.[131] As reports also circulated that segments of Sudan's security actors had protected protestors from attacks by the National Intelligence and Security Service,[132] containing the potential split within their ranks may have also been a motive for the generals to stage the coup.

Even after the Sudanese generals ousted Bashir and established a Transitional Military Council (TMC) under the leadership of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the protests did not cease. Across the country, protestors demanded civilian leadership for

126  Berridge et al., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy*, p. 11.

127  Hassan and Kodouda, "Sudan's Uprising."

128  John Young, *Sudan Uprising: Popular Struggles, Elite Compromises, and Revolution Betrayed*, (Switzerland: Small Arms Survey Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2020).

129  Hassan and Kodouda, "Sudan's Uprising."

130  The Economist, "Omar al-Bashir declares a state of emergency in Sudan," 2019, accessed October 5, 2022, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/02/28/omar-al-bashir-declares-a-state-of-emergency-in-sudan.

131  Berridge et al., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy*, pp. 37–43.

132  Radio France Internationale, "Sudan: Anti-Bashir protesters 'protected' by army on fifth day of sit-in," 2019, accessed October 7, 2022, https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20190410-sudan-anti-bashir-protesters-protected-army-fifth-day-sit; Amnesty International, "Sudan: Government mounts lethal offensive against protesters killing nine, blocking food and water supplies," 2019, accessed October 4, 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/04/sudan-government-mounts-lethal-offensive-against-protesters-killing-nine-blocking-food-and-water-supplies/.

**The June 3 massacre was a watershed moment for the crisis in Sudan.**

the government. Protests and strikes accompanied the brief episode of negotiations between the TMC and the FFC in 2019. After the TMC suspended the talks at the end of May 2019, security forces brutally shut down the 10-week sit-in outside of military headquarters, killing 120 people. However, this so-called June 3 massacre was a watershed moment for the crisis in Sudan. Around this time, the protest movement gained new force, which culminated in the June 30th 'million-man' march with hundreds of thousands across Sudan gathered on the streets. Finally, on August 17, 2019, the TMC and FCC signed a constitutional declaration that laid out a 39-month transitional period for elections as well as the creation of a civilian-military Sovereignty Council as the Sudanese Head of State.[133] The latter included five civilian members nominated by the FFC, five military representatives chosen by the TMC and a civilian representative that the TMC and FFC would jointly appoint.[134] The agreement also anticipated a mainly civilian cabinet (except for the ministers of defense and interior) of technocrats headed by a civilian prime minister.

The FFC selected technocrats for the transitional government led by newly appointed Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, a well-respected former United Nations economist. The cabinet had lofty ambitions for transforming Sudan's government processes. The Juba Peace Agreement – the peace accord that the transitional government signed with rebel groups in October 2020 – was a major milestone (although it ultimately undermined the constitutional declaration and strengthened Sudan's security sector, as the signatories became part of the government).[135] Hamdok re-established relationships with the international community and succeeded in removing Sudan from the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism in December 2020,[136] thus paving the way for much-needed debt relief.[137] However, also in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sudan's economy continued its downward trajectory and inflation rates hit a high of over 400 percent in July 2021 – a huge burden on the daily lives of the Sudanese people.[138]

Throughout the transition phase, protests never entirely ceased. Pro-revolutionary demonstrators demanded justice for the victims of the June 3 massacre, peace in the outskirts of country, faster economic reforms, and more power for the civilian leadership. Over time, those protest groups linked to more radical NRCs, trade unions and the Sudanese Communist Party began to channel their frustration toward the civilians in the government.[139] Anti-revolutionary forces, who were close

133  International Crisis Group, "Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution," 2019, accessed October 10, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/281-safeguarding-sudans-revolution.

134  Radio Dabanga, "Sudan's Sovereign Council appointed," 2019, accessed October 7, 2022, https://www.dabanga-sudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-s-sovereign-council-appointed.

135  Gerrit Kurtz, "Die Spoiler von Darfur," German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP-Aktuell no. 54, 2022, accessed September 22, 2022, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/aktuell/2022A54_Spoiler_von_Darfur.pdf.

136  US Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Sudan," 2022, accessed November 1, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Y-1iy5n.

137  German Federal Foreign Office, "Federal Foreign Office on the US announcements to remove Sudan from the State Sponsors of Terrorism List," 2020, accessed November 2022, https://bit.ly/3PapOaU.

138  Reuters, "Sudan's inflation rises further to 422.8% - official statistics," 2021, accessed October 8, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/article/sudan-inflation-idAFL1N2PN15K.

139  ACLED, "Appetite for Destruction: The Military Counter-Revolution in Sudan," 2021, accessed October 9, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VIO1Yr; Deutsche Welle, "Protesters hit Sudan streets calling for political reforms,"

to the Islamists of the Bashir regime, also organized protests to call out both the civilians and security services in government for the bad economic situation. While the latter generally attracted less people (one protest reportedly only consisted of several hundred people), the pro-revolution demonstrations mobilized up to tens of thousands to take to the streets.[140]

As frustration in the population over the dire living conditions grew, the Sudanese generals stirred up opposition against the civilian cabinet. They financed anti-government protests organized by rebel groups – who had left the FFC and instead partnered with the military – and political parties close to the armed forces.[141] The generals had good reasons to fear the planned civilian handover of the Sovereign Council chairmanship, as they could lose control over key sectors of the economy. The FFC also did not tire of demanding justice for those protestors killed in the June 3 massacre – the responsibility for which is largely attributed to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (also known as "Hemedti"), a leading member of the Sovereignty Council.[142] Even though a committee was established to look into the June 3 massacre, it never completed its investigation.[143] In December 2020, Sudan's Prime Minister Hamdok called for the unification of the armed forces and a limit to the security services' control to the defense sector,[144] increasing tensions between the civilians and generals in government.

In October 2021, in what amounted to another military coup, Burhan dissolved the Sovereign Council and detained civilian government officials, including Hamdok. After international and domestic pressure, the military reinstated Hamdok as Sudan's prime minister a month later. However, amidst mass protests demanding a full civilian government, Hamdok resigned on January 2, 2022 following unsuccessful attempts to form a technocratic cabinet.[145] Since then, mass demonstrations against the military rule have continued. On December 5, 2022, the Sudanese generals and the Central Council of the FFC signed a framework agreement that established a two-year transition period. While some welcomed the agreement, members of the NRCs and FFC have rejected the agreement and continue demonstrating.[146]

2020, accessed October 4, 2022, https://bit.ly/3HpwujL.

140   Sudan Tribune, "Hundreds protest in Khartoum against Hamdok government," 2020, accessed September 2, 2022, https://sudantribune.com/article67313/.

141   Berridge et al., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy*, p. 199; Reuters, "Sit-in calling for Sudanese government dissolution grows into thousands," 2021, accessed October 5, 2022, https://bit.ly/3uxsx4D; International Crisis Group, "Reversing Sudan's Dangerous Coup," 2021, accessed October 12, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/reversing-sudans-dangerous-coup.

142   International Crisis Group, "Reversing Sudan's Dangerous Coup."; Sudanese Archive, "Violence against protesters in Khartoum on June 3, 2019," 2020, accessed November 1, 2022, https://sudanesearchive.org/en/investigations/june3-overview.

143   Amnesty International, "Sudan: Speed up investigations into 2019 Khartoum massacre," 2021, accessed November 4, 2022, https://bit.ly/3PbZywH.

144   Radio Dabanga, "Sudan PM Hamdok: 'No place to hide' from accountability," 2020, accessed October 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3HkrGMv; Reuters, "Sudan's PM calls for unified military after tensions surface," 2021, accessed November 3, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-security-idAFKCN2DY1WP.

145   Yezid Sayigh, "Sudanese Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok Has Resigned," 2022, accessed December 7, 2022, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/86146.

146   Radio Dabanga, "Sudanese shrug shoulders at Political Framework Agreement 'being touted as end of military rule'," 2022, accessed on December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3HgNmJn.

# Role and Potential of Civil Society Actors

In a highly restricted environment such as Sudan, a vibrant and formally organized civil society could not openly develop.[147] Given the crucial roles that trade unions and professional associations played in the two previous revolutions, Bashir feared that organized civil society could potentially endanger his power. To counterbalance this risk, he prohibited such groups outright. In parallel, he worked tirelessly to build a "façade of civil society" by establishing pro-regime civil society and coopting the few remaining opposition groups.[148] However, this did not prevent different strands of civil society from organizing underground.

So-called shadow unions and professional associations first came together to form the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors and Teachers in 2012, planting the seeds for the SPA. Given the restrictions, the SPA only formalized in 2016 with a membership of 17 professional associations.[149] The SPA's socio-economic make-up clearly differed from the trade unions that had driven previous uprisings in Sudan: while the members of these trade unions represented the working class, SPA members had formal education and came from middle and upper classes.[150] In the early years of its existence, the SPA focused on working toward establishing a minimum wage in the country.

As mentioned in the previous section, the central umbrella group that drove the protests in 2018 and 2019 was the FFC, with the SPA in the front seat. One prominent FFC member included the Sudan Call, the opposition coalition of civil society groups, political parties and the armed rebel groups already noted above. The No to Women's Oppression Initiative, which was founded in 2009,[151] and MANSAM, a coalition of women's groups, also featured as noteworthy FFC members. Moreover, youth groups inspired by the Arab Spring such as Girifna and Change Now – many of which were led by women, diaspora and urban people – participated in the coalition.[152] In total, around 150 groups joined the FFC.[153] The umbrella group made a tactical choice: "Civil society groups rallied around the SPA's leadership and mainstream opposition parties lent it behind-the-scenes support, realizing that [the FFC political parties] lacked the popular legitimacy to lead the movement."[154] While armed rebel groups were also part of the FFC, they did not participate in the peaceful civic protests.[155]

The NRCs that formed during the 2013 protests also played a central role in the 2018-2019 uprising. "The committees were informal, locally autonomous and covered

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147  Notably, for the purpose of this study, our definition of civil society excludes political parties.

148  Berridge et al., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy*, p. 6.

149  Marovic and Hayder, "Sowing the Seeds of Nonviolent Action in Sudan."

150  Young, *Sudan Uprising: Popular Struggles, Elite Compromises, and Revolution Betrayed*, p. 55.

151  Peace Insight, "No to Women's Oppression Initiative," 2018, accessed December 3, 2022, https://bit.ly/3iN-vhYV.

152  Young, Sudan Uprising: Popular Struggles, Elite Compromises, and Revolution Betrayed, pp. 19–22.

153  Stephen Zunes, "Sudan's 2019 Revolution: The Power of Civil Resistance," ICNC Special Report Series 5, 2021, accessed October 5, 2022, https://bit.ly/3UHn9GL.

154  International Crisis Group, "Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution."

155  Berridge et al., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy*, p. 85.

neighborhoods villages, and other smaller networks of residents."[156] Largely, these members were young Sudanese people who did not participate in the FFC, as they did not feel represented in the more traditional coalition. While the FFC provided the organizational leadership for the protest movement, the NRCs had the power to mobilize people, especially in the working-class communities to which the middle-class FFC leaders often did not have access. On top of their mobilization efforts, the NRCs also took over logistics, which included ensuring sufficient food supply for those protesting as well as those facing shortages.[157] The Sudanese diaspora also played an important role by keeping other countries' publics informed, lobbying foreign governments, providing support, and organizing protests abroad.

What made Sudan's 2018-2019 movement remarkable and different from the previous two popular uprisings was the extensive presence of youth and women. Young people were dissatisfied with limited opportunities in the country, and the ones who participated in the protests largely "assumed a globalized – which is to say Western – identity and adopted individualist values acquired through the internet, social media, participation in civil society, and foreign travel, and in response to government repression."[158] Sudanese women were frustrated with laws constraining their rights, such as the continued legality of marital rape. Reportedly, up to 60 percent of the protestors were female.[159]

FFC members such as the SPA and the NRCs adopted decentralized tactics and structures. First organizing small, wide-spread protests in various neighborhoods proved to be a vital strategy to exhaust Sudan's security forces, which had to focus on continuously changing locations. While the SPA and its union members had committees to organize as well as a handful of spokespersons, both the SPA and NRCs made sure to maintain the secrecy needed to protect their members.[160] In the words of researchers, a "mapping of the revolutionary associations would look like a tangled yarn ball."[161] This decentralized approach made it more difficult for the Bashir regime to attack and arrest activists.[162]

After Bashir's ousting on April 11, 2019, the FFC's unity crumbled as its leaders were not prepared for their success. The flat hierarchy structure and principle of consensus made it difficult for the FFC members to decide quickly on a way forward. The SPA, many of whose leaders had led the protests and thus became prime targets for arrests, was paralyzed by internal disputes while others – including activists from the diaspora – sought to take over but lacked sufficient internal support. SPA members were further split over the question of whether they should lead the negotiations with the TMC. This was made even more difficult because SPA decisions were made through their established principle of consensus. In the end, the SPA decided to hand over the leadership role in the negotiations to the FFC coalition.

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156  Zunes, "Sudan's 2019 Revolution," p. 18.

157  Zunes, "Sudan's 2019 Revolution," p. 17ff.

158  Young, *Sudan Uprising: Popular Struggles, Elite Compromises, and Revolution Betrayed*, p. 34.

159  Berridge et al., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy*.

160  Young, *Sudan Uprising: Popular Struggles, Elite Compromises, and Revolution Betrayed*, p. 25.

161  Berridge et al., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy*.

162  Emma Graham-Harrison, "Sudan's displaced citizens stir revolt from the sidelines," 2019, The Guardian, accessed October 18, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/21/sudan-diaspora-stir-revolt-from-overseas.

The FFC, however, also did not have a functioning decision-making mechanism, which delayed the start of negotiations with the TMC. This bought the Sudanese generals significant time to refine their negotiation strategy, further reducing the FFC's bargaining power on top of a relative lack of experience on the part of its eventual negotiators.[163] The continued divisions of the FFC during the negotiations further weakened their position: for example, the Sudanese Communist Party, a member of the FFC, decided to not join or even nominate candidates for positions in the transitional government.[164] Rebel groups, which were also part of the opposition coalition, wanted to be more involved in the FFC's decision-making structures. However, the FFC did not trust these actors and decided not to address the periphery conflicts, as it would take too long and would risk losing their momentum.[165] These divisions led to an interruption of the negotiation process.[166] Further, the FFC signatory MANSAM criticized that women were excluded from the negotiation table, as only two women were part of the FFC negotiation team.[167]

The role of the SPA was significantly reduced during the transition period, since they no longer unified civilian forces (FFC members and NRCs) as they had during the 2018-2019 uprising. Instead, both the SPA's relationship with NRCs and its ties with the civilian cabinet significantly worsened. In the beginning of 2020, for example, the SPA strongly condemned the governments' appointment of three additional ministers, which violated the constitutional declaration. Another point of contention was with the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement, for which the signatories were anticipated to join the government. According to the SPA, this further complicated Sudan's already-fragile political situation. The SPA eventually split into two factions, one of which demanded to keep the FFC and supported the Hamdok government. The other group called for holding both parties accountable for the failures of the past year. The reason for this division is arguably due to its quick transformation from a group representing the interests of trade unions and professional associations into the leading member of the FFC, which encompassed way more actors than the SPA's usual membership.[168]

## Donor Goals and Stabilization Approach

Western donors have long been concerned with questions around peacebuilding and stability in Sudan. In the 2000s, donors poured crucial funding into Sudan to support the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the central government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, which ultimately

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163  Berridge et al., Sudan's Unfinished Democracy, pp. 81–90.

164  International Crisis Group, "Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution."

165  Interview with a researcher.

166  Aljazeera, "Negotiations between Sudan's military, protest leaders postponed," 2019, accessed October 23, 2022, https://bit.ly/3UHLFI3.

167  United Nations, "Security Council Urges Recommitment to Women, Peace, Security Agenda, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2493 (2019)," 2019, accessed October 8, 2022, https://press.un.org/en/2019/sc13998.doc.htm; NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, "Statement by Ms. Alaa Salah at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security," 2019, accessed November 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3ux-mCMS.

168  El Agati et al., "Sudanese Professionals Association."

resulted in the secession of South Sudan in 2011. The end of the peace agreement put a halt to donor funding, as donors had not planned for this development and were reluctant to support more informal, younger movements like Girifina that demanded regime change.[169]

In subsequent years, donors' engagement with Sudan focused on issues of counter-terrorism and migration. The former was mainly a preoccupation of the United States, which also repealed some of its sanctions against Sudan in this context.[170] In 2016, Khartoum and Washington agreed to steps for Sudan to take across five key areas.[171] A year later, the Trump administration made the controversial decision to permanently lift economic sanctions against Sudan, claiming that Khartoum had progressed in these areas.[172] This permitted international trade and business with Sudanese counterparts.[173] However, other targeted sanctions related to the war crimes in Darfur as well as Sudan's status as a state sponsor of terrorism remained intact, still blocking the country's much-needed debt relief.

In the European Union, efforts to improve relations with Sudan were driven mainly by an increased influx of migrants from the Horn of Africa. In 2014, the EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative (also known as the 'Khartoum Process') was established to address "the challenges of migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings."[174] The EU, with significant funding from Germany, created the Better Migration Management Program, which faced heavily criticism and accusations of cooperating with the same Rapid Support Forces that are considered responsible for war crimes in Darfur.[175] To prevent a possible state collapse, European leaders were in favor of the removal of United States' sanctions. [176]

Western government donors started to follow the protests of late 2018 and 2019 as they proved sustainable over an extended period and gained in force. Despite the changed dynamic, however, donors did not believe that the Bashir regime would break down. Rather, they expected the 2018-2019 uprising would be destined to the same fate as the previous protests, which were forcibly shut down with violence and repression.[177]

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169   Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, "The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?," International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, February 2021, accessed September 28, 2022, pp. 53–57, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/external-support-for-nonviolent-campaigns/.

170   International Crisis Group, "Time to Repeal U.S. Sanctions on Sudan?"

171   These included "cooperation on counter-terrorism; addressing the LRA threat; ending hostilities in the Two Areas and Darfur; improving humanitarian access; and ending negative interference in South Sudan. According to a senior Sudanese official, meetings to assess progress on the five tracks involved one official from each of the two sides, with locations alternating between Khartoum and Washington." International Crisis Group, "Time to Repeal U.S. Sanctions on Sudan?"

172   Radio Dabanga, "US lifts sanctions on Sudan: 'More progress needed'," 2017, accessed October 9, 2022, https://bit.ly/3UADfSA.

173   US Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Sudan."

174   International Organization for Migration, "EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative (Khartoum Process)," accessed November 12, 2022, https://bit.ly/3h64GWT.

175   Suliman Baldo, "Border Control from Hell: How the EU's migration partnership legitimizes Sudan's "militia state"," *The Enough Project*, 2017, accessed October 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BfEks8. The German government declared it would exclude any cooperation with the RSF. See: Deutscher Bundestag, " Zusammenarbeit der Bundesregierung mit der Regierung der Republik Sudan," 2019, accessed September 29, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VIU0MT.

176   International Crisis Group, "Time to Repeal U.S. Sanctions on Sudan?"

177   Interview with three Western government officials.

Further, one donor official admitted to not possessing sufficient analytical capacity to disentangle the many important political developments in Sudan at the time.[178] Therefore, donors' activities in the lead-up to Bashir's fall were ostensibly guided by the general aim of averting large-scale violence to the extent possible, but not by more detailed stabilization objectives corresponding to a particular pathway out of the crisis.

However, once Bashir had been ousted and the transition government put in place, engaging with the very different trajectories Sudan's crisis could potentially take became all but inevitable. The sheer power imbalance between the civilian and military parts of the transition government – the latter of which possessing considerable financial resources and, more importantly, the capacities to resort to violence – indicated a clear risk that security services would undermine civilian leaders' power and consolidate their own economic and political control. For donor governments with an interest in sustained stabilization and peace in Sudan, this trajectory could not have appeared satisfactory. For this reason, supporting the civilian component of the transition government became the centerpiece of donors' stabilization approach.

Meanwhile, averting any escalation of violence that could spiral into a civil war remained a clear priority. As Sudan's security services had stopped the protest wave between 2011 and 2013 by cracking down on demonstrations with brutal force, it was not difficult to imagine that they would go down the same route again. Given the mistrust and rivalry between the different security services that were each well-equipped, an armed confrontation was also not an unlikely scenario. The refusal of pro-democracy protestors to any military rule, combined with other grievances resulting from the worsening economic situation, added to the threat of general unrest and violent confrontations – a situation which donors urgently sought to avoid.

## Donor Support to Civil Society During the Crisis

Donors' engagement with civil society actors in Sudan in the acute crisis context built on the legacies of earlier initiatives. In 2015, for instance, the European Union had launched a program to "enhance civil society organizations' and local authorities' contributions to governance, policy formulation and development processes in Sudan." The initiative was worth €5.5 million and succeeded a similar program that ran from 2007 to 2013. It is worth noting that the program's focus was on "respond[ing] to the needs of the Sudanese people [...] [and that] one important priority [was] basic services delivery to the poorest sections of the Sudanese society."[179] While the overarching goal was arguably political given that it sought to strengthen the political roles of civil society organizations in Sudan, the operational goals seemed to target more 'technical' development and humanitarian objectives.

A fairly small donor community had also specifically sought to strengthen political civil society before the uprising. These donors included organizations with a long engagement history in the country, including the German political foundation

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178  Interview with a Western government official.

179  European Union, "European Union promotes open society and democracy in Sudan," 2015, accessed October 24, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VInAlE.

Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Goethe Institute, as well as the United States' National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, and Freedom House. These organizations mostly focused on supporting Sudanese civil society with project-specific funding, dialogue platforms, capacity-building (notably also in non-violent tactics), and the creation of community networks. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation, for example, has led a so-called Young Leaders Program since 2012 that strengthens the capacities of selected Sudanese activists from civil society, political parties and youth-led initiatives to enable them to better participate in political processes. For this, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation not only creates networking opportunities but also provides training in analysis, communication and negotiation as well as project design and implementation.[180]

When confronted with the acute crisis starting in late 2018, a Sudanese expert found the international community to be in a state of "paralysis:"[181] hamstrung by fixed project goals and timelines, donors were seen as incapable of adjusting to the massive change in political context, even though their own political goals required such adaptation. However, according to one representative of a Sudanese civil society organization, it was not only donors but also the Sudanese people and the diaspora themselves who "were all over the place, [...] struggling to understand what to do next."[182] Western donor organizations that had no employees on site found it particularly difficult to grasp the developments in Sudan. Overall, donors arguably did not have an engagement strategy with civil society on the ground, but rather remained observers of the crisis.

At the political level, donor governments played a more active role in the Sudanese crisis. For instance, Western governments publicly condemned the use of violence against protestors as early as December 2018 – the first month of the demonstrations.[183] A month later, the Troika (the United States, United Kingdom and Norway) – which had closely cooperated in the peacebuilding efforts in Sudan and South Sudan – and Canada went further and stated: "The Government of Sudan's actions and decisions over the coming weeks will have an impact on the engagement of our governments and others in the coming months and years."[184] They also called for the implementation of "necessary political reforms," but did not provide further explanation on what these would entail. This statement made it clear that Khartoum would endanger its recently improved relations with Western donors if it continued to violently suppress peaceful protests. Even though Sudanese officials were left unsure of what this warning would mean in practice, it is not difficult to envisage the potential consequences: Washington had just removed Sudan's economic sanctions before the protests, but this policy change had

**Donors were seen as incapable of adjusting to the massive change in political context, even though their own political goals required such adaptation.**

180 Friedrich Ebert Foundation, "Young Leaders Program," accessed October 22, 2022, https://bit.ly/3iMRKWg.

181 Interview with a Sudanese civil society organization.

182 Interview with a Sudanese diaspora civil society organization.

183 Radio Dabanga, "Troika calls on Sudan Govt, protestors for restraint during demonstrations," 2018, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Fb0eOo; European Council and Council of the EU, "Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the situation in Sudan," 2019, accessed October 1, 2022, https://bit.ly/3uzqSeU; Deutscher Bundestag, "Zusammenarbeit der Bundesregierung mit der Regierung der Republik Sudan."

184 US Embassy in Sudan, "Statement by the Troika on the response to continuing protests in Sudan," 2019, accessed October 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VK5BLy.

not yet been put into practice and could have been easily revoked.[185] More importantly, tensions with Western states would greatly reduce Sudan's prospects of being removed from the United States' list of state sponsors of terrorism, which it needed to pave the way for debt relief and for which talks had just begun.[186] The European Union issued a similar statement in February 2019, notably without calls for reforms.[187]

Sudan's peak crisis from late 2018 until mid-2019 did not trigger new or expanded donor programming for civil society. The few donors who had active programs to support Sudanese civil society pursued one of two different approaches: while most donors put a halt to these projects, a few deliberately continued them. The former group mainly justified their decisions through the need to protect their Sudanese partners and employees, who also did not have the capacity to continue the programs while participating in the uprising.[188] One donor organization also mentioned that partners explicitly expected them not to continue with "business as usual." While it is true that the ongoing and previous violent repression of protestors and activists gave legitimate reasons for concerns about the safety of their Sudanese partners, these donor organizations also feared becoming a target themselves and losing their permission to operate in the country.[189] One representative of a civil society organization criticized the interruption of programs, as "the revolution was in very much need of support for the protestors, [but] some donors just did not want to intervene."[190]

Those donors that decided to continue their projects supported their existing partners and did not accept new grantees.[191] One donor organization stated that this was due to a lack of funding mechanisms that would allow for rapid changes. However, this donor was able to use their continued programs to support trainings at the sit-ins staged by many of their Sudanese partners. A few donors that were physically present in Sudan also provided unsystematic, practical support to the activists on the streets by handing out food and water as well as opening their offices for gatherings (which, however, mostly did not happen, as people wanted to remain on the streets).[192] According to one civil society organization, the large sit-ins that took place at locations like medical centers, classrooms, exhibitions, and street art spaces were mostly financed by Sudanese businesses and the diaspora.

Importantly,      While some NGOs saw the need to support activists with trainings and workshops, the key groups that organized the protests were very wary of accepting any kind of foreign support. The SPA, the driving force of the FFC, adopted a policy against receiving any external support, relying instead on funding from local

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185   Sanctions were only effectively lifted in 2020, see: Mohammed Amin, "US lifts embargo on 157 Sudanese insti-tutions: official," *Anadolu Agency*, 2020, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3uviugF; France24, "Sudan central bank announces US sanctions lifted on 157 companies," 2020, accessed September 29, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Y7u277.

186   Fatiha Belfakir, "Sudan Diplomat: Talks to Remove Sudan From US Terror List to Begin," *Voice of America*, https://bit.ly/3P9IveG.

187   European Council and Council of the EU, "Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the situation in Sudan."

188   Interview with two international donor organizations.

189   Interview with two international donor organizations; interview with a Sudanese civil society organization.

190   Interview with a Sudanese civil society organization.

191   Interview with an international civil society organization; interview with a Western government official.

192   Interview with two international civil society organizations.

communities and the Sudanese diaspora. In this way, they could ensure that the uprising remained a Sudanese affair unaffected by any kind of foreign agenda. Instead of money, which they did not need given the voluntary nature of their activism, the protestors called on donors to support them by "debating and pressuring the dictators."[193] Not all FFC members followed this decision, as some chose to accept bilateral support.[194] The NRCs were also very reluctant to accept external support at that time, potentially also because they lacked the structures to receive such funding.[195]

A handful of the Sudanese peacebuilding and development NGOs that had these funding structures in place tried to obtain donor's support for training for activists, awareness-raising about democracy and logistics for the uprising. These attempts, however, failed. One representative of a Sudanese NGO concluded that they "did not get the support when it was most needed,"[196] as donors were slow to make funding decisions. Donors also did not have fast-track or simplified procedures that could have reduced the burden of grant applications for civil society applicants.[197] Similarly, several donor representatives pointed out obstacles that hindered fast reactions. Even extending existing programs "was very bureaucratic" and did not contain a "rapid-reaction funding mechanism,"[198] making it impossible for these donors to support the activities of new groups. Nevertheless, Sudanese NGOs supported the protest movement with activities described above using their own limited resources.

For Western governments, the overthrow of Bashir was an "eye-opener" that sparked strategic thinking about how to capitalize on this historic opportunity.[199] Donors got the ball rolling on extending and expanding existing programs as well as on conceptualizing new project ideas, even though it would take until the beginning of the transition period for funding for new programs to come through.[200] Politically, several Western ambassadors visited the sit-in located in front of Sudanese military headquarters, which had continued since April 6.[201] While these actions communicated their support for protestors' demands, the international community only officially called for an accelerated transfer to civilian rule and used diplomatic pressure after the June 3 massacre.[202] After this point, several governments such as Germany and the United States as well as international bodies like the United Nations, European Union and African Union strongly called for a transition to civilian rule in Sudan. Washington also asked Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Cairo to help convince the Sudanese generals to hand

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193   Interview with a SPA representative.

194   Interview with a Sudanese civil society organization.

195   Interview with two Sudanese civil society organization; interview with one international civil society organization.

196   Interview with a Sudanese civil society organization.

197   Interview with two Sudanese civil society organizations.

198   Interview with a donor organization.

199   Interview with a Western government official.

200   Interview with a Western government official; interview with a Western donor organization.

201   Sudan Tribune, "Visits of foreign diplomats to protest site enrage Sudan's officials," 2019, accessed December 8, 2022, https://sudantribune.com/article65640/.

202   The Troika already called for the transfer to civilian rule after Bashir's fall. The difference resides in the urgency and collaborative effort of the international community. See: UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, "Troika statement on the current unrest in Sudan," 2019, accessed October 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3uzW6mo; Reuters, "EU calls for calm in Sudan, urges democratic transition," 2019, accessed November 3, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VGkVZL.

over power to civilians. Further, to condemn the violence against protestors, the African Union's Peace and Security Council suspended Sudan's membership.[203] Combined with the unprecedented mass protests, this international pressure helped lead the generals to come to an agreement with the FFC.

**During the transition phase, Western donors put all of their strategic eggs into one basket: strengthening the civilian part of the Sudanese government.**

During the transition phase, Western donors put all of their strategic eggs into one basket: strengthening the civilian part of the Sudanese government in order to hold their own against the generals, execute difficult economic and political reforms, and – not least of all – boost their legitimacy and acceptance among the population. Already in December 2019, the European Union had provided €7 million for the Sudanese Prime Minister's Office and €35 million for the social protection system. In February 2020, the European Union then announced €100 million to support Sudan's transitional government with a focus on "economic reforms, economic opportunities for youth and women, and the peace process and democratic governance."[204] Following the establishment of the informal Friends of Sudan group that Germany initiated in 2019,[205] international donors pledged €1.6 billion at a 2020 Sudan Partnership Conference in Berlin to support Sudan's transition. These funds were supposed to particularly help the transitional government with the country's ongoing economic crisis.[206] In December 2020, the United States alone pledged $700 million to support the civilian part of Sudan's government, providing assistance to key ministries and the Prime Minister's Office.[207]

After the Sudanese government's power-sharing agreement was signed in August 2019, new opportunities for civil society groups to apply for projects – which often focused on elections, political participation and democratic debate – opened up. Support that had already been requested during the peak of the crisis also slowly trickled in. Through the Consortium for Elections and Political Processes – a collaborative effort by the National Democracy Institute, International Republican Institute and International Foundation for Electoral Systems – the National Democratic Institute, for example, started to bolster civil society organizations' capacity to effectively observe political processes and advocate for reforms in Sudan, fostering domestic oversight and government accountability in 2020.[208] Similarly, the National Endowment for Democracy supported a range of civil society projects in Sudan. For instance, it funded civic education training programs for Sudanese activists to enhance activist and citizen engagement on Sudan's reform agenda. Another project aimed to "increase the capacity of politically active youth to advance local and national peace and conflict resolution

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203 Notably, the AU's Peace and Security Council only came to this decision after the massacre, even though their policy on non-constitutional transfers would have arguably required this action after Bashir's ouster two months earlier. See: International Crisis Group, "Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution."

204 European Commission, "European Union announces €100 million to support the democratic transition process in Sudan," 2020, press release, accessed October 17, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_352.

205 Western governments such as in the United Kingdom, United States, Norway, France, and Germany as well as Egypt, Ethiopia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are among the members of the Friends of Sudan.

206 Sudan Partnership Conference, "Final Communiqué," 2020, accessed October 17, 2022, https://bit.ly/3iFn-WKZ.

207 USAID, "Testimony of Deputy Administrator for Policy and Programming Isobel Coleman before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations," 2022, accessed September 23, 2022, https://bit.ly/3FfzTip.

208 National Democratic Institute, "Sudan Overview," accessed October 23, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BjxAcO.

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efforts" by training them "in democratic concepts and dialogue facilitation and support[ing] them to organize democratic dialogue forums."[209]

Many donor organizations focused on supporting the media and providing trainings for journalists, leading to a rivalry among donors and therefore a lack of willingness to coordinate among one another. One interviewee called this a "donors' wild west," often leading to arbitrary projects.[210] Some donor organizations hosted conferences to discuss economic policies and priorities for Sudanese civil society. However, two civil society representatives expressed disappointment around these processes, as they often resulted in civil society groups feeling forced to compromise in favor of donors' goals if they wanted support. For example, this was the case with the need to focus on women's political participation, which – despite the strong role of women in the protest movement independent of any donor demands – these interviewed representatives saw as problematic as they "cannot impose it on women."[211] Despite increased rhetorical support, strengthening civil society never became a real priority but was rather "vaguely considered," as one Western government official put it.

While the new funding provided existing Sudanese civil society organizations with a bit more stability, it also led to a "boom in civil society organizations," some of which were more interested in obtaining donors' money than in promoting Sudan's transition process.[212] It is important to stress that the new funding benefited mostly the organized civil society who fulfilled certain requirements, such as being registered, speaking English and having the capability to navigate the abstract logic of programming language.[213] In addition, donors with existing established Sudanese partners first focused on extending and expanding their project portfolios with these trusted civil society groups, as building new relationships takes time.[214] This was criticized by a few Sudanese civil society organizations who claimed that donors stuck to their known "elite circles,"[215] which they also saw as keen to "monopolize the communication with donors."[216] With Western donors slowly expanding their partnerships with NRCs, their members started to participate in workshops and trainings that organized Sudanese civil society actors would conduct with the help of Western funding. In 2021, for example, the National Democratic Institute started to work with NRCs "to help them identify and build consensus around community policy priorities, and more effectively advocate for change within their communities through engagement with local decision-makers." [217]

Overall, however, the main focus of Western donors remained on supporting the civilian-led authorities in Sudan. In the words of an interviewee, there was a "gold rush" around supporting government institutions.[218] However, this support lacked strategic

209  National Endowment for Democracy, "Sudan 2021," 2022, accessed December 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3iN21Sk.

210  Interview with an international media organization.

211  Interview with a Sudanese civil society organization.

212  Interview with a Sudanese civil society organization.

213  Interview with a Sudanese grassroots initiative and a donor organization.

214  Interview two donor organizations.

215  Interview with two Sudanese civil society organizations.

216  Interview with a Sudanese civil society organization.

217  National Democratic Institute, "Sudan Overview."

218  Interview with a Sudanese expert.

**When Sudan's military took over in October 2021, Western donors were keen to redirect their funds initially earmarked for the transition government toward Sudanese civil society.**

direction and sufficient coordination among donors. According to one representative of a Sudanese civil society organization, the Office of the Prime Minister asked five different donors to finance the same project. A journalist also discovered this issue, stating that "diplomats told me that at one point, three different donors funded communications efforts in Hamdok's Office that did nearly the same thing."[219]

When Sudan's military took over in October 2021, Western donors were keen to redirect their funds initially earmarked for the transition government toward Sudanese civil society.[220] After an initial freeze of the United States' $700 million fund, Washington announced in 2022 that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) will use some parts of the fund – $108 million – to mostly support civil society organizations with trainings and civic education to strengthen their capacities for a potential new transition.[221]

## Impact of Donor Support for Civil Society Actors on Crisis Dynamics

The ouster of Bashir in April 2019 was the success of the Sudanese activists and organizers who participated and mobilized peaceful protests and other forms of civil resistance. As donors' programmatic support for crucial civil society actors during the peak campaign was very limited at best, it is clear that such support did not play a role in achieving the fall of Bashir. While Western donors' quick public condemnation of regime violence as well as the Troika and Canada's threat of a potentially negative impact on relations constituted attempts toward political support, their impact was questionable as the repressions not only continued but even worsened after these steps.[222]

However, previous long-term donor efforts arguably contributed to making activists more effective, especially with regard to trainings in non-violent tactics and connecting Sudanese activists to other activists in the region. According to a civil society representative, donors' support before the uprising "really changed and affected" activists, as they could acquire skills in strategy planning, leadership and mobilization strategies. A recently published study also found that long-term civil society support can help lay the foundations for non-violent movements.[223]

Diplomatic efforts and mediation were also crucial for reaching the Sudan government's power-sharing agreement. After the shock of the June 3 massacre, Western diplomatic pressure backed up the unprecedented force of Sudan's protest movement, which ultimately drew the generals back to the negotiation table with

219 Justin Lynch, "How the U.N. and the West Failed Sudan," 2022, accessed December 1, 2022, https://bit.ly/3FD-peiY. It is notable that improving communication efforts by the civilian component of the government toward the public was crucial to strengthening popular support and thus the legitimacy of the cabinet.

220 Interview with two Western government officials.

221 Adva Saldinger, "US will resume aid funding for Sudan but bypass military government," 2022, accessed December 5, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BlFm5Q.

222 Physics for Human Rights, "Intimidation and Persecution: Sudan's Attacks on Peaceful Protesters and Physicians," 2019, accessed December 2, 2022, https://bit.ly/3UDaS6d; Jehanne Henry, "Emergency Decrees Bring More Repression in Sudan," *Human Rights Watch*, 2019, accessed October 23, 2022, https://bit.ly/2SNr4SJ.

223 Chenoweth and Stephan, "The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?"

the African Union and Ethiopia.[224] One representative of a Sudanese civil society organization criticized the strong role of international actors in mediation efforts, as "it was not what Sudanese people wanted" and reflected donors' priority to support short-term stability instead of democracy.[225] As clearly demonstrated by the June 3 massacre, however, there was a considerable risk of escalating violence at the hands of the security services. Therefore, donors' efforts to push for a negotiated solution was consistent with their stabilization objectives – i.e., to reduce violence and continue their joint counter-terrorism efforts.

During the transition, expanded donor funding helped Sudanese civil society to become more effective and sustainable. However, civil society representatives mostly agreed that these improvements remained small. At first glance, this might be surprising given the considerable donor funding opportunities available at that time. However, several challenges – which were mentioned in the interviews for this case study – may have hampered further strengthening the civil society landscape more broadly. First, donors only gradually started to build new relationships after the power-sharing agreement was signed in August 2019, and instead invested new funds into established partnerships. This mindset may well have led donors to overlook opportunities to fund new or different actors with the potential for greater impact. In fact, donors' support for NRCs only commenced slowly, with some partnerships not even forming before the 2021 coup, as the grant applications processes had not yet been finalized. Second, Western governments clearly focused on strengthening the civilian government. Meanwhile, civil society actors were not considered to be important political players, but were seen as only "play[ing] a marginal role"[226] and were only "vaguely considered."[227]

Overall, even though donors intensified their civil society engagement during the transition phase, they mostly saw supporting civil society as an end in itself and not as a means of pursuing strategic political goals toward stabilization or peace. This might also have been influenced by the considerably reduced political role of key civil society actors such the SPA during the transition – as compared to their central importance in the revolutionary phase – due to their internal divisions. Ultimately, whatever donor support was provided did not make a decisive difference in keeping the democratic transition on track, as this process was interrupted by the generals' October 2021 coup.

## Could Support to Civil Society Actors Have Made a Greater Difference?

As noted above, the protest movement succeeded in ousting Bashir without much help from Western donors during the peak campaign. Could short-term donor support have made a difference at this stage of the crisis? Arguably, given Sudan's experiences with popular uprisings and growing economic grievances, donors could have better anticipated potential trajectories of such a crisis, including the possibility of popular

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224 International Crisis Group, "Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution."

225 Interview with a Sudanese civil society organization.

226 Interview with a Western government official.

227 Interview with a Western government official.

protests. In this way, they could have better drawn up policy and programmatic options for civil society support. For instance, a few Sudanese NGOs failed in their attempts to receive critical funding for trainings for activists, emergency support for wounded people and logistical support for coordinating various activities at the weeks-long sit-ins due to tedious and complicated application processes. In the lead-up to the crisis, donors could have already established more flexible procedures to provide support when it was most needed. On the other hand, donors could not have provided direct support to the SPA and NRCs, two of the key groups organizing the civil resistance campaign, as these actors were reluctant to accept foreign support. This situation considerably limited the impact that donors could have had during the peak protest phase.

Given donors' limited options for supporting key civil society actors during the uprising, the central question for the crisis in Sudan is whether donors could have better leveraged civil society support to secure a democratic transition. In this regard, diplomatic efforts could have complemented popular mobilization to pressure the Sudanese generals to incrementally hand over power to the civilian cabinet and to prevent these military actors from irregularly seizing power again through a coup. This would have put the civilian cabinet in a better position to gradually and carefully reduce the generals' power over economic sectors and to address transitional justice in a balanced matter. Research suggests that a transition to democracy after non-violent revolutions is most likely to succeed when protest actors continue their mobilization while simultaneously reducing their maximalist positions and also pursuing their goals through institutional channels.[228] Of course, striking this balance is difficult and therefore requires joint efforts of protest actors with different priorities.

In this regard, donors had arguably little leeway to bridge the internal divisions within Sudan's civilian coalition. It is questionable whether donors' facilitation through, for example, dialogue workshops could have helped to reconcile the opposing views. Most importantly, key actors in the protest movement such as the SPA and NRCs were still reluctant to receive external support, meaning that efforts to mediate disagreements between the NRCs and the FFC – for example, on the formation of the Transitional Legislative Council – would most likely have not been accepted. In fact, one donor organization's offer to mediate between different FFC factions was refused.[229] Moreover, in some instances, donors would not have been able to act as a credible, neutral facilitator of discussions. The Sudanese Communist Party, for example, left the FFC because the former refused to adopt the International Monetary Fund's economic policies, which they viewed as "foreign dictates."[230] However, adopting economic reforms to receive debt relief was very much in the interest of donors.[231]

Even if donor organizations had found a way to effectively address the internal divisions within Sudan's civil society, it is questionable whether this could have kept

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228  Jonathan C. Pinckney, *From Dissent to Democracy: The Promise and Perils of Civil Resistance Transitions,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

229  Interview with a Western donor organization.

230  Information Improves Lives, "#SudanUprising: Hamdok initiative rejected and parties told to prepare for elections as FFC unity remains questionable," 2021, accessed October 5, 2022, https://bit.ly/3uxO25p.

231  A national economic conference to reconcile these differences, initially scheduled for March 2020, was post-poned due to a surge in COVID-19 infections. See: Darfur 24, "Sudan postpones national economic conference amid rise in coronavirus infections," 2020, accessed December 6, 2022, https://bit.ly/3P8sOEJ.

the transition on track. Several interviewees did claim that a unified civilian coalition of the SPA, FFC and NRCs would have made it harder for the Sudanese generals to seize power from the civilians in government. Better relationships between the different actors could have also provided the ground for collective mobilization efforts to keep security services at bay while jointly working on a shared strategy, vision and goals. However, most interlocutors were still convinced that such civil society efforts would not have ultimately prevented the 2021 coup.[232] This assessment seems reasonable, as the Sudanese generals were concerned over potential retaliations for the June 3 massacre and with losing control over the country's key economic sectors. Moreover, these military actors had the possibility of resorting to violence as a means of political contestation. Arguably, this is an issue that cannot be plausibly addressed with short-term civil society investments.

That said, even if the 2021 coup was inevitable, Sudan's future remains wide open at the time of this writing. As civil society groups have proven that they can be a key driver of political change in Sudan, the case for liberal-minded donors to continue engaging with these actors to advance sustainable stabilization on more democratic foundations remains strong. To make this engagement as effective as possible, it will be important to learn from the challenges encountered in past efforts.

## Implications

It is uncertain what the future will hold for the Sudanese people. What is clear, though, is that protestors are not likely to leave the fate of their country to the military, as demonstrations continue to this day.[233] The case of Sudan provides several important findings:

**1.** Sudanese civil society was the central actor in mobilizing large-scale protests, leading to the historic removal of Sudan's long-standing Dictator Omar al-Bashir. This shows the success that non-violent protest movements can have politically. While donors' long-term efforts may have contributed to creating an enabling environment for the movement, short-term civil society support did not play a role in the outcome of the protest campaign, as it was basically non-existent. In this regard, the reluctance of crucial civil society actors to accept external support was a key obstacle to donor efforts.

**2.** Donors were completely surprised by the fall of Bashir. This points to their lack of analytical capacities to unpack protest dynamics, as admitted by one donor representative. Moreover, it arguably indicates donors' bias against believing that transformative change can actually happen in any individual case until that moment arrives. As donors did not foresee or believe in such a scenario, they did not have a prepared response and engagement strategy for civil society. For

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232 Only one interviewee claimed that a coup could have been prevented with more support for Sudanese civil society, though did not further detail the plausible impact pathways.

233 France24, "'We will not compromise': Hundreds in Sudan continue protests against military rule," 2022, accessed September 5, 2022, https://bit.ly/3UF5Ber.

similar cases in the future, donors should invest in scenario planning that includes thinking through potential impact pathways for civil society and develop at least basic contingency plans, also for low-probability trajectories.

3. Donors had difficulties in flexibly adapting their civil society support in peak crisis contexts. Notably, they were perceived as unable to adapt to a significant change in the political situation, as they were constrained by fixed project goals and timetables – even when their own political aims required adjustments. Moreover, donors did not have simplified procedures in place to reduce the complex grant applications processes for civil society groups.

# Lebanon

## Donors' Elusive Search for a Path Toward Managed Reform
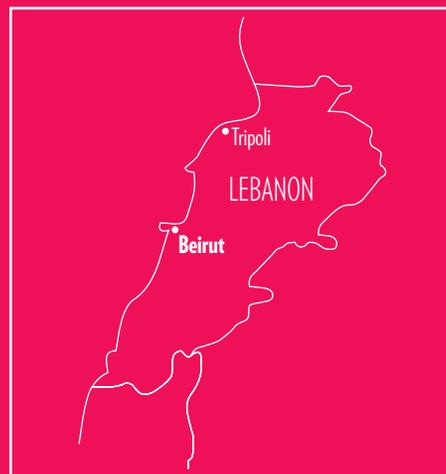


### Main Takeaways

Since 2019, Lebanon has suffered a progressive failure of basic state functions and a deepening humanitarian emergency. This situation is the result of a breakdown of an unsustainable economic model built on excessive public debt. Taking place in a politically pluralist context with a vibrant civil society, these developments triggered a large-scale protest movement. However, the protests did not lead to a substantial renewal of the political leadership or to incumbent elites adopting key reforms that could also have unlocked international financial assistance. In this context, donors largely refrained from attempts to influence short-term crisis dynamics through civil society support due to a combination of factors, including concerns about disruptive political change as well as hesitations among civil society actors to accept foreign assistance. While donor organizations continued pre-crisis support with some adjustments, these efforts mostly remained geared toward long-term, gradual societal change. The Lebanon case provides some indications of how a more direct contribution to crisis resolution may have been accomplished and what it would take for donors to pursue such attempts effectively. However, it also illustrates a fundamental limitation of such efforts: As long as a political landscape is shaped by players who can ultimately protect their interests through armed violence, opportunities to help civil society advance substantial political change remain severely limited.

# Crisis Context

Since 2019, Lebanon has faced one of the worst economic crises of any country in recent centuries.[234] The economic collapse has pushed a substantial share of the population into acute poverty, while vast sections of the middle class have lost access to their savings and have little prospect of regaining it. Citizens suffer from a breakdown of basic public services such as electricity, water and waste disposal. The decay of state institutions has reached a point at which they are unable to avert major threats to citizens' physical safety, as most starkly exemplified by the Beirut port explosion in August 2020.

In response to the worsening economic situation, a wave of popular protests erupted in October 2019. While leading to the resignation of Lebanon's then-government, the protests did not result in a comprehensive renewal of political personnel or in substantive policy reforms. An entrenched political establishment – which still prominently features key figures from the country's civil war era (1975-1990) – has managed to sustain itself in power, but failed to chart any credible course out of the deepening quagmire. Although the crisis, which remains unresolved at the time of this writing, has so far featured only limited organized violence, concerns about a breakdown of public order and an ultimate escalation of tensions are rife.[235]

The longer-term roots of the crisis reach back to at least Lebanon's reconstruction period following the civil war. The agreement that ended the fighting perpetuated the power-sharing arrangement among sectarian leaders that had been devised at Lebanon's independence.[236] Unfolding substantially under the control of neighboring Syria, Lebanon's post-war reconstruction fused complex sectarian coalition politics with a heavily market-oriented economic strategy, which primarily sought to re-establish its capital Beirut as a regional financial and commercial hub.[237]

The unsustainable character of the economic model underpinning this settlement became increasingly apparent over time. In particular, the Lebanese government accumulated ever increasing public debt, largely financed through an outsized domestic banking sector.[238] Although Lebanon's National Bank BdL repeatedly averted a breakdown though creative financial maneuvers, by the end of the 2010s, Lebanon's leaders urgently needed to find ways to improve the state's fiscal position. In a context of growing nervousness around the impending economic crisis as well as an inept government response to major wildfires, it was the planned introduction of a tax on internet-based calls (e.g., via WhatsApp) that eventually sparked large-scale protests in October 2019.

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234  World Bank, *Lebanon Economic Monitor: Lebanon Sinking (To the Top 3)* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2021), https://bit.ly/3Yjn9PM.

235  International Crisis Group, "Managing Lebanon's Compounding Crises," *Middle East Report* 228 (2021).

236  Matthijs Bogaards, "Formal and Informal Consociational Institutions: A Comparison of the National Pact and the Taif Agreement in Lebanon," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): pp. 27–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2019.1565176.

237  Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction* (London: Hurst, 2016).

238  Toufic Gaspard, "Lebanon: Anatomy of a Currency Crisis," November 23, 2019, accessed June 23, 2022, https://middleeasttransparent.com/en/lebanon-anatomy-of-a-currency-crisis/.

Often referred to as a 'revolution' (*thawra*), the protests took place throughout the country and across confessional boundaries.[239] These features distinguished these protests from earlier periods of popular mobilization in Lebanon, such as the 2005 Cedar Revolution against Syrian influence in the country or Beirut's 2015 'trash protests' that were triggered by a breakdown of waste collection in the capital. The breadth of public participation in the 2019 protests suggested a widespread estrangement from the entire post-civil war political leadership, poignantly reflected in the slogan "all of them means all of them." Common economic grievances and frustration with the sectarian power-sharing system gave the movement a momentary sense of shared purpose, though formulating a clearer political vision (beyond abstract calls, such as the widespread demand for a 'civil state') and sketching concrete steps toward its goals proved challenging.[240]

The protests precipitated the resignation of Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his cabinet. Subsequently, however, the protest movement proved unable to channel popular grievances into a clearer set of political demands, instead experiencing internal fragmentation and a loss of dynamism. In addition, harassment and violent attacks by individuals associated with Hezbollah and its ally Amal, whose leaderships ended up denouncing the protests, compounded the personal risks to protesters arising from clashes with security forces.

Ultimately, protests died down in early 2020, partially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A new Lebanese government under Prime Minister Hassan Diab failed to make any significant progress toward reform and resigned after the Beirut port explosion in August of the same year. Although briefly reigniting the street protests, the traumatic port explosion mainly contributed to an atmosphere of hopelessness in the country. By this point, much of the population focused on dealing with private economic hardship rather than on seeking political change, and newly emerging civic initiatives concentrated mainly on reconstruction and relief efforts. Politically, Lebanon entered another period of paralysis, with a new government under Prime Minister Najib Mikati only forming in September 2021. Discussions about decisive international financial assistance remained stuck as donors and Lebanese government officials were unable to agree on a set of economic policy reforms that would have been acceptable to both sides.

While Lebanon's May 2022 parliamentary elections saw new political parties and independent candidates associated with the protest movement winning a double-digit number of seats, this shift was insufficient to drive progress on any major reforms. The country's economic situation has continued to deteriorate – which, by one estimate, has led almost 200,000 citizens to emigrate since 2019.[241] An accumulation of incidents such as armed hostage situations at bank branches with assailants asking for the release of their savings withheld by the banks, indicate the fragility of basic public order in Lebanon.[242]

239  Lea Bou Khater and Rima Majed, "Lebanon's 2019 October Revolution: Who Mobilized and Why?," *Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship Working Papers*, 2020, http://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/leb-oct-rev_-_v.1.3-digital.pdf.

240  Interview with an activist and researcher and interviews with representative of civil society groups.

241  Miguel Mendelek, "The Lebanese Trend of Emigration: A New Peak Since 2019?," *LAU School of Arts and Sciences* (blog), accessed October 25, 2022, https://soas.lau.edu.lb/news/2022/01/the-lebanese-trend-of-emigration-a-new-peak-since-2019.php.

242  Al Jazeera News, "People Are 'Robbing' Banks in Lebanon – to Take Their Own Money," *Al Jazeera News*, September 15, 2022, accessed October 25, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/15/what-is-behind-leb-

# Role and Potential of Civil Society

Organized civil society in Lebanon is a vibrant – albeit fairly small – ecosystem, with a concentration of actors in Beirut. Of those actors based in Lebanon's capital, individuals are often part of dense social networks formed around key universities and neighborhoods. That said, civic engagement is widespread across the country and integral to Lebanon's social fabric.

In Lebanon, civil society has long played an important role vis-à-vis relatively weak state institutions. This notably concerns the involvement of charitable organizations (usually with clear religious connections) in the provision of what would elsewhere be considered public services, which serves as part of a mode of governance in which significant parts of the population rely on the patronage of community leaders (*zu'ama*).[243] For this reason, Lebanon has been described as "a case of a hybrid order, where the line at which 'state' power ends and 'civil society' territory begins is uniquely blurred."[244]

The social environment and regulatory framework for organized civil society are largely permissive in the country, as is reflected in a vibrant associational life and a diverse and sometimes raucous public debate. If anything, the relative ease of establishing a registered NGO has arguably contributed to a fragmentation of civil society and an 'NGO-ization' of activism. As such, a significant number of people in Lebanon find professional employment in formal NGOs that work symbiotically with donors and, in the eyes of critics, often serve an implementation role rather than acting as drivers of an independent political agenda.[245]

For the purposes of this study, the most relevant civil society actors largely correspond to what is often subsumed as the 'protest movement'. This comprises a fairly heterogeneous set of groups with diverse political orientations, mostly ranging from radical leftist to moderately progressive views. Many of these actors trace their roots to activism against the 'neoliberal' reconstruction approach after 1990 (especially the remodeling of central Beirut), the Cedar Revolution of 2005, as well as the 2015 trash protests and subsequent campaign for Beirut's municipal elections.

Further, a legacy of student politics – especially at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Université Saint-Joseph – has fed into the emergence of these civil society groups.[246] Despite a substantial mobilization of other segments of the Lebanese public, students and young professionals clearly played a key role in the 2019 protests.[247]

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anons-bank-robberies-explainer.

243 Melani Claire Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

244 Sára Vértes, Chris van der Borgh and Antoine Buyse, "Negotiating Civic Space in Lebanon: The Potential of Non-Sectarian Movements," *Journal of Civil Society* 17, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2021): p. 258, https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2021.1994202.

245 Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, Léa Yammine, and Amreesha Jagarnathsingh, "Civil Society in Lebanon: The Implementation Trap," *Civil Society Knowledge Centre* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2019), https://doi.org/10.28943/CSKC.002.70000.

246 Kareem Chehayeb and Tala Majzoub, "Lebanon's Student Movement: A New Political Player?," *Arab Reform Initiative Research Paper*, September 7, 2021, https://bit.ly/3JUkZBX.

247 That said, patterns of youth political engagement in Lebanon are complex and differentiated, with the prevalence of secular activism often being overestimated. See Mona Harb, "Youth in Lebanon: Policy Narratives, Attitudes, and Forms of Mobilization," Arab Center Washington DC, June 17, 2021, https://arabcenterdc.org/

This also contributed to a notable savviness of even small and newly formed groups regarding the use of social media and general political communication.

Some of the more significant 'political groups' (a common term of self-description) involved in the movement, such as youth organization Mintishreen, only took shape during the weeks of the protests. Others – such as leftist group Li'haqqi or MMFD ("Citizens in the State"), a group led by public intellectual and former Labor Minister Charbel Narhas – had already emerged in the preceding years and could rely on more advanced organizational structures prior to the broad public mobilization. The new context galvanized the activities of these groups and fostered exchanges between them, but did not lead to the emergence of a unified leadership or a concrete set of political demands.

After protests faded in early 2020, the paths of the different groups diverged, some of them transforming into formal political parties while others rejected this option or did not manage to pursue it successfully. The organization Kulluna Irada took an interesting trajectory: Founded in 2016 as an advocacy group, the organization adapted during the lead-up to the 2022 elections to focus more on assisting the political groups and independent candidates it deemed promising with communication and logistics support as well as with fundraising from citizens and the diaspora. This elicited mixed reactions among activists, some welcoming the attempts to structure and professionalize campaign efforts while others (especially at the more radical end of the spectrum) objected to what they saw as undue influence on internal matters like candidate selection and campaign strategy.[248]

While the political groups operate at the boundary of electoral politics, other actors correspond more closely to a Western understanding of formal civil society organizations with greater distance from parties and formal political institutions. This includes watchdog and accountability NGOs focusing on issues like political participation and equality, the rule of law and financial transparency. Having "mushroomed" since the 1990s,[249] some of these civil society groups have a track record of involvement in policy debates, notably around reforms of the electoral law.[250] Some organizations have also sought more of a think tank role to develop policy ideas, complementing the efforts of policy-oriented institutes attached to Beirut's universities (such as the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, both at AUB).

Relatedly, a growing number of independent journalists and self-described 'alternative media organizations' such as Mégaphone, Daraj Media and The Public Source have emerged. These actors seek to provide critical coverage against the backdrop of a media landscape that has traditionally aligned closely with political and business interests. Having started mostly with commentary and citizen journalism-style coverage, these outlets have also increasingly engaged in more professional investigative work.[251]

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resource/youth-in-lebanon-policy-narratives-attitudes-and-forms-of-mobilization/.

248  Interview with a member of a political group.

249  Interview with a Lebanese public intellectual.

250  See, for example, ReliefWeb, "Lebanon: Campaigners Push Electoral Reform to End Sectarian Politics," March 29, 2007, https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-campaigners-push-electoral-reform-end-sectari-an-politics.

251   Interviews with journalists and representatives of alternative media organizations. See also Clément Gibon,

Finally, there are an array of professional organizations, labor unions and so-called 'syndicates' in Lebanon, though their level of effectiveness and involvement on matters beyond their members' immediate interests has varied. The country's labor movement was historically significant, but underwent a period of political co-optation after the civil war. While organized labor has seen a degree of reinvigoration in recent years, notably through the founding of new 'alternative' unions, this is a reaction to the experience of the 2019 uprisings rather than a process that had already substantially progressed when the protests initially broke out.[252]

In sum, strong legacies of civic engagement, prior episodes of mobilization as well as the presence of relatively well-organized groups meant that civil society actors were in a position to play a consequential role when the 2019 crisis took shape. The impact of their activities on the crisis trajectory and the relevance of donor support in this context thus merit closer examination.

## Donor Goals and Stabilization Approach

**Western donors have been substantially involved in Lebanon throughout the post-war period.**

Western donors have been substantially involved in Lebanon throughout the post-war period. This engagement has reflected the needs arising in the reconstruction process, the country's strategically relevant location from a European perspective and – especially in recent years – the presence of large numbers of Palestinian and later Syrian refugees. While the extent to which recent donor activities have been solely driven by the aim to avoid further refugee flows into Europe is sometimes overstated, a clear donor priority has been to avert a humanitarian emergency that could lead to such a development. In addition, besides general aims such as poverty alleviation and human rights promotion, a common donor motive with specific relevance to civil society support includes the prevention of violent extremism.[253]

Against this backdrop, many donor governments saw the developments of late 2019 with ambivalence. On the one hand, the deteriorating economic situation in Lebanon had already been a matter of concern for several years. Up to this point, attempts to address this issue through international financial support had taken place at the intergovernmental level, notably at the CEDRE Conference of March 2018. Due to the glacial progress of reforms in the country, these efforts bore very limited fruit.[254] For this reason, the emergence of popular protests raised some hope that domestic pressure would finally lead to movement on the economic crisis. On the other hand, the predominant concern shaping donor governments' perspectives on the rapidly evolving situation and their approaches to engaging with civil society actors was the risk of political destabilization and violence.

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"Alternative Media and Democratic Dynamics in Lebanon," *The New Arab*, November 4, 2021, accessed September 21, 2022, https://english.alaraby.co.uk/features/alternative-media-and-democratic-dynamics-lebanon.

252 Jamil Mouawad, "Lebanese Trade Unions and Independent Professional Associations: A Review in Light of the Popular Movement," *Arab Reform Initiative Research Paper*, November 9, 2021, https://bit.ly/3JVacHQ; Nadim El Kak, "Alternative Labor Unions in Lebanon: Comparative Reflections and Lessons," *Lebanese Center for Policy Studies* (blog), April 14, 2021, accessed September 21, 2022, https://bit.ly/3I7whS1.

253 Interviews with representatives of multiple donor organizations.

254 Kenza Ouazzani, "CEDRE: One Year Later, Where Are We?," *L'Orient Today*, April 9, 2019, accessed June 22. 2022, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1165541/cedre-one-year-later-where-are-we-.html.

Despite an initial optimism about the peaceful and cross-sectarian character of the protest movement, many observers were skeptical from the outset about whether it could prevail with its demand for sweeping political change, including the overhaul of political personnel. A key reason for this was the lack of an alternative political elite with widespread popular recognition and legitimacy that could have seized vacant leadership roles and orchestrated a transition toward a new political order. In addition, incumbent elites had not only a clear stake in the existing order, but also a history of skillfully weathering political storms.

Moreover, it was apparent that if their political survival was genuinely threatened, at least some of these actors also had the capacity to resort to violence. Most importantly, this was the case for Hezbollah, which was likely to meet any real threat to its 'state-within-the-state' status with decisive resistance. Some have argued that the risk of large-scale, group-based violence remains low, as Hezbollah is widely considered to be the only actor immediately capable of organized fighting in recent years. However, some analysts also note a resurgence of militaristic rhetoric by other groups (such as the Lebanese Forces, which is one of the largest Christian political parties in Lebanon and a former civil war militia), and warn that if key actors see it in their interest to precipitate violent confrontation, occasions to do so will inevitably arise.[255] When Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned during the peak protest period that the situation could lead to "chaos" and "God forbid" to civil war, many saw this as a thinly veiled threat.[256] While sustained, government-directed violent repression against protesters seemed far less plausible in Lebanon than in authoritarian contexts, clashes with security forces as well as Hezbollah and Amal militants could have turned into larger riots, with potential ripple effects that would have been very difficult to predict.

Therefore, the ostensible best-case scenario from a donor perspective was to persuade a sufficiently large faction of the established political leadership to adopt key reforms to unlock substantial international financial support and address the most immediate economic issues. Arguably, this could have created the space for more gradual structural reforms, notably through growing numbers of reform-oriented individuals reaching political office through elections and changing the system from within.

The result was an overall approach to stabilization that continued to rely on a dialogue with incumbent elites. This was particularly apparent in the case of France, which, as the former colonial power in Lebanon, has also exercised decisive influence at the European level. While other Western donors have sometimes considered the French position overly status quo-oriented, they have tended to acquiesce to French proposals and generally shared an outlook that does favor significant reforms – but only if they do not come with the risk of radical and disruptive political change with uncertain consequences.[257]

> **It was apparent that if the political survival of the incumbent elites was genuinely threatened, at least some of them also had the capacity to resort to violence.**

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255  Interview with a Lebanese expert. Also see International Crisis Group, "Managing Lebanon's Compounding Crises," p. 20ff.

256  Mersiha Gadzo, "'All of Them': Lebanon Protesters Dig in after Nasrallah's Speech," *Al Jazeera News*, October 25, 2019, accessed September 13, 2022, https://bit.ly/3xaTEE8.

257  Interview with a European diplomat.

# Donor Support to Civil Society During the Crisis

In pursuing their goals at the level of civil society engagement, donors could draw on a myriad of relevant ongoing activities in Lebanon. First, they had a track record of collaboration with civil society actors in the context of humanitarian and development projects, often linked to the refugee issue. For example, a program implemented by Expertise France since early 2019 aimed to "strengthen the capacities of Lebanese NGOs" as "vital players in crisis prevention and response," especially given their "fundamental role in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis."[258] As the latter quote indicates, such projects have sometimes been framed in terms of 'stabilization,' and the practitioners involved tend to be acutely aware of the political character of the issues that they seek to address.[259] However, in a pattern similar to other development assistance contexts,[260] the prevailing tendency in these projects is to emphasize technical aspects and avoid an explicit engagement with political issues, limiting the relevance of these efforts to the main concerns of this study.[261]

Second, donor support explicitly aimed at strengthening political civil society is driven mostly by organizations with a dedicated focus and expertise in this area, such as German political foundations, the United States' National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, and, more recently, the European Endowment for Democracy. Prior to the crisis period considered here, all of these organizations already had a track record of extending small to mid-sized grants to Lebanese civil society organizations – usually in the form of project-specific funding – as well as supporting them with capacity-building efforts, trainings and dialogue programs. Some donors (including Germany) have also pursued comparable projects directly through their embassies, though usually with fairly limited capacity. In addition, private actors like the Open Society Foundations were also active in this area in Lebanon.[262]

In light of the overall disposition described above, many donor organizations in late 2019 agonized about how they could play a constructive role amid concerns over escalation risks and possible unintended consequences as a result of their efforts. Allegations of foreign interference also quickly emerged, though ostensibly directed more at regional political players than at Western donors: Hezbollah leader Nasrallah, who had initially acknowledged that the protests were "honest and spontaneous,"[263] warned in late October 2019 that the country had "entered a stage of regional political targeting, and it is no longer just a popular movement."[264] In this context, following an initial burst of excitement, most donor organizations made the deliberate decision to "take a step back" and wait for the situation to develop.[265]

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258  AFD, "SHABAKE – Capacity-Building Program for Civil Society Organizations," accessed October 18, 2022, https://www.afd.fr/en/carte-des-projets/shabake-capacity-building-program-civil-society-organizations.

259  Interviews with development practitioners.

260  James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

261  As one interviewee put it, "for us, drawing the line to politics has been easy in the sense that we do not discuss politics at all, we only discuss technical issues." Interview with an NGO representative.

262  Interviews with representatives of donor organizations, diplomats and Lebanese civil society groups.

263  Laila Bassam and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Thousands Take to Lebanon's Streets in Third Day of Anti-Government Protests," Reuters, October 19, 2019, accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests-idUSKBN1WY0AC.

264  Gadzo, "'All of Them.'"

265  Interviews with representatives of donor organizations, quote from an interview with Anna Fleischer (Hein-

At the political level, donor governments mostly maintained a posture of observation and emphasized the importance of the protests remaining peaceful rather than particular expectations regarding the government's reaction. For example, Germany's then-Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stated that "it is of paramount importance that the stability in Beirut does not continue to suffer [...] We don't need a political vacuum, especially not in the current situation."[266] Several individuals involved in relevant discussions at the time indicated that some Western embassies had considered a more outspoken stance in support of the protest movement, but were warned about the sensitivity of the situation by both local experts and officials from other organizations with more local experience.[267]

Changes to donors' approaches to civil society support in the months following the *thawra* were mostly gradual. For instance, among the German political foundations, those that had existing relationships with established political parties in Lebanon reduced the frequency and visibility of their exchanges in favor of intensified engagement with the new political groups and non-partisan civil society actors. However, the foundations refrained from severing all ties from their old partners, hoping to support reformist tendencies within the established parties but drawing criticism from new actors who saw these established actors as discredited beyond repair. Project portfolios also began to reflect substantive trends in the issues emphasized by emerging civil society actors, such as in the form of an increasing number of media and journalism-related projects in collaboration with the new alternative media organizations.[268]

Both donor representatives and Lebanese civil society actors agreed that their shared dialogue was open and generally constructive.[269] Nevertheless, operationalizing concrete projects usually took time. The reasons for lengthy timeframes are partly to be found on the donor side: While donor organizations generally saw themselves as having a good understanding of civil society dynamics and access through their established partners and local staff, some admitted to having a limited overview of the relevant actors and not always being able to identify potential partners at an early stage. In the latter regard, officials were also understandably hesitant to shift substantial resources to projects with new civil society partners without much of a track record. Finally, while some pragmatic adjustments were possible within the boundaries of running projects, established project and funding cycles meant that even if there had been a clear case for a substantial re-prioritization of activities, this would only have been possible in the medium to long term.[270]

Moreover, many Lebanese civil society actors hesitated to accept foreign support, both out of reputational concerns and a desire to maintain maximum independence. This was particularly the case for the political groups, which have generally accepted only non-monetary support like participation in training and dialogue programs (and

**Changes to donors' approaches to civil society support in the months following the thawra were mostly gradual.**

**Many Lebanese civil society actors hesitated to accept foreign support, both out of reputational concerns and a desire to maintain maximum independence.**

rich Böll Foundation).

266  AP News, "The Latest: German FM Fears 'political Vacuum' in Lebanon," AP NEWS, October 29, 2019, accessed December 1, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/c0868b55a74c4c449a2b88dde217f286.

267  Interviews with local experts and representatives of donor organizations.

268  Interviews with representatives of donor organizations and alternative media organizations.

269  Interviews with representatives of donor organizations and civil society groups.

270  Interviews with representatives of political foundations and other specialized donor organizations.

even this only to a very limited extent, such as in the case of Li'haqqi).[271] Other civil society actors in Lebanon did eventually accept foreign funding, but only after careful deliberation and consideration of multiple potential donors.[272] In this regard, the German political foundations and other independent organizations were generally seen favorably as compared to direct government funding – as one activist noted, "nobody wants to say 'we're funded by an embassy.'"[273] Different perceptions of donor countries also played a significant role, with several organizations, for instance, openly indicating that they would not accept funding from the United States.[274]

At the senior political level, donor governments only re-dedicated substantial political attention to Lebanon in August 2020, when the Beirut port explosion emblematically demonstrated the desolate state of the country and its perilous implications. At this point, French President Emmanuel Macron decided to take a more publicly confrontational stance, which was clearly evident during his two visits to Beirut shortly after the explosion.[275] In addition to public rhetoric threatening to withhold financial support and adopt sanctions in the absence of substantial progress within three months, France became closely involved in an attempt to broker a new government in Lebanon.[276]

Civil society activists involved in the protest movement mostly greeted French President Macron's activism with disdain. To them, Macron's continuing engagement with the same sectarian political leaders, whose core interests precluded any real change for the better, signaled that donors were willing to provide these individuals "with political currency over and over again" while setting the Lebanese population up for failure.[277] That said, any attempt to engage more substantially with the protest movement would have faced obstacles in identifying widely accepted interlocutors – as one activist and researcher noted, foreign leaders "tried to engage with the street, but no one could claim legitimacy to speak on behalf of the street."[278]

Despite Macron's threat, Lebanese political leaders' failure to form a new government for more than a year after the explosion did not result in the adoption of systematic targeted sanctions, even though a framework for this purpose was adopted at the EU level in July 2021.[279] Instead, a renewed attempt to collaboratively address the

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271  Interviews with representatives of political groups.

272  Interviews with representatives of civil society groups.

273  Interview with a civil society activist.

274  Interviews with representatives of civil society groups.

275  David Gardner, "Emmanuel Macron Lays down the Gauntlet to Lebanon's Corrupt Elite," *Financial Times*, September 2, 2020.

276  Rym Momtaz, "Macron on Lebanon: 'It's a Risky Bet I'm Making,'" *Politico*, September 1, 2020, accessed September 13, 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macrons-risky-bet-in-lebanon-beirut-explosion/.

277  Interview with a civil society activist. This sentiment was echoed by multiple individuals involved in political groups and civil society organizations.

278  Interview with a political activist and a researcher. For Macron's view on this matter, see also Momtaz, "Macron on Lebanon: 'It's a Risky Bet I'm Making'.

279  Council of the European Union, "Lebanon: EU Adopts a Framework for Targeted Sanctions," July 30, 2021, accessed June 21, 2022, https://bit.ly/3YAMyEC. Several individuals (including, for instance Central Bank Head Riad Salameh) have faced indictments or criminal investigations abroad, but these were unrelated to any sanctions regime. See Pascal Schumacher, "Warum der Libanon kollabiert: der Fall Riad Salameh," *Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF)*, April 14, 2022, accessed June 21, 2022, https://bit.ly/3DQR3mo.

country's challenges was made in the form of the so-called Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF). Set up under the auspices of the European Union, the United Nations and the World Bank to drive and coordinate Lebanon's reconstruction effort with an estimated resource need of approximately $ 2.6 billion, 3RF was conceived as a "collaborative process that is based on the participation of the government, civil society, the private sector, as well as development partners."[280] The framework comprised elements such as an independent oversight body composed of civil society members, and a large number of civil society organizations have participated in 3RF meetings. Many protest movement groups were, however, not interested in the fundamentally consultative role allocated for them in 3RF. Indeed, activists and donor representatives tend to agree that this engagement is largely cut off from the processes through which genuinely consequential political decisions are made, and can hardly address the structural issues at the root of the crisis.[281]

In sum, donors adopted a deliberately restrained and observing posture when faced with the emergence of the 2019 protest movement in Lebanon. While they subsequently made some adjustments to their engagement with civil society actors, efforts continued to be largely directed toward longer-term and gradual social change rather than having a more immediate impact on crisis dynamics. 3RF was an innovation in terms of donor efforts to orchestrate an engagement between government and civil society, but fundamentally presupposed an impact pathway (consultation) that was rejected by most relevant political civil society groups for its lack of credibility to deliver the necessary change.

## Impact of Donor Support for Civil Society Actors on Crisis Dynamics

Due to donors' restrained approach during the most dynamic phase of the protests in late 2019, their activities to support civil society actors did not have an immediate impact on how the crisis unfolded during this period. Put plainly, there were no significant short-term initiatives that could have substantially altered the course of events in Lebanon.

However, it is questionable whether Lebanon would have featured a comparably vibrant civil society ecosystem in the first place had it not been for donors' long-term efforts to support such actors and gradually strengthen their capacity. While it is difficult to precisely reconstruct complex social dynamics like the outbreak of large-scale protests, it is clear that many of these civil society groups played an active role in the mobilization and in shaping the (abstract) political demands that emanated from it.

Similarly, donors' sustained provision of project funding and non-financial support clearly helped some of the civil society actors that emerged or galvanized through the protest movement to develop their initiatives into more sustainable organizations. This contributed, for instance, to the professionalization of alternative

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280  World Bank, "Lebanon Reform, Recovery & Reconstruction Framework (3RF)," (Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, December 2020), accessed June 21, 2022, https://bit.ly/40JSsVS. The actual amounts disbursed through 3RF have significantly fallen short of its fundraising aims, see Abby Sewell, "What Happened to the International Aid Promised to Lebanon after the Beirut Port Blast?," *L'Orient Today*, December 17, 2021, accessed June 21, 2022, https://bit.ly/3XhxnPE.

281  Interviews with representatives of donor organizations and civil society groups.

**Donor engagement helped maintain a fairly vibrant civil society based in the country under adverse conditions, but it did not measurably contribute to short-term ways out of the crisis (i.e., 'stabilization').**

media organizations that provide a growing audience with access to reporting and analysis that is not beholden to partisan and business interests, contrary to the country's traditional media landscape. Such actions amount to a strengthening of public scrutiny around political processes and a diversification of the public sphere that could undoubtedly foster more accountable governance. Given the extremely adverse economic situation and often highly qualified profiles of people involved in these initiatives, financially enabling them to continue their work in the country was a significant achievement. Likewise, while the transformation of some emerging political groups into formal parties may have shifted them outside of the scope of civil society in strict terms, the rise of these actors was inextricably linked to the civil society ecosystem that donors helped to cultivate. Further, some of these newly formed political parties also directly benefitted from non-monetary support (notably from the German political foundations).[282]

Civil society representatives interviewed for this study consistently described the support offered by donors, especially those donor organizations focusing specifically on political civil society, as reasonably pragmatic and effective. While the sums involved were often modest, they made a substantial difference for organizations typically starting with a very low budget. However, the common donor preference for purely project-based funding was sometimes cited as a challenge to making organizations sustainable. With the exception of the latter point and a general plea for pragmatic reporting requirements, any concerns raised by activists about their engagement with donor organizations tended to refer to content issues, particularly the imposition of thematic priorities that do not resonate locally.[283] This point was stressed in particular by representatives of media organizations, who underlined the importance of avoiding interference with editorial processes.[284]

In sum, donor support to civil society actors contributed to long-term societal processes that may eventually result in the emergence of a political order that is more liberally democratic and perhaps also more economically sustainable than the system that led the country to the brink. However, at the time of this writing, Lebanon's crisis remains substantially unresolved. The rise of incidents like hostage situations at bank branches also indicates that the situation remains highly febrile, rather than settling into a kind of equilibrium at a lower level of economic prosperity. Donor engagement helped maintain a fairly vibrant civil society based in the country under adverse conditions and advanced its ongoing (and fundamentally indigenous) diversification – but it did not measurably contribute to short-term ways out of the crisis (i.e., 'stabilization'). Therefore, it is reasonable to ask whether any adjustment to donors' approach could have made a more favorable outcome in Lebanon more likely.

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282 Interviews with representatives of political groups.

283 Interviews with representatives of civil society groups.

284 Interviews with representatives of alternative media organizations.

## Could Support to Civil Society Actors Have Made a Greater Difference?

As noted, donor governments' best case scenario for resolving Lebanon's crisis is one that eschews the risks of revolutionary political change, but nevertheless ushers in significant reforms toward a more sustainable political economy. Such reforms have also been a condition for unlocking substantial financial support, without which the country cannot reach any kind of viable economic position again.

In terms of economic policy, donor expectations have been clearly apparent from the content of an April 2022 International Monetary Fund staff-level agreement for a $3 billion 'bailout', which, however, failed to obtain approval from the Lebanese government. Key elements of this agreement included comprises like restructuring Lebanon's financial sector, introducing fiscal reforms, adopting reforms for state-owned enterprises, strengthening governance, investing in anti-corruption efforts, developing frameworks against money laundering and for combating the financing of terrorism, and re-establishing a "credible and transparent monetary and exchange rate system."[285] Such a major reform package raises legitimate questions concerning priorities and policy design – whether all the elements required by donors are indeed sensible and necessary is a question that this study cannot meaningfully address. However, there has been political resistance to undeniably overdue demands, such as an audit of Lebanon's National Bank BdL or the lifting of certain banking secrecy provisions,[286] which have been non-negotiable from a donor perspective and arguably cannot be dropped without fatally damaging the credibility of any reform agenda.

With this in mind, the relevant question for this study is whether anything donors could have done with regard to supporting civil society would have substantially increased the likelihood for Lebanon's political leaders to agree to meaningful reforms. Building on such an opening, the process of addressing the root causes of the crisis could have plausibly advanced at a more incremental pace, for instance through reform-oriented groups gradually building popular support and successfully pursuing the electoral route.

To this end, the most intuitive impact pathway for civil society would have been popular pressure though even larger-scale or more sustained protest mobilization following the 2019 *thawra*. However, even leaving aside the exogenous factor of the COVID-19 pandemic, donors had limited scope to support these activities for several reasons, and the risks associated with such efforts would have been considerable.

First, most actors within the protest movement were hesitant to accept external support, notably due to concerns around undermining their domestic legitimacy. Therefore, it is dubious whether offers of any kind of assistance during the peak protest period would have met positive resonance. Similarly, a more vocal political stance by Western governments in support of the protest movement would have been unlikely to help their cause – and may even have harmed it.

**The most intuitive impact pathway for civil society would have been popular pressure though even larger-scale or more sustained protest mobilization following the 2019 thawra.**

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285 International Monetary Fund, "IMF Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on Economic Policies with Lebanon for a Four-Year Extended Fund Facility," April 7, 2022, accessed June 21, 2022, https://bit.ly/40JfcFh.

286 Timour Azhari, "Lebanon Parliament Passes Amendments to Banking Secrecy Law," *Reuters*, July 26, 2022, accessed June 28, 2022, https://reut.rs/3xaRgNC.

Second, many civil society activists and donor representatives agree that a lack of unified leadership and an inability to articulate more concrete political demands were key weaknesses of the protest movement that contributed to its deflation.[287] Donors could have conceivably tried to address this issue in the years preceding the crisis, for example by putting forth greater effort toward formats in which emerging political and civil society actors could have developed a more substantial shared vision for their country. However, several activists described the extent of genuine ideological disagreements as well as of personal animosities among these actors as considerable, casting doubt on the prospects of such efforts.[288] Moreover, it is uncertain whether a vision developed in such a fashion would have found broad public support in Lebanon.

Third, especially after initial confrontations between protesters, security forces and militants, it was apparent that large-scale mobilization always presented an elevated risk of violent incidents – despite the explicitly non-violent character of the protest movement. While potential pathways toward a broader escalation remained speculative, encouraging a sustained stand-off on the streets was not an attractive option from a donor perspective.

Regarding other ways in which civil society support could have helped put pressure on existing elites in Lebanon, the analysis did not uncover any blatant missed opportunities. However, there are areas in which potential opportunities were arguably not fully addressed, notably with regard to financial transparency and corruption investigations. In addition to the reputational pressure that exposing elites' wrongdoings could have generated domestically, such efforts had the potential to dovetail into attempts to amplify external pressure through targeted sanctions and to isolate obstructionist actors politically, as well as to investigate illicit financial flows into donor countries themselves.[289] While civil society actors working in these areas received some donor support, these efforts could have been further scaled up, and the opportunities arising from the emergence of alternative media and investigative journalists could have perhaps been seized more rapidly. Such efforts would not have represented a 'quick impact' intervention during the most dynamic period in 2019, but could have influenced the political trajectory as the crisis in Lebanon developed further.

In addition to opportunities for more active support, Lebanese civil society actors interviewed for this study consistently stressed that they expected donors to be clearer in their disengagement with those incumbent actors hindering political change. This particularly concerns the senior political level, but also the partnerships of the German political foundations with some of the established political parties, which have only seen a reduction in activities since 2019 and no instance of open rupture. While the hope to support reform efforts in what remain consequential political organizations is understandable, the credibility of such prospects clearly should be weighed against the risk of inadvertently supporting obstructionist actors, be it materially or symbolically.

While these considerations hint at possibilities for improving donor support to civil society from the vantage point of stabilization, it bears emphasizing that the Lebanese crisis has ultimately presented donors with a fundamental predicament. The

> **While potential pathways toward a broader escalation remained speculative, encouraging a sustained stand-off on the streets was not an attractive option from a donor perspective.**

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287  Interviews with civil society activists and donor representatives.

288  Interviews with representatives of civil society groups and emerging political groups.

289  Schumacher, "Libanons Zentralbankchef - Warum der Libanon kollabiert."

fact that political leaders have watched their country drop into an economic abyss and maintained opposition to even foundational reform steps – without which decisive international financial assistance remains almost inconceivable – strongly suggests that they regard these reforms as a genuine threat to their political survival. Therefore, it remains unclear whether *any* degree of popular or international pressure would suffice to lead these actors to pursue reforms, and whether there is any 'orderly' reform trajectory that could put the country on more stable footing economically without triggering decisive resistance from incumbent elites. As long as these key actors enjoy substantial popular backing – and as some of them are even able to resort to armed force – meaningful reform will remain a perilous venture. This is an issue that no amount of donor resources or degree of sophistication in supporting civil society can overcome.

## Implications

**Fundamentally, the transformative demands of the protest movement and donors' trepidations about disruptive change were not fully compatible.**

Taken together, the Lebanese case provides important insights with wider relevance for the questions at the heart of this study. Three aspects in particular stand out:

1. Civil society groups were important actors in Lebanon's evolving crisis since 2019, but donors' ability to support their activities to advance stabilization objectives was fundamentally limited. In addition to the practical challenge of civil society actors' hesitation to accept external assistance, an even more basic issue was that the main pathway through which these actors sought to effect political change – namely large-scale public mobilization – was one that, from a donor perspective, entailed significant risks of violent escalation. Fundamentally, the transformative demands of the protest movement and donors' trepidations about disruptive change were not fully compatible.

2. Notwithstanding the constrained set of options resulting from this basic setting, an important reason why donors did not support all plausible ways in which civil society actors could have contributed to crisis resolution was that such short-term impact was not a guiding motive for most donors in the first place. Though faced with a dynamic crisis environment, most of the donor organizations active in this area maintained a longer-term outlook guided by a broad vision of a more democratic society, not by the aim of influencing acute crisis dynamics. Exerting this type of influence would have required a much more deliberate approach based on clear political objectives describing a pathway out of the crisis. Especially smaller donor organizations would also likely have needed to focus their often-diverse portfolios on a more integrated set of projects.

3. Despite variations in donor organizations' agility in adjusting to Lebanon's changing crisis environment, attempts to exert greater short-term influence on crisis dynamics would also have run into difficulties in terms of donor organizations' established processes and funding frameworks. This concerns both their ability to identify suitable partners and project opportunities in real time and the availability of sufficiently flexible resources to implement them on short notice.

# Mali

## Civil Society Support Amid Conflicting Political Visions



MALI

Timbuktu

• Kidal

• Gao

**Bamako**

### Main Takeaways

In 2012, Mali was plunged into an unprecedented crisis after a Tuareg rebellion, which was the result of the decades-long marginalization of the country's northern communities. Jihadist groups and a military coup further contributed to destabilizing the country. Since then, international partners launched several military interventions and supported the implementation of the 2015 agreement between non-state armed groups in northern Mali and the Malian government. Mali contains a rich and diverse civil society landscape in which the groups most effective in driving significant political change have been actors that fought – rather than supported – the stabilization objectives and pro-democratic agenda of donors. Donors significantly supported other, far less influential civil society groups for the sake of strengthening participatory governance, but not as a strategic contribution to short-term stabilization. To date, most of the 2015 peace agreement has yet to be implemented. Meanwhile, the security situation in Mali has further deteriorated, and two coups in the past two years have further exacerbated political instability in the country. This case illustrates how donors' focus on security and military responses can reduce the strategic direction of their civil society efforts. Moreover, it shows that donors' support can lead to competition between civil society actors and to problematic forms of artificial collaboration that can harm these actors' effectiveness.

# Crisis Context

After two decades of serving as a prime example of democratization in post-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa, a Tuareg rebellion, the spread of jihadist groups and a coup plunged Mali into an unprecedented crisis in 2012. Given the decades-long marginalization of the country's northern communities and previous failed reconciliation efforts, Tuareg rebels launched several attacks against the Malian army, demanding the independence of the so-called Azawad (which includes the northern Malian regions of Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, Ménaka, and Taoudénit). Soon, jihadist groups – which have established themselves in northern Mali over roughly the past decade – and self-defence militias fought for territorial control over the country's northern regions.[290] As popular dissatisfaction with the Bamako political elites' insufficient response to the escalating violence grew, Malian army officers around Captain Amadou Sanogo staged a coup in March 2012. France, the former colonial power that has maintained close ties with Mali, quickly launched a military intervention at the request of the Malian government – Operation Serval – that briefly expelled jihadist groups from the north. After international mediation led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Sanogo eventually agreed to hand over power to a civilian interim president, Diouncounda Traoré, who navigated Mali toward presidential elections in 2013. Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (commonly referred to by his initials, IBK), who had already served as Mali's prime minister from 1994 to 2000 and as president of the parliament from 2002 to 2007, won the elections with his political party 'Rally for Mali'.

During IBK's rule, Malians were confronted with increasing violence. After the initial success of the French military intervention, it became quickly clear that Mali was far from peace. Violent clashes between Tuareg rebels, other non-state armed actors and the Malian army, new attacks by jihadist groups, and inter-communal conflicts made the country increasingly insecure. The Malian government not only failed to protect civilians from deadly attacks and abuses, but Malian soldiers also "committed extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary arrests against men accused of supporting Islamist armed groups."[291] New actors such as the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jihadist Coalition, its rival the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and self-defence militias further contributed to a situation of escalating violence, which reached its highest death toll in 2020.[292] Notably, the security situation deteriorated despite the presence of a UN peacekeeping mission, a French-led counter-terrorism mission, EU training efforts for the Malian army, and regional counter-terrorism efforts in the form of the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

A 2015 peace agreement signed by the Malian government and two rebel group coalitions – the Platform and the Coordination of Azawad Movements – proved largely ineffective, as its implementation stalled. At the end of 2019, only 20 percent

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290 International Crisis Group, "Mali: Avoiding Escalation," 2012, accessed December 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3vOOJrS.

291 Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Unchecked Abuses in Military Operations," 2017, accessed December 2, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/08/mali-unchecked-abuses-military-operations.

292 ACLED, "Mali: Any End to the Storm?," 2020, accessed October 9, 2022, https://acleddata.com/2020/12/17/mali-any-end-to-the-storm/.

**Popular frustration with the government's inability to address Mali's multiple challenges – particularly the grave security and economic situation as well as pervasive corruption – culminated in mass protests in June 2020.**

of the commitments within the peace agreement had been fulfilled:[293] measures to advance decentralization (or regionalization) fell short, leaving interim authorities in northern parts of Mali without sufficient resources and training. The Coordination of Azawad Movements – a pro-independence coalition of armed groups and a signatory of the 2015 peace accords – still controls Kidal, a city in northern Mali. The process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) has also proven difficult. Moreover, funding for development in Mali's north has not led to economic growth, and the establishment of a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission in 2014 scarcely elicited interest.[294] The Carter Center, in its capacity as an independent observer of the peace accords' progress, noted that the respective parties seem to favor the status quo, as they benefit economically from the presence of international actors as well as the institutions created for the implementation of the agreement.[295]

Despite IBK's announcement of a "war against corruption,"[296] this strong (rhetorical) commitment largely failed to produce concrete progress. During his administration, several scandals involving Malian government officials came to light. In 2014, for example, the purchase of a $40 million presidential airplane led to national and international outcry.[297] However, investigations into Mali's Office of the Auditor General led to very few prosecutions. This is arguably due to the fact that key members of Mali's political elite and government officials are themselves involved in and benefit from bribery and embezzlement.[298]

Against this background, popular frustration with the government's inability to address Mali's multiple challenges – particularly the grave security and economic situation as well as pervasive corruption – culminated in mass protests in June 2020.[299] These demonstrations were triggered by controversial legislative elections that were initially scheduled for 2018 but were postponed several times. What ultimately triggered the protests was the amendment of the ruling from Mali's Constitutional Court that granted IBK's Rally for Mali party 10 additional seats in the parliament. A coalition of opposition parties and civil society groups – the 5 June Movement-Assembly of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP), spearheaded by popular Imam Mahmoud Dicko – formed in June 2020 and organized anti-government protests demanding IBK's resignation.[300] The protests, which reportedly gathered at times tens of thousands of people in Bamako,[301]

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293 Carter Center, "Report of the Independent Observer: On the Implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, Emanating from the Algiers Process," 2020, accessed November 6, 2022, https://bit.ly/3W5s5qd.

294 International Crisis Group, "Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years on: An Uneasy Calm," 2020, accessed December 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BnAnld.

295 Carter Center, "Report of the Independent Observer."; International Crisis Group, "Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years on."

296 Thierry Oberlé, "Au Mali, IBK lance la lutte contre la corruption," *Le Figaro*, 2014, accessed December 3, 2022, https://bit.ly/3HkpLax.

297 Alex Duval Smith, "Mali flies into international storm over purchase of $40m presidential jet," *The Guardian*, 2014, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3iQZDty.

298 For example: Smith, "Mali flies into international storm over purchase of $40m presidential jet."

299 Seán Smith, "Building Integrity in Mali's Defence and Security Sector," *Transparency International*, 2019, accessed December 6, 2022, https://bit.ly/3F9Y0id.

300 Alex Thurston, "Protests in Mali: An Unfolding Political Crisis," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2020, accessed December 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Pcwgyb.

301 The New York Times, "Tens of Thousands Protest in Mali Amid Growing Opposition to Keita Presidency,"

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turned violent as participants looted and set government buildings on fire. In response, Malian security forces brutally cracked down on the demonstrations, killing at least 14 and injuring over 300 people.[302]

On August 18, 2020, a military junta led by Assimi Goïta – later known as the Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) – overthrew IBK, declaring his regime responsible for Mali's overall state of decay. As a result of negotiations with ECOWAS, a charter was adopted that set up a transition period of 18 months. The CNSP designated Bah N'Daw as civilian president, while Goïta became vice president, and Moctar Ouane took over as prime minister.[303] A total of 25 people from political parties as well as civil society groups formed the transition government, including M5-RFP members, military officials and coup leaders.[304] In the next months, CNSP members managed to assume powerful positions in government before the junta had to be dissolved in January 2021 following a demand by ECOWAS.

The transition government failed to make progress in their priority areas: first, the Malian government failed to address the corruption that is deeply entrenched in the country's political and economic system. Second, the reform of the long-disputed electoral law stalled, partly due to tensions between military officials and civilian authorities. Due to the commitments made in the transitional charter and pressure from international actors, Civilian President N'Daw pushed for the start of elections in February 2022 – a timeline that many observers deemed unrealistic. Third, the transition government failed to fill most of the administrations' posts in northern and central Mali, a key requirement of the 2015 peace accord. Last but not least, violence still persisted and even spread to a region close to Bamako that had previously not seen armed attacks.[305]

At the same time, tensions between Mali's civilian government and the former CNSP members grew. On May 24, 2021, Prime Minister Ouane announced his new cabinet, replacing two out of the three ex-CNSP members with non-CNSP generals, as well as two ministers close to the CNSP. As a response to the reshuffling, the former CNSP officers immediately staged a coup. Notably, the coup did not trigger any mass demonstrations or outcry from the Malian population. Due to international pressure for a civilian prime minister, Goïta – now president – appointed Choguel Maïga, who was part of the M5-RFP's executive committee and a former minister, as Prime Minister.[306]

Since then, relations between the ruling junta and European governments severely worsened. The former exploited anti-French sentiment by blaming France's military presence and stabilization strategy for the deteriorating security situation in Mali. Tensions dramatically grew over Bamako's decision to employ mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group for the fight against jihadists. As the junta did not follow through

2020, accessed October 29, 2022, https://nyti.ms/3Bk9UFn.

302 Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Security Forces Use Excessive Force at Protests," 2020, accessed October 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BlNu6m.

303 International Crisis Group, "Saving Momentum for Change in Mali's Transition," 2021, accessed October 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3uAQNCW.

304 United Nations Security Council, "Situation in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General," S/2020/1281, 2020, accessed December 2, 2022, https://bit.ly/3hbpMms.

305 International Crisis Group, "Saving Momentum for Change in Mali's Transition."

306 International Crisis Group, "Saving Momentum for Change in Mali's Transition."

with previously agreed-upon elections in February 2022, its relations with ECOWAS also worsened, leading the regional organization to impose targeted sanctions and limit regional trade with Mali. As a response to escalating tensions with the Malian junta, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the withdrawal of France's military operations, Barkhane and Takuba.[307] The EU also stopped its training efforts for Malian soldiers in April 2022.[308] At the time of this writing, the French and European troops from Operation Barkhane and the Takuba Task Force have left the country. Moreover, several other countries that contribute to UN peacekeeping mission (including those in the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, and Benin) announced the withdrawal of their troops in the coming months and year.[309] With regard to civil society support, Mali notably banned all NGOs supported by France in response to Paris' suspension of development aid to Mali.[310]

## Role and Potential of Civil Society Actors

**The landscape of Malian civil society is rich and diverse, encompassing formal NGOs, youth groups, women's associations, trade unions, student associations, faith-based groups, as well as traditional and religious leaders.**

Until recently, civil society groups were generally permitted to operate in post-colonial Mali. However, the volatile security situation in recent years as well as some incidents of violent repression by the government has largely constrained political activities such as popular mobilization.[311] Despite this, the landscape of Malian civil society is rich and diverse, encompassing formal NGOs, youth groups, women's associations, trade unions, student associations, faith-based groups, as well as traditional and religious leaders. While some provide basic welfare services to the population, others focus more on explicitly political matters such as mobilizing and lobbying for a specific group's interests as well as democratic civic education.

At the national level in Mali, three umbrella groups exist: the *Conseil National de la Société Civile* (CNSC), the *Forum des Organisations de la Société Civile* (FOSC), and the *Coalition Citoyenne des Associations de la Société Civile Pour la Paix, l'Unité et la Réconciliation Nationale* (CCSC/PURN). External actors were involved in the creation of all three groups. The CNSC was created at the initiative of the Malian government in 2003 with the help of a USAID capacity-building program in the context of discussions around poverty reduction strategy papers for which the World Bank demanded civil society consultations.[312] The FOSC was initiated by the European Union in 2009 to strengthen independent civil society, as the European Union considered part of Mali's landscape to be "not fully independent."[313] Members of the FOSC were mainly grouped

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307 Takuba was a European task force that complemented Operation Barkhane.

308 International Crisis Group, "Mali: Staying Engaged Despite Souring Relations," 2022, accessed January 19, 2023, https://bit.ly/3CWUt6w.

309 International Crisis Group, "MINUSMA at a Crossroads," 2022, accessed January 19, 2023, https://bit.ly/3QSvTJK.

310 Radio France International, "French NGOs in Mali concerned for civilians in wake of suspension," 2022, accessed January 19, 2023, https://bit.ly/3QNNvGR.

311 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2018: Mali," 2018, accessed November 29, 2022, https://bit.ly/3HhN8l1.

312 Özge Aydogan, Véronique Fradin and Selma Merdan, "Les Bailleurs de Fonds et La Société Civile Malienne," SciencesPo, 2009, accessed December 3, 2022, https://bit.ly/3heAWXB.

313 Interview with an EU official.

along thematic areas and focused on policy dialogue and representation.[314] In this context, FOSC's activities aimed at professionalizing and improving the leadership skills of civil society organizations in Mali. Notably, the FOSC's focus were national and regional networks of civil society organizations, which meant that they excluded localized grassroots groups. The existence of the two national umbrella organizations caused tensions, as both claim to represent Malian civil society. Parts of Mali's civil society community feared that an EU-initiated FOSC could undermine the CNSC, which – despite USAID's involvement – had been initiated by the Malian government and therefore arguably enjoyed greater local ownership.[315] On the other hand, the European Union tried to counterbalance the, in their view, control exerted by the Malian government over the CNSC by diversifying the civil society marketplace. In 2017, the CCSC/PURN was established as a result of a project by the UN peacekeeping mission to "build common positions and actions of civil society organizations."[316] According to a civil society representative, this third coalition was supposed to reconcile the tensions between the FOSC and the CNSC, potentially merging them into one single umbrella organization – despite the massively diverse and politically divergent set of actors at play.

**Significant international funding over the past decades has created a flourishing "NGO business" in Mali.**

Significant international funding over the past decades has created a flourishing "NGO business" in Mali. Working for civil society organizations in the country is considered a lucrative career choice – to the point that donors at times question these actors' authenticity and intrinsic commitment.[317] One representative of a Western government donor pointed out that civil society is also "the biggest economic sector in Mali to get foreign funding." At the same time, donor representatives noted that professionalized NGOs are well suited to alleviate donors' pressure to disburse more money than they could sensibly invest.[318] However, even though these NGOs have the capacities and capabilities to acquire projects, they often lack the ability to implement them effectively.[319] A representative of a civil society organization characterized the problem by saying that "civil society is so after money and power" that it hinders greater coordination and synergy-building for their actions. This is partly because donor funding has increased competition among civil society actors instead of fostering more collaborative work.[320] This results in a situation in which "everyone is doing the same thing,"[321] but without a unified vision and coordination, reducing the effectiveness of these activities.

Beyond this concern, civil society groups in Mali are confronted with further challenges: First, the grave security situation significantly reduces their capacities

314  United Nations Development Program, "Document de Projet PAOSC: Programme d'Appui aux Organisations de la Société Civile malienne (PAOSC) Phase I," https://bit.ly/3W0rYvT.

315  Gaudence Nyirabikali, "Opportunities and Challenges for Civil Society Contributions to Peacebuilding in Mali," *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security* 5, 2016, https://bit.ly/3W06SxJ.

316  Mali-web, "Réfondation du Mali: La CCSC/PURN s'engage," 2021, accessed October 23, 2022, https://bit.ly/3PczYb5.

317  Interviews with three Western donor organizations.

318  Interviews with two Western donor organizations.

319  Interviews with three representatives of different German political foundations.

320  See: Gaudence Nyirabikali, "Opportunities and Challenges for Civil Society Contributions to Peacebuilding in Mali."

321  Interview with a civil society organization.

to drive change. Many civil society actors prioritize securing the physical safety of themselves, their families and communities instead of driving for political action on a broader level. Second, the polarized political situation and incidents of government repression endanger explicitly political activities. For example, an influential blogger who was engaged against political corruption and the planned 2017 constitutional reform was shot in the chest and seriously injured.[322] At times, Mali's state security forces also responded violently to protests, killing, for example, a demonstrator in December 2017 and injuring several more.[323] Third, civil society groups in Mali suffer from weak capacity. For instance, the umbrella organizations CNSC and FOSC were unable to consult with civil society beyond their own members, and particularly failed to include grassroots groups in their efforts. This is due in large part to their weak organizational, institutional and financial capacities. Furthermore, interviewees identified a clear lack of capacity in internal management, knowledge on campaigning and leadership skills within these organizations.[324] A representative of a civil society organization concluded that they largely "did not play [their] role as counterweight and watch dog."

To the extent that Malian civil society actors succeeded in driving political objectives over the past decades, these were often achieved by groups that already had links to political actors and organizations. In general, "large, established NGOs with ties to the political elite are influential, and can overshadow smaller and more innovative groups, particularly in the competition for funding."[325] In addition to established NGOs, prominent figures created movements and initiatives with explicitly political objectives. For example, Sy Kadiatou Sow, president of the political party *Alliance pour la démocratie au Mali*, created the initiative *Touche pas à ma Constitution* that successfully mobilized protestors against a referendum on a constitutional reform that the Malian government had planned for July 2017. Given the outbreak of protests, the referendum was indefinitely postponed and has not been held to this day.[326] More recently, *Espoir Mali Koura* (EMK), a movement made up of civil society groups and political parties, was created in 2020 as a successor of the *Touche pas à ma Constitution* platform. The EMK movement was created by Cheick Oumar Sissoko, a film director and Mali's former minister of culture and education in the 2000s.[327] EMK was an influential member of the M5-RFP that effectively mobilized protestors against the IBK regime in 2020.

EMK was built on the legacies of associations and groups that emerged after the 2012 peak crisis in Mali. The Coordination of Patriotic Organizations of Mali and the Popular Movement of March 22 (MP22) formed briefly after the coup in 2012 to organize mass protests in support of the military junta. Notably, the MP22 was created

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322  Radio France Internationale, "Mali: rassemblement de soutien au blogueur Madou Kanté blessé par balle," 2017, accessed November 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VVObes.

323  Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2018: Mali."

324  Interviews with representatives of a German political foundation, a Western government donor and a civil society organization.

325  Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2018: Mali."

326  Radio France Internationale, "Mali: «Touche pas à ma Constitution» demande le retrait du projet de révision," 2017, accessed October 22, 2022, https://bit.ly/3W5z4iV.

327  Maliweb.net, "Espoir Mali Kura (EMK): Cheick Oumar Sissoko démis de son poste de coordinateur," 2022, accessed October 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Yioib0; Sebastian Elischer, "Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali," OECD, 2022, accessed December 2, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BjgPP5.

by the African Solidarity Party for Development and Independence, which once again shows the interlinkages between political actors and civil society groups. Both demanded that the Malian government address the needs of Tuareg and non-African minority groups, as well as instituting national autonomy and self-determination. The Coordination of Patriotic Organizations of Mali and the MP22 were led by anti-globalization activists, while their members were young Malians who suffered from the grave economic situation in the country. These groups as well as smaller ones such as *Yérèwolo-Ton* viewed the 2012 coup as an opportunity to put in place a military junta that, in their view, was more willing to address the needs of Mali's population and get rid of the self-interested political elite ruling the country. Moreover, these activists were against internationally mediated peace agreements with Tuareg or jihadist groups, as they believed these accords only responded to international actors' interests. These sentiments against external intervention have resurfaced in recent years. The EMK prioritizes national autonomy and sovereignty first and feeds the flames of anti-French sentiments. The *Groupe des Patriotes du Mali*, created in 2016, and *Yérèwolo*, a successor of the above-mentioned group with a similar name that was active after the 2012 crisis, pursue similar goals and organize many support protests for the junta and in favor of Russian involvement.[328] Notably, these were explicitly anti-democratic actors with whom donors sensibly do not partner in order to pursue a pro-democratic agenda. However, around the same time, the United Front for the Protection of Democracy and the Republic was formed by politicians in Mali and the movement Alliance IBK emerged in support of the former prime minister and democratic rule.[329]

Trade unions have also played a major political role in Mali. The biggest umbrella trade unions in Mali – the *Confédération Syndicale des Travailleurs du Mali* (CSTM) and *Union Nationale de Travailleurs de Mali* (UNTM) – have a track record of organizing large-scale strikes. The CSTM notably joined the M5-RFP and its Secretary General Hamadoun Amion Guindo entered Mali's transitional parliament after the 2020 coup. The UNTM, on the other hand, did not seem to have a clear position on the movement.[330] However, the UNTM organized a nationwide general strike in May 2021 following failed negotiations with the transition government on questions related to salaries and allowances, which contributed to the decision to reshuffle the cabinet and led to the second coup.[331]

Finally, Islamic associations and leaders have increasingly entered the political space despite the secular character of the Malian state. Religious leaders like Imam Mahmoud Dicko, president of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HICM) from 2008 to 2019, and other HICM members have not only been very popular in the country, but have also taken over political postures. For example, in 2012, Dicko supported the reappointment of controversial Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra by organizing a mass protest in his favor.[332] Since then, religious leaders have increasingly leveraged

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328  Elischer, "Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali."

329  Elischer, "Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali."

330  Bamako.com, "Appel à l'UNTM: « Rejoignez le M5-RFP pour que nous terminons rapidement cette phase de la lutte. »," 2020, accessed November 9, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VVPzOc.

331  Christian Klatt, "'Coupception': Mali's coup within a coup," *International Politics and Security*, 2021, accessed November 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3F76nv0.

332  Alex Thurston, "Towards an 'Islamic Republic of Mali?'" 2013, accessed November 1, 2022, https://bit.

opportunities to "develop an operative narrative focused on anti-corruption and public morale" to play more political roles.[333] More recently in 2019, for example, Dicko created the Coordination of Movements, Associations and Sympathizers to organize mass protests against IBK as the front runner of the M5-RFP.[334] At the time of this writing, Dicko and his Coordination of Movements, Associations and Sympathizers continue to play an important role in Mali's political arena, as they publicly denounced the ruling Goïta junta's plan to revise the constitution in January 2023 because the junta is not an elected government.[335]

## Donor Goals and Stabilization Approach

Since 2013, the overarching stabilization approach taken by Western donors in Mali has arguably relied on two elements. On the one hand, it has emphasized the need for the representation of previously marginalized groups and a fairer distribution of resources in the hope of alleviating key grievances and thus bringing these groups – including the armed signatories of the 2015 peace agreement – into the non-violent political fold. On the other, it has sought to contain the remaining radical violent actors – mainly jihadist groups – through armed force and conveyed confident in the ability of security forces to accomplish this objective.

The viability of this overall stabilization approach has been subject to considerable discussion given the inability of successive Malian governments and their international partners to pacify the country. In particular, various commentators have called for talks with selected, more pragmatic jihadi leaders who could arguably help reduce violent attacks.[336] However, it is important to engage with the donor government's chosen stabilization pathway on its own terms in order to assess to what extent their civil society support contributed to its realization.

Politically, Western governments have tried to push for the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement between non-state armed groups from northern Mali and Bamako, which was supposed to resolve the grievances of the northern communities. This understanding spanned broadly four components: first, decentralization should improve the representation of marginalized northern communities. Second, on defense and security matters, DDR, security sector reform and redeployment of the Malian army in the north should provide stability and inclusion for the region. Third, socio-economic development should further economic growth and alleviate related grievances, as better representation would make a greater share of resources benefit the periphery. Fourth, a reconciliation and justice process should bring the Malian society closer together. The UN's stabilization mission MINUSMA was tasked with assisting

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333 Dr. Virginie Baudais, "Mali: Fragmented territorial sovereignty and contested political space," 2020, accessed January 9, 2023, https://bit.ly/3Go4Y3X.

334 Elischer, "Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali.

335 Anadolu Agency, "Mali: Imam Mahmoud Dicko's CMAS asks Goita to postpone the draft of the new constitution," 2023, accessed January 19, 2023, https://bit.ly/3CXcCRG.

336 International Crisis Group, "Speaking with the 'Bad Guys': Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists," 2019, accessed November 1, 2022, https://bit.ly/2wqrJ3u.

with the implementation of the peace agreement. This political peace process notably excluded jihadist groups, as it focused on non-state armed groups from northern Mali. Efforts to open talks in 2017 with the *missions de bons offices* initiative quickly died, as key backers of the Malian government – including France – did not perceive dialogue or negotiations as a viable option.[337] Instead, these actors only responded militarily to jihadist groups. To this end, the French-led Operation Serval that had briefly repelled jihadist groups in January 2013 turned into Operation Barkhane a year later and continued combatting terrorism. Moreover, the European Union deployed training missions for the Malian military (2013) and for police, National Guard and gendarmerie (in 2015) to enable them to address the security challenges.[338]

Generally, the stabilization strategy in Mali – which was led by France, given its historical ties with the country – was meant to address security, development and governance challenges. However, as shown by the multiple initiatives in this regard and voiced in several interviews with Western government representatives, donors' need for a secure environment to safely implement development projects meant that, effectively, security came first and development efforts were delayed – in many places indefinitely, as insecurity did not shrink but rather grew. As a result, the massive development portfolio of the Sahel Alliance – representing multiple donors – of approximately €17 billion in 2018 (several times the Malian government's budget) remained focused on safe areas where it did not reach many of the marginalized communities from whom armed groups recruited and from whose grievances they drew their legitimacy.[339]

Governance reforms were also only half-heartedly pursued, effectively at the pace allowed by the Malian authorities. For instance, instead of focusing on the fight against pervasive corruption and the Malian army's impunity, Western donors retreated to building up capacities – and therefore focused on technical solutions rather than strenuous political reform processes.[340]

## Donor Support to Civil Society During the Crisis

**Given Western donors' stark focus on security and military aspects in Mali, supporting civil society was not a strategic priority.**

Given Western donors' stark focus on security and military aspects in Mali, supporting civil society was not a strategic priority. This is not to say that they did not significantly invest in civil society groups, but it was clearly not considered a relevant component of their stabilization efforts. For example, according to a representative of a Western foreign ministry, donors' clear overarching priority was "stability, or at least the prevention of state collapse and expansion of instability." The same representative did note that donors also wanted to "support democratization, but this was not the ultimate goal." The official elaborated that "the underlying idea is that a functioning democracy – which is a long-term process – can be more stable, as [it helps to] better balance conflicts"

337 International Crisis Group, "Speaking with the 'Bad Guys'"; John Irish, "Mali, France rule out talks with jihadists after attacks," *Reuters*, 2017, accessed January 9, 2023, https://reut.rs/3XiTVzG.

338 International Crisis Group, "A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy," 2021, accessed October 20, 2022, https://bit.ly/3uwTUfc.

339 Alliance Sahel, "Results Report 3 years of Sahel Alliance," accessed November 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3UDob6F.

340 Anna Schmauder, Guillaume Soto-Mayor and Delina Goxho, "Strategic Missteps: Learning from a Failed EU Sahel Strategy," 2020, accessed December 1, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VFvjAJ.

and that civil society constituted the "ultimate pillar for democracy." However, despite acknowledging the relationship between democracy and sustainable stability, this donor seemed to view democratization as a long-term endeavor, while focusing more immediately on acute security threats such as terrorism and state collapse. Ultimately, it thus did not see civil society support as a means to achieving stabilization.

Interestingly, a representative of a Western development ministry clearly stated that "supporting civil society is not a purpose in itself," but is rather always connected to specific sectors that the ministry wants to address. This stems from the fact that they consider civil society as the "channel of delivery," which is common for development programming. This logic may also explain why there is no dedicated political strategy for civil society support in Mali: civil society actors are largely seen through the prism of particular projects to which they can contribute, not as autonomous political forces. Furthermore, even though civil society support was "not forgotten, [it was] not considered in a strategic way," as they focused on an institutional approach, for example by providing budgetary support to enhance Mali's public finances.[341]

Western donors' support to civil society pre-dated the outbreak of the 2012 crisis. From 2010 to 2011, a Support Program for Civil Society Organizations (PAOSC I) was co-financed by several EU states as well as the United States, Canada and the UN Development Program. The PAOSC I provided institutional and organizational support to civil society umbrella organizations, particularly the FOSC. Its goal was to bring together civil society organizations to improve internal coherence and institutional structures, foster collaboration among civil society actors and promote collective representation. Building on this, the objective of its follow-up program, PAOSC II – which ran from 2012 to 2017 – was to increase the involvement of civil society in the Malian government's development policies and programs so that these efforts would better address the needs of the population and marginalized groups. Indeed, these programs positively benefitted the policy dialogue and consultation capacities of some Malian civil society actors. However, civil society representatives criticized that a lot of groups were excluded from the support mechanism, as they struggle with the administrative procedures and requirements to receive funding.[342] This particularly affected regional, local and grassroots groups.[343] Notably, donors themselves as well as implementing partners criticized PAOSC II "for being too dispersed and for not demonstrating a clear impact in the thematic sectors covered,"[344] which is why the European Union's successor *Harmonisation et Innovation au Bénéfice des Initiatives de la Société Civile d'Utilité Sociale* aimed at focusing more on achieving impact on thematic sectors.

> **Civil society actors are largely seen through the prism of particular projects to which they can contribute, not as autonomous political forces.**

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341  Interview with a Western government official.

342  Moussa Djiré, Djibril Sow, Kissima Gakou and Bakary Camara, "Assessing the EU's conflict prevention and Peacebuilding interventions in Mali," *Université des Sciences Juridiques et Politiques de Bamako*, 2017, accessed November 17, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BjhCj4. This point was also mentioned in an interview with a representative of a civil society organization.

343  Gaudence Nyirabikali, "Opportunities and Challenges for Civil Society Contributions to Peacebuilding in Mali."

344  Germany Trade & Invest, "Programme d'action annuel 2017 en faveur de la République du Mali, pour les thèmes : appui à la société civile et éducation, à financer sur le 11e Fonds européen de développement, " accessed October 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BlRpA9.

In addition to this collective effort, the crisis outbreak in 2012 also led donors to start running their own civil society programs with a focus on citizen awareness and youth participation, social cohesion, the prevention of violent extremism, and electoral support. In January 2013, USAID/Office of Transition Initiatives, for example, began to "work with Malian civil society and community organizations to support broad-based participation in the democratic process and to promote improved access to reliable information about the transition, including news about the ongoing peace negotiations between the Malian government and the northern armed groups."[345] They generally aimed at improving civil society's capacities in advocacy, networking, citizen awareness campaigns, and collaborating with government actors.[346] More specifically, USAID/Office of Transition Initiatives created a platform for youth groups and associations to advocate for peace via social media platforms.[347] In 2016, the German Federal Foreign Office and *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) started a project to support stabilization and peace in Mali that focused on strengthening the efforts of Mali's Ministry of Reconciliation to inform about and implement the peace agreement. This project also involved trainings for civil society organizations with the aim to provide a common understanding of the 2015 peace agreement in order for them to disseminate the content to the wider public.[348] More recently, in 2018, the same donors set up a project named *Donko ni Maaya* with a focus on leveraging the positive role of youth as change agents to combat violent extremism. This goal is meant to be achieved by establishing cultural spaces where Malian youth can participate in activities to express their thoughts on political and social issues.[349]

In addition to government donors, Western donor organizations that have a specific focus on democracy as well as civil society promotion and are also financed by their respective home governments have also been active in Mali. This includes actors like the German political foundations, the National Endowment for Democracy, International Republican Institute (IRI), and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD). Private organizations like the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) and the Aga Khan Foundation have also supported Malian civil society, mostly in the form of projects, trainings and workshops. While some of these donors have steadily worked in Mali throughout the past decades, others showed renewed interest in supporting civil society after the 2012 crisis. For instance, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation had already been active in Mali since 1970 to strengthen the country's "pluralistic, participatory and democratic development."[350] Regarding civil society support, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation has a long track record of cooperating with

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345 USAID, "Mali 2013-2016," accessed October 4, 2022, https://bit.ly/3UHwU7O.

346 USAID, "USAID Mali Civic Engagement Program (CEP)," 2021, accessed October 12, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Yv-ROcu.

347 USAID, "Youth Groups in Mali Spread Messages of Unity," accessed November 14, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VD-gAGy.

348 Alliance pour Refonder la Gouvernance en Afrique, "Formation des Formateur à l'adresse des Organisations de la Société Civile sur l'utilisation du guide méthodologique de formation sur le contenu de l'Accord pour la Paix et la Réconciliation au Mali," 2016, accessed November 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3XZyJ2S.

349 Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, "Mali: Donko ni Maaya – Krisenprävention und Stärkung der sozialen Kohäsion durch die Förderung des Kultursektors," 2022, accessed December 2, 2022, https://bit.ly/3VHdz8h.

350 Friedrich Ebert Foundation, "FES au Mali," accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3PdnGiB.

and supporting trade unions such as the umbrella organizations UNTM and CSTM.[351] The Friedrich Ebert Foundation as well as National Democratic Institute have also supported the CCSC-PURN, which has critically accompanied the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement.[352] Additional civil society partners include other NGOs, think tanks and media.[353]

In contrast to donors with a long-standing presence in Mali, the IRI, for example, reopened its Mali office in 2013 to focus on supporting elections with the help of civil society, political parties and traditional leaders.[354] The 2012 crisis was also the reason that the OSIWA designated Mali as a priority country for its strategy between 2014 and 2017. In 2013, OSIWA started working with civil society and media actors with a focus on elections as well as advocating for electoral and constitutional reform.[355] The Aga Khan Foundation and NIMD – of which the latter has been engaged in Mali since 2002, but only opened an office in 2018 – facilitated dialogue fora to bring together political actors and civil society groups.[356]

In the interviews conducted for this study, almost all Western donor representatives acknowledged the diversity of civil society actors in Mali that also represent values and opinions not in line with – or even at times directly opposed to – Western views. Some donor representatives pointed out the dilemma posed by only working with civil society groups that share Western perspectives, but who are not the relevant actors in the Malian population. Interviewees especially mentioned religious and traditional leaders (as well as their associations) who generally enjoy a high legitimacy in (parts of) the Malian population and are considered to be effective civil society actors. Even though donors may have regular contact to these actors, they do not directly support them. However, donors have collaborated with religious and traditional leaders for some stabilization activities such as mediation and conflict resolution programs. The USAID's Peacebuilding, Stabilization and Reconciliation Program, for example, "conducted a series of workshops that engaged religious women in exchanges with youth to develop their understanding and agreement on ways they would work together to contribute to the prevention and fight against violent extremism and conflict."[357] Moreover, the program organizes platforms for exchange between citizen associations as well as traditional and religious leaders on local conflict resolution and development priorities.

It is also notable that donors have generally not supported members of the M5-RFP.[358] According to a donor representative, this was partially because of the donor community's long-standing partnership with IBK, against whom the movement

> **Some donor representatives pointed out the dilemma posed by only working with civil society groups that share Western perspectives, but who are not the relevant actors in the Malian population.**

351   Friedrich Ebert Foundation, "Partenaires," accessed December 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3FB4hVw.

352   Friedrich Ebert Foundation, "Stockender Friedensprozess in Mali," 2019, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3UIIdgf.

353   Friedrich Ebert Foundation, "Partenaires."

354   International Republican Institute, "Mali Overview," accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3PcGy1h.

355   Open Society Initiative for West Africa, "Mali," accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Bh9sHW.

356   Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, "NIMD Country Programme Mali," accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BjvkCn; Aga Khan Development Network, "Mali | Civil Society," accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3FC86tR.

357   USAID, "Mali Peacebuilding, Stabilization and Reconciliation (Mali PSR)," 2022, accessed February 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3YwSTkn.

358   There was only one exception, which is due to long-standing collaboration with one of the M5-RFP members.

was mobilizing. Furthermore, another donor representative argued that IBK was re-elected in 2018 "not due to fraud, [but] more or less transparent elections," and is thus the legitimate president. From a donor perspective, not supporting the M5-RFP movement was the most plausible course of action, as the loudest civil society members were at minimum critical of Western governments or even openly stirred anti-Western sentiments. Generally, the interconnectedness of actors and the dynamic civil society landscape made it difficult for donors to identify actors with genuinely compatible aims and strategies. In the words of an interlocutor, the civil society ecosystem in Mali is a "quite opaque mesh."[359] Once donors identified organizations with objectives similar to their goals, these groups were "showered with money and expectations" with little tangible results,[360] as the assessment of the EU's PAOSC II and the subsequent refocus on thematic sectors in the successor project suggest.

Generally, in addition to the administrative burden to receive the above-mentioned support, representatives of Malian civil society groups criticized the dominance of donors' agenda in creating and selecting projects. Instead of first consulting civil society, donors often have already set their priorities, which are then very difficult to change. An example mentioned several times in the interviews were the elections that the international community pushed for after the coups in 2020 and 2021. Even though holding elections is also relevant for the Malian population and civil society, for many, improving security should be the primary goal.[361] Moreover, donors tend to work with small, closed circles in Bamako, while civil society groups in northern and central Mali had more difficulties accessing funding.[362] This is most likely due to the bad security situation in these parts of the country. Germany's civilian stabilization efforts, for example, are closely aligned with the presence of the Bundeswehr, without which the German government would likely be unable to engage in northern Mali.[363]

## Impact of Donor Support for Civil Society Actors on Crisis Dynamics

Over the past decades, Western donors have significantly supported civil society actors in Mali. Most of the civil society organizations interviewed for this study stated that the external support from and collaboration with donors have been beneficial for them. More specifically, funding has helped these groups to undertake their activities and ensure a higher quality of work. However, while donor funding has enabled civil society organizations to function, the main question in this section is whether this support contributed to implementing the 2015 peace agreement.

To this end, donors' capacity-building efforts may have enabled civil society groups to critically voice their concerns regarding the peace process in Mali. A significant part

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359  Interview with a representative of a Western government donor.

360  Interview with a representative of a Western government donor.

361  Interviews with several representatives of civil society organizations. See also: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, "Mali-Mètre: Enquête d'opinion 'Que pensent les Malien(ne)s?'," 2022, accessed January 9, 2023, https://bit.ly/3ZqhMiL.

362  Interviews with several representatives of civil society organizations and donor organizations.

363  Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, "Promoting peace and stability in Mali," 2022, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3jHANNO.

of Malian civil society – among others, the EU-supported umbrella organization FOSC – voiced its criticism toward the 2015 peace agreement. More concretely, they criticized that the agreement reduced the role of civil society in overseeing the implementation process.[364] This public outcry, however, did not lead to a meaningful inclusion of civil society representatives in the peace process. Instead, the Independent Observer of the peace process noted in its December 2020 report "that civil society increasingly considers the CSA [the Monitoring Committee of the implementation process] as a 'closed club' far from the daily realities."[365]

Donors provided notable support to civil society organizations to enable them to contribute to the successful implementation of the 2015 peace agreement. For instance, the civil society CCSC/PURN coalition that, after its initial MINUSMA funding ended, was subsequently funded by the National Democratic Institute and Friedrich Ebert Foundation, intended to inform the broader population about the peace agreement and to accompany its realization.[366] For this, CCSC/PURN published reports about the implementation process, including recommendations, on an annual basis.

That being said, donors' efforts to support civil society actors in contributing to the 2015 peace agreement were seriously limited by a number of factors. First, the peace agreement generally lacked popular support, including from several civil society groups. Further, the signatories' reticence to implement the peace agreement also considerably reduced the support of civil society groups for the peace process.[367] This lack of popular support became particularly clear when the Malian government planned a referendum on constitutional reforms, which donors also generally perceived as crucial for the peace accords' implementation.[368] On the one hand, these anticipated amendments aimed to provide better representation for northern communities in state institutions, and thus were in line with the peace agreement. On the other, these amendments would have allowed IBK to broaden his power to appoint a third of the Senate members – actors who were supposed to be newly established and represent local actors.[369] Another argument against the referendum was that the volatile security situation would have hindered Malians living in insecure places from voting. Popular protests by the initiative *Antè*

**The peace agreement generally lacked popular support, including from several civil society groups.**

364 Naffet Keita, "Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali resulting from the Algiers process. Between euphoria and scepticism: traces of peace," *Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, 2018, accessed December 9, 2022, https://bit.ly/3UFrdYg; Center for Strategic & International Studies, "Why Mali Needs a New Peace Deal," 2020, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3uCKYFf; UN MINUSMA, "La MINUSMA et la Société Civile Engagées Pour Une Mise en œuvre inclusive de l'Accord Pour la Paix et la Réconciliation au Mali," 2016, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3FcYlAX; Carter Center, "Rapport de l'Observateur indépendant," 2018, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Fb8i1O.

365 Carter Center, "Rapport de l'Observateur indépendant."

366 Bamako.com, "Forum de la société civile sur l'accord de paix : Les rideaux sont tombés sur une note de restitution," 2016, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3HJPEzl; CCSC/PURN, "A propos de la CCSC-Purn," accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3YB4VZS.

367 Carter Center, "Mali Independent Observer: Little Progress in Implementing Peace Agreement in 2020, but Transition Offers New Opportunity," 2020, https://bit.ly/3uvP0zf.

368 For example, see: German Federal Foreign Office, "Rede von Außenminister Heiko Maas vor dem Bundestag zur Debatte über die Verlängerung der deutschen Beteiligung an der UN-Mission MINUSMA," 2019, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3FyxIHZ; Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and the Rule of Law, "Support to the Constitutional Reform Process in Mali and Capacity Building for the Constitutional Court of Mali," accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3iObN6u.

369 France24, "Video: Thousands protest in Mali over constitutional reform," 2017, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Fg8RXQ; Library of Congress, "Mali: Referendum on Constitutional Amendments Postponed," 2017, accessed December 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3uzXRje.

*Abana, Touche Pas à Ma Constitution*, which were organized by political and civil society groups in 2017, led to the indefinite postponement of the referendum.[370] Moreover, in the northern Malian city of Gao, protestors demonstrated against the new interim authorities in 2016, who were appointed as a result of the decentralization mechanism established in the peace agreement.[371] All of these examples show the lack of popular support for the peace accords, which ultimately hindered its implementation.[372]

Second, the volatile security situation seriously restricted the room for maneuvering for both donors and civil society groups. This is why most activities that donors have supported over the past decades were located in Bamako. However, doing so prioritized civil society groups in the capital and hindered engagement with groups in other parts of Mali, minimizing donors' reach in areas that have already been historically neglected. Moreover, the crisis also led donors to shift their focus to humanitarian measures in response to the urgent needs of the population.[373] In addition, some civil society groups had difficulties implementing their activities and did not have the capacity to develop their own agenda and strategic plan.[374]

Overall, donors' support to civil society organizations enabled these actors to undertake their activities. However, donor support did not measurably contribute to a more serious implementation of the 2015 peace accords, which has been the political framework through which Western donors sought to reconcile non-state armed groups from the north with the Malian government. Instead, parts of Malian civil society led – partially effective – protests against putting into practice the peace provisions. Donor engagement was further constrained by the severe security situation with increased violence, which has continued its downward trajectory over the past years.

## Could Support to Civil Society Actors Have Made a Greater Difference?

As outlined earlier, Western donors' approach to the crisis in Mali focused on the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement. Following its provisions, donor priorities included meaningful reforms and the inclusion of non-state armed groups from northern Mali to resolve the grievances of northern communities. Could donors have better leveraged civil society support for more progress on the provisions in the peace accords?

Overall, donor representatives were unanimously in the opinion that different or more civil society support would not have ultimately altered the course of the crisis in Mali. In the words of a Western donor representative, "civil society is not the panacea

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370  Baba Danoko, "Mali's suspended constitutional review provides vital lessons," *Institute for Security Studies*, 2017, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3F9n3Cd.

371  France24, "Gao protest turns deadly as Malian army opens fire," 2016, accessed December 5, 2022, https://bit.ly/3HjkSyw.

372  Baba Danoko, "Mali's suspended constitutional review provides vital lessons." As outlined earlier, the signatories' lack of political will to implement the peace agreement seriously hampers its implementation.

373  European Union, "Mali – Feuille de route pour l'engagement avec la société civile 2014 – 2017," 2020, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3Vzx3eV.

374  Interview with a Western government official and an interview with a representative of a civil society organization.

for everything." Although this statement is undoubtedly true, it is worth noting that this disregards the powerful role that civil society actors played in the case of Mali – even if they ran counter to donors' agenda. Two civil society representatives claimed that if civil society groups had collectively acted as a watchdog of national and international actors, the situation could have possibly improved. More specifically, even though "advocacy activities are included in all projects, the reality is that the organizations are not prepared to do a good job of monitoring governance."[375] While this situation points to insufficient capabilities in this regard, the lack of coordination between donors as well as between civil society groups has contributed to fragmented action and the lack of a common vision.[376]

**Donors' efforts to structure the Malian civil society landscape by creating two different umbrella organizations were largely counterproductive.**

It is important to note that additional funding for civil society groups would most likely not have helped with these challenges to cohesion, as support from donors – who also often had different views – contributed to competition between civil society groups. Moreover, none of the interviewed civil society representatives claimed that there was not enough funding available. Instead, what civil society actors needed from donors was to create synergies between the different groups and facilitate coordinated action. While this was the focus of some donor support programs, it is dubious that more efforts in this regard would have significantly improved the collective action of civil society in Mali given the very different views and objectives of civil society actors. More importantly, donors' efforts to structure the Malian civil society landscape by creating two different umbrella organizations were largely counterproductive, as the CNSC and the FOSC – created with the help of USAID and EU respectively – competed over representation in Malian civil society. Therefore, the dual efforts of donors created more tensions and divisions rather than unifying the different civil society groups.

Considering the unpopularity of the 2015 peace agreement, donors could have considered putting more effort into building support from civil society groups for its implementation. In this regard, it is notable that Western governments did not advocate for better inclusion of civil society actors in the peace negotiations. Giving various civil society groups from different sections of Malian society the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to the peace agreement arguably could have helped it gain popular support. Instead, only a few organizations that were allied with Malian parties were involved in the country's peace process. However, even these civil society actors were only consulted and were not permitted to participate in the substantive negotiations. Relevant civil society groups representing northern communities as well as traditional leaders who play a crucial role within these communities were essentially excluded. Arguably, their omission was due to the priority placed by Algeria, which led the negotiations, on quickly moving forward with the negotiations in order to restore stability. This approach broadly resonated with the priorities of other members of the international mediation team, which, among others, included the European Union (strongly dominated by France), the United States and MINUSMA.[377] While this approach is understandable given negotiators' need to gain momentum, receive backing

375 Interview with a representative of a civil society organization.

376 Interview with a representative of a civil society organization.

377 International Crisis Group, "Mali: Last Change in Algiers," 2014, accessed December 7, 2022, https://bit.ly/3BhfuZ6; International Crisis Group, "Mali: la paix à marche forcée?," 2015, accessed December 8, 2022, https://bit.ly/3PcP9B4.

from Malian parties and prevent more violent clashes, it also significantly reduced the role of civil society actors in the negotiations – and therefore did not contribute to greater buy-in from their side.

While this points to potential opportunities that Western donors could have better leveraged, they were generally confronted with several challenges in engaging with civil society groups. First, some actors seem to have lost hope in real political change or lacked an intrinsic commitment to the peace process. According to one civil society representative, professionalized civil society organizations "give up very quickly," as there is little prospect for success in holding the Malian government accountable, which is also a result of the lack of coordination and synergized action among civil society actors. Furthermore, two donor representatives and a civil society representative underlined the difficulty of distinguishing between intrinsically driven actors and those who only want to benefit from donor funding.

Second, in a polarized environment with a rich and diverse civil society landscape such as Mali, choosing genuine and effective partners that are aligned with donors' stabilization goals is a difficult task. In this case, this is due to the connections between many civil society actors and political and religious groups that were often at least ambiguous toward Western donors' pro-democratic and stabilization agenda. In the past, however, it was these groups that had been more effective in achieving their goals – most recently, the M5-RFP. Reflecting on this challenge, a donor organization representative openly questioned the impact of supporting an "artificially constructed association for three years when the compass of values of people cannot be influenced," as many of the donors' civil society partners lack legitimacy in the broader Malian population. Similarly, another donor representative questioned: "how far are we willing to [compromise our values] if we want to pursue Malian populations' interests?" – pointing out the dilemma of whether to reconcile local interests and donor goals.

Finally, Western governments should not be surprised that a significant portion of Malian society does not support their political direction, as donors have fundamentally disregarded legitimate grievances by tying themselves to a corrupt and unresponsive government – which stand accused of, for example, embezzling public funds and not providing key services – due to their short-term security objectives.

## Implications

Overall, the case of Mali provides three main findings with regard to the overarching question of this study:

1. Civil society groups do not necessarily pursue the same goals as donors and may even be in outright opposition to donor priorities. In Mali, the most effective civil society actors mostly did not share donors' stabilization approach. In the past decade, the most successful civil society movement was the M5-RFP, in which civil society groups like the EMK, which also mobilized anti-French sentiments, played an important role.

2. Overly confident expectations concerning the effectiveness of military and security efforts to thwart violent extremists can make it seem as though accommodating for the interests of disadvantaged populations is unnecessary, which reduces

the potential for civil society actors to contribute in this regard. This adds to the likelihood that activities in the area of civil society support will lack strategic direction and remain irrelevant for crisis dynamics.

3. Donor efforts can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of civil society groups. In the case of Mali, donor funding not only led to the development of a so-called "NGO business" in which some organizations are mainly interested in financial resources, but also fostered competition and tensions between civil society groups that served to hinder more collective and effective action. Further, donors' efforts to coalesce civil society groups into umbrella organizations both exacerbated this competition and also enabled the Malian government to better control parts of civil society. This situation greatly benefitted the professionalized NGO elites running these umbrella groups – which, while likely making it easier for donors to disburse funds, was ultimately detrimental to the ability of such efforts to improve political inclusion.

# Synthesis and Recommendations
## A More Strategic Approach

The country cases analyzed for this study demonstrate the diversity of crisis settings and highlight the importance of understanding contextual specificities for any external stabilization effort. This especially applies to attempts to advance stabilization through support to civil society given the diversity of the actors involved, the often complex relationships between them and the many ways in which their activities can influence crisis dynamics. For this reason, this synthesis does not try to distil law-like generalizations about the impact of different forms of external support to civil society actors in acute crises. Rather, it lays out a set of findings with overarching relevance to any effort in this field and offers recommendations on how donors' approaches could be improved.

**We have found no compelling example of donor support exerting an attributable influence on immediate crisis dynamics.**

Drawing on the four case studies, the synthesis emphasizes that civil society actors play important roles in a wide range of crisis settings despite usually operating under challenging and risky conditions within constrained civic space. Efforts to leverage these actors' potential to contribute to crisis resolution are therefore worthwhile. However, in the crises examined in this study, donor engagement with civil society hardly amounted to such attempts at a serious level. Donor efforts have had relevant impact in terms of providing some protection against repression and supporting activities that drive gradual societal change. That being said, we have found no compelling example of donor support exerting an attributable influence on immediate crisis dynamics – for example, by decisively enhancing civil society actors' ability to drive key reforms through protest mobilization, lobbying or watchdog activities, or to advance crisis resolution as conveners of civic exchanges or mediators between conflict parties.

To a considerable extent, this is due to constraints beyond donors' control – the counterfactual discussions in the country chapters underline that, at least in the cases considered here, opportunities to influence crisis trajectories through support to civil society actors were largely limited. Nevertheless, it is also clear from the analysis that even in contexts more amenable to this kind of intervention, a much more strategic approach would be required to enable substantial impact. As this is something that donors can control and that could also benefit more long-term efforts to support civil society, fostering such an approach is the thrust of this study's recommendations. At same time, efforts should always be guided by realistic expectations and place particular emphasis on managing risks and potential unintended consequences.

# Finding 1: Local civil society actors can be even more consequential political players in crisis environments than often assumed.

## 1.1. Local civil society actors are relevant – sometimes even central – in shaping how crises play out.

A basic but important finding of this study is that civil society actors in acute crises are rarely bystanders to developments shaped by political elites or armed actors, but rather central political players with considerable influence on how a crisis unfolds. This applies not only to comparatively open political contexts such as Lebanon, where civil society has long played an important role, but also to closed systems like Sudan and Belarus. In all of these cases, popular mobilization driven by civil society actors challenged the respective regimes, creating openings for change to political and economic orders that had failed to deliver public goods. In Sudan, the protests even toppled the regime. In Mali, the most influential efforts of civic activism opposed rather than supported the Western strategy, but this makes them no less politically important.

A notable pattern in the examined cases is that the most tangible instances of civil society impact on politics in acute crises tended to be disruptive – for instance, dislodging a long-standing authoritarian regime in Sudan. Since a continuation of existing trends seemed economically and politically untenable, temporary destabilization was arguably necessary in these cases to open up the possibility of a more sustainable trajectory. However, civil society actors consistently found it hard to shape transitions toward durable democratic governance and political stability. Still, the undeniable political relevance of these actors means that donors should continue to engage with them and look for ways to harness their contribution to stabilization efforts.

**As a fundamental rule of thumb, there is never a single 'civil society', even in settings where broad public mobilization conveys a basic unity of purpose.**

As a fundamental rule of thumb, there is never a single 'civil society', even in settings where broad public mobilization conveys a basic unity of purpose. Rather, civil society consists of many actors pursuing distinct, if sometimes overlapping, goals. While developing and sustaining shared positions and building coalitions is a challenge with which civil society groups across the case studies grappled themselves, donors' approaches to this issue – such as fostering artificial umbrella organizations in Mali – have also been at times problematic. More generally, without a basic understanding of who is who and who wants what, any attempt to engage with 'civil society' is doomed to fail.[378]

Importantly, the ways in which civil society actors seek to achieve political impact also vary significantly. Based on our case studies and the relevant literature, we outline five archetypical impact logics for political civil society below (as noted in the introduction, groups primarily engaged in service delivery were not the focus of our analysis).[379] Which of these logics primarily underpin actors' activities has clear

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378  See also Béatrice Pouligny, "Civil Society and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Ambiguities of International Programmes Aimed at Building 'New' Societies'," *Security Dialogue* 36, no. 4 (December 2005): pp. 495–510, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010605060448.

379  Inspirations for the impact pathways presented here include Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, eds., *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion, A Carnegie Endowment Book*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000); Kristian Harpviken and Kjell Erling Kjellman, "Beyond Blueprints: Civil Society and Peacebuilding," (Oslo: Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation

implications for how their actions may influence crisis dynamics, which kinds of support may help them and which risks may arise in the process. Whereas practice-oriented civil society mappings often rely on classifications by sector or organizational form that may be ill-suited to local contexts, viewing civil society actors through the prism of these impact logics can help address blind spots and identify the most promising avenues of support.

Figure 1: Typology of Impact Logics of Political Civil Society Actors



| Mobilisierung | Lobbying | Ideengenerierung | Monitoring | Politische Bildung | Dienstleistung |

**Mobilization:** Civil society actors organize political pressure by orchestrating collective action with public participation, such as protests, boycott, strikes, and petitions. Political impact may be achieved by influencing relevant decision-makers or by effecting changes in the political leadership.

**Lobbying:** Civil society actors publish statements or organize meetings in order to influence decision-makers in favor of their agenda.

**Idea generation:** Civil society actors develop innovative ideas regarding political, economic or social issues and disseminate them via the media and/or directly among political decision-makers in order to influence the latter's thinking and behavior.

**Monitoring:** Civil society actors (e.g., independent and investigative media, watchdog NGOs) create transparency regarding political, economic or social issues and around the behavior of powerful actors. Their reporting may aim to influence decision-makers directly (as they will seek to avoid condemnation, reputational damage or increased pressure from international actors or political rivals) or indirectly by exposing wrongdoing that may feed into public mobilization. Either way, the objective is to push for adherence to existing laws or ethical principles.

**Civic education:** Civil society actors promote democratic consciousness among the public by providing platforms for exchange or giving impulses for an informed and differentiated public debate that recognizes diverse positions.

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(NORAD), 2004); Mary Kaldor, "Civil Society and Accountability," *Journal of Human Development* 4, no. 1 (March 2003): pp. 5–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/1464988032000051469; Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology," *Human Affairs* 22, no. 3 (July 1, 2012): pp. 283–300, https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1.

Of course, highlighting the political role of civil society actors is not to suggest that their influence is boundless, especially when confronted with violent groups or an effective security apparatus deployed toward their repression. As discussed below, such factors can impose major constraints on what civil society actors can achieve and give rise to severe risks to those involved in their activities, also raising difficult ethical questions for the donors who seek to support them.

## 1.2. The aims and strategies of civil society actors are rarely perfectly aligned with donor preferences.

An important corollary of taking the political impact and agency of civil society actors seriously is to recognize that they are autonomous actors whose aims and strategies rarely dovetail entirely with external priorities. Some civil society groups even pursue agendas that are explicitly anti-democratic, anti-Western or both, as illustrated especially in the Mali case. But even between stabilization-minded donors from democratic countries and civil society actors with clearly pro-democratic agendas, positions on key issues frequently diverge. This occurs despite their shared set of basic normative commitments: democratic pluralism at work.

In the case of Lebanon, prominent civil society groups had more transformative ambitions regarding the scope and speed of political change than donors were willing to actively support. This also reflected the varying degree to which donors and civil society actors in these cases were ready to accommodate the interests of incumbent political elites to enable a less disruptive trajectory. In Mali, on the other hand, donors' emphasis on fairly rapid democratic elections was seen skeptically even by those civil society actors that were fundamentally supportive of political reform, but saw a need to further improve the security situation and to address more structural, institutional issues first.

As further detailed below, impact-oriented donor support to civil society requires capacities and processes to understand the local actor in sufficient detail to assess where the aims and strategies of specific civil society actors are indeed aligned with donor objectives and where they diverge. A lack of perfect alignment with a given actor does not preclude constructive collaboration, but should draw attention to its likely limitations. In situations where donors struggle to find suitable partners or where important civil society actors openly oppose their objectives, this may also serve as an alarm bell as to whether donors' goals are indeed viable or require adjustment.

## Finding 2: Donors can provide critical support to civil society actors, but their short-term impact on crisis dynamics is often constrained.

## 2.1. Donor support can help civil society actors to survive and develop even under very challenging conditions.

Attempts to support civil society actors in acute crises often build on foundations of exchange and partnership over extended periods. Of the cases examined, this was

particularly true in Lebanon and Belarus, where some donor organizations had worked with civil society partners for decades prior to the crisis episodes analyzed for this study. This engagement contributed to the formation of ecosystems of actors committed to advancing more inclusive governance and thus to shaping the political context in which the respective crises unfolded.

**Donor efforts have helped civil society actors to sustain and develop their activities in the face of challenging economic conditions, repression and even violence, potentially contributing to societal and political change in the long term.**

In a similar vein, donor efforts across the examined cases have helped civil society actors to sustain and develop their activities in the face of challenging economic conditions, repression and even violence, potentially contributing to societal and political change in the long term. In Lebanon, donor support has played an important role in consolidating civil society-led innovations, including independent media initiatives, into more institutionalized organizations that continue to influence political developments despite the decline of the 2019 protest movement. More generally, donor funding enables activists to continue their work in the country despite the dramatic economic crisis, thereby preventing a potentially permanent weakening of civil society. In Sudan, despite complicated relations with civil society actors during the transition phase after Bashir's fall, donors have increasingly facilitated access to international networks and supported projects that should help develop and sustain a more vibrant civil society going forward. And while organized local activism became all but impossible after the crackdown in Belarus, donors have attempted to support the reconstitution of civic networks and pursuit of pro-democratic activities in exile.

Activities by donor organizations working directly with civil society actors – which include providing project-based funding, trainings and other capacity-building opportunities – tend to embrace a fairly pragmatic approach that is attuned to local conditions. In this regard, the sustained local presence of organizations like the German political foundations and the National Endowment for Democracy in many countries is a clear asset. Across the considered cases, most civil society representatives confirmed that donors' support in these areas broadly corresponded to their needs, even though they expressed concerns about application processes and administrative requirements (see below under 4.2).

Donors are also largely aware of the risks associated with their involvement, notably regarding the possibility of discrediting actors in the eyes of local constituencies. However, the case of Belarus highlights that the dangers of documenting activities for reporting purposes are not always recognized and acted upon quickly enough.

## 2.2. Donors' ability to influence acute crisis dynamics by supporting civil society is often constrained by factors beyond their control.

Influencing complex social and political processes is inherently difficult. Attempts to do so via support to civil society actors are confronted with particular challenges, which in some environments amount to fundamental obstacles.

A basic requirement for any viable effort is the presence of civil society actors with sufficient popular legitimacy and a degree of home-grown capacity. Donor efforts to artificially instigate civil society activities that do not draw on fundamentally local dynamics are not only normatively dubious, but also very unlikely to achieve significant

impact.[380] Of the cases examined, Mali is perhaps the clearest example in which donors have faced a limited pool of plausible partners. The cases of Belarus and Sudan caution against underestimating the capacity of civil society actors operating within closed systems: in these examples, some civil society actors were able to build structures and public legitimacy more robust than expected. However, given their usually informal and sometimes even clandestine character, these actors tend to be particularly difficult for donors to engage.

A repressive state apparatus or political agents capable of defending their interests through armed force may also severely constrain the impact of civil society efforts in crisis settings, notably if civil society actors seek to accomplish major political change through large-scale public mobilization. Unfortunately, while academic research provides indications about conditions under which non-violent campaigns are more likely to succeed as well as the factors associated with violent crackdowns, these are by no means reliable predictors.[381] Thus, donors are regularly confronted with situations in which civil society support comes with uncertain prospects and may also inadvertently encourage activities that put these actors at risk. In such situations, decision-making must ultimately be guided by contextually specific analysis and close consultation with the actors that ultimately bear the brunt of potential risks. In cases where civil society efforts in these settings indeed achieve important concessions or trigger changes within repressive structures (such as the ousting of Omar al-Bashir by his generals in Sudan), defending democratic gains is likely to prove a lengthy endeavor that donors should be ready to support accordingly, including in the face of setbacks.

Finally, it is also clear from the accounts in this study that civil society actors in dynamic crisis situations are often hesitant to accept foreign support, posing another key obstacle to donor funding and other forms of direct collaboration. In these instances, donors may still be able to help by offering assistance to activists who are subject to personal threats (as donors have practiced with some success, even in the case of Belarus) and by positioning themselves at the political level. Regarding the latter point, the case of Lebanon highlights that withdrawing support and recognition from actors obstructing crisis resolution efforts can be in some instances at least as relevant as rhetorical support to civil society actors.

> **Donors are regularly confronted with situations in which civil society support comes with uncertain prospects and may also inadvertently encourage activities that put these actors at risk.**

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380 On the centrality of local actors for the success of non-violent campaigns, see Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?*, (Washington, DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2021). On the very limited ability of actors (in this instance, mainly domestic elites) to instigate protest activities without the involvement of locally embedded actors and compelling issues, see also Sarah J. Lockwood, "Can People Be Manipulated to Protest?," *Political Violence at a Glance* (blog), August 10, 2022, https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2022/08/10/can-people-be-manipulated-to-protest/.

381 Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, "Drop Your Weapons: When and Why Civil Resistance Works," *Foreign Affairs* 93 (2014); Dan Slater, "Revolutions, Crackdowns, and Quiescence: Communal Elites and Democratic Mobilization in Southeast Asia," *American Journal of Sociology* 115, no. 1 (July 2009): pp. 203–54, https://doi.org/10.1086/597796; Sabine C. Carey, "The Dynamic Relationship Between Protest and Repression," *Political Research Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (March 2006): pp. 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290605900101.

# Finding 3: Efforts to support civil society tend to lack strategic direction.

## 3.1. Donors typically lack a clear political strategy to guide their actions on civil society support toward greater immediate impact.

A recurrent theme across the examined cases is that crises erupted unexpectedly or developed in directions that donors did not foresee. They were therefore left with an incomplete understanding of how the situation would further develop, which scenarios could offer sustainable pathways out of the crisis and what the changing circumstances meant for their own political aims in the country in question. As donors' political priorities and preferred outcomes tended to only crystallize after a certain delay, it remained unclear during critical phases of the considered crises what roles different civil society actors could play in achieving donors' goals, resulting in a hesitant approach. Common delays and deficiencies in formulating a clear strategic approach to a (new) crisis are not specific to civil society support alone, and stem from broader structural, procedural and political reasons. Improvements would require clear leadership from the top, a better balancing of staff resources and policy priorities, and a better utilization of existing analytical and strategic planning tools.[382]

**Most donor representatives saw themselves as working in crisis environments, but not necessarily on crisis resolution.**

Moreover, the case studies show a disconnect between the presumed relevance of civil society support as an instrument of crisis mitigation and the reality of how efforts to support such actors in crisis settings are typically designed and implemented. Most donor organization representatives engaging with civil society actors in the examined cases clearly saw themselves as working in crisis environments, but not necessarily on crisis resolution. Fundamentally, efforts to support civil society actors and protect civic space are widely seen as an end in itself and a contribution to a functioning democracy in the long term, rather than as part of a political strategy of stabilization. While it is possible to justify such an approach (certainly in contrast with the alternative of inaction), it arguably amounts to a missed opportunity to help shape developments during crucial periods in which genuine progress toward inclusive governance may actually be possible.

Ultimately, none of the cases examined here featured a concerted donor effort that systematically combined support for civil society actors with other stabilization instruments and diplomatic initiatives to address incumbent political elites. Especially the latter aspect was also stressed repeatedly by civil society activists across the examined cases, who felt that donor governments' interactions at the political leadership level were not always in tune with their own efforts (with Lebanon perhaps providing the starkest example). Any hopes to substantially influence acute crisis dynamics through activities in this area in the absence of a more strategic approach seem misguided.

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382  Philipp Rotmann, Melissa Li and Sofie Lilli Stoffel, "Follow the Money: Investing in Crisis Prevention," Global Public Policy Institute, October 2021, https://followthemoney.gppi.net/.

## 3.2. Making programming decisions at the level of individual projects renders it difficult to gear portfolios toward a unified purpose.

Even in cases where donors have a fairly clear sense of their political priorities and their preferred pathway toward crisis resolution, prevailing programming logics make it difficult to consistently pursue political objectives. In particular, the common practice of making funding decisions only or mostly at the level of individual projects means that 'theories of change' are also usually discussed at this level. This leads to portfolios composed of various projects that are individually sensible but are rarely geared toward a specific goal, rendering them less effective. For example, while donors clearly saw the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement in Mali as central to their political strategy in the country, only a fraction of their projects with civil society partners had a clear connection to this process. Important potential impact pathways (such as strengthening groups that could have pressured the government into implementing some of the agreement's key provisions) remained largely unaddressed.

More generally, project-driven programming can lead to the spread of resources over various, often relatively small initiatives. Each of these efforts may have a positive incremental effect, but tend to have little impact at the systemic level, especially in the short term. Opportunities to create synergies across projects also often remain under-exploited. In Lebanon, for example, the activities of independent media organizations, investigative journalists and transparency NGOs are arguably highly complementary, but donors have mostly engaged with each of these actors individually and not played a discernible role in galvanizing this emerging ecosystem.

## 3.3. Potential synergies between donors with compatible political objectives are rarely leveraged effectively.

The fragmentation of efforts to support civil society is exacerbated by the large number of actors involved on the donor side, both across and within donor countries. In the case of Germany, relevant actors who draw directly from state funding include the German Federal Foreign Office and its network of embassies, the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the state-owned implementers for development (GIZ) and financial cooperation (KfW), as well as the political foundations. Of those, BMZ, GIZ and KfW often engage with civil society organizations in a way that is primarily implementation-oriented and tends to de-emphasize political aspects, notwithstanding a frequent focus on 'governance' issues that are relevant to the questions of crisis prevention and resolution in focus here. Though explicitly independent from the German government, the political foundations are key actors with regard to engaging with local political parties and political civil society actors on issues that are also central to these concerns.

The German model – with its multiplicity of actors and rather unique feature of political foundations – has clear strengths, notably in terms of the foundations' specific expertise in working with civil society actors and their considerable degree of local embeddedness (see also below). However, it is also apparent that the various organizations tend to lack a detailed understanding of each other's activities in the same country, making it difficult to capitalize on complementarities. Not only do the

examined cases indicate little coordination and alignment across organizations on strategy processes, portfolio planning and crisis response activities, but also reveal very limited sharing of resources such as local actor analyses that all of them require. In addition to capacity issues, data sensitivity concerns are sometimes cited as an obstacle to greater collaboration – but this is arguably a challenge that could be addressed with much less effort than better resource sharing could save.

Across different donor countries, this issue is even more pronounced. The European Union has played a significant role in all of the cases considered here, both as a platform for policy coordination and as an actor in its own right, including through funding the European Endowment for Democracy. Still, many activities remain driven by individual states without much mutual transparency. Where there are exceptions to this finding, such as the multilateral 3RF program in Lebanon, it is perhaps no coincidence that these initiatives have mostly involved civil society actors in a consultative capacity, lending the effort a rather technocratic character and avoiding potentially controversial political positions on which donors themselves may not be fully aligned.

## Finding 4: Limited real-time analysis and inflexible processes hinder rapid responses to dynamic crisis situations.

### 4.1. Limited or outdated donor understandings of local actor landscapes and socio-political dynamics make it difficult to identify relevant impact pathways and potential partners.

**All of the cases considered here highlight the importance of contingency planning, also for what are seemingly low-probability trajectories.**

As already noted, a reason why donors have often struggled to more strategically approach civil society support is that they were confronted with crisis dynamics that they did not fully expect and that they also tended to lack a detailed understanding of different civil society actors' roles in these dynamics. The former aspect speaks to broader issues around investments into foresight capacities as well into access to granular local political analysis that cannot be addressed in detail in this study.[383] However, one point worth stressing is that all of the cases considered here highlight the importance of contingency planning, also for what are seemingly low-probability trajectories – in particular Belarus and Sudan, where donors had been justifiably skeptical about the likelihood and prospects of a large-scale public uprising and therefore found themselves mostly unprepared to react to it.

More specifically on donors' understanding of civil society landscapes, many organizations largely rely on infrequent mapping exercises that are easily overtaken by events in a dynamic crisis situation. Several donor organizations interviewed for

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383 On foresight and forecasting, see Sarah Bressan and Philipp Rotmann, "Looking Ahead: Foresight for Crisis Prevention," *EU LISTCO Policy Paper Series,* no. 3 (2019), https://gppi.net/media/bressan_rotmann_2019_ EU-LISTCO-POLICY-PAPERS_03.pdf. On local political analysis, see Abigail Watson and Philipp Rotmann, "Local Political Analysis for Stabilization and Peacebuilding," forthcoming with the Global Public Policy Institute.

this study noted that their resources in this regard were several years old and that they were themselves skeptical about whether these exercises were still accurate. Especially in smaller organizations, such formal instruments are often supplemented by the knowledge of individuals within the donor's staff lists and their respective networks, sometimes including local staff who are also privately involved in civil society groups. This knowledge is a highly valuable resource that should arguably be used more systematically, ideally also across organizations (see below). However, it can be susceptible to inadvertent biases and reinforce a tendency to work with partners who are already close to the respective donor organization, and may not represent the most innovative or relevant actors. Conversely, donors have often found it difficult to establish relations with civil society actors deviating from the model of a formalized civil society organization, such as the Neighborhood Resistance Committees in Sudan, bloggers in Mali or 'ITshniks' in Belarus.

## 4.2. Despite considerable pragmatism and creativity at the ground level, donors usually take too long to adjust to changes in local circumstances.

The structures and processes of most donor organizations working with civil society actors are geared toward regular funding and project cycles rather than to dealing with dynamic crisis situations in an agile fashion. Their ability to rapidly initiate new activities in response to changing circumstances is therefore constrained, even if pragmatic solutions are sometimes found within running projects. Donor governments have recognized this issue and, to some extent, have worked to address it. At the European level, the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy, whose comparatively flexible processes and funding modalities have proven helpful in several of the examined cases, was an important step in this regard. Other organizations (including government ministries) have also tried to find flexible solutions within their established structures. However, if donors develop such solutions on a case-by-case basis rather than establishing options that can be activated on very short notice, the delay required to set up the new, flexible scheme may undermine its entire purpose (as shown in the Belarus case). In the considered case studies, these procedural obstacles were mostly secondary to the more fundamental issue of lacking a political strategy for civil society support, which would have been necessary to drive relevant short-term initiatives in the first place. However, if donors do seek to develop related activities as a more relevant instrument of stabilization policy, these issues are likely to become more critical.

These observations also relate to broader issues regarding the duration and complexity of application processes and the volume of formal reporting requirements, which various civil society representatives cited as a challenge of working with donors. These issues pose a particular hurdle for small as well as new groups. This is a clear concern with regard to civil society's envisaged role as a driver of inclusiveness and innovation. Encouraging partnerships with more established groups or international NGOs is one possible solution, but this approach can also make newer groups more dependent on the established circles. While various donors also seek to build civil society capacity specifically to enable groups to better navigate formal requirements, the question remains whether they could further simplify the requirements themselves to make funding more accessible.

Regarding ongoing activities, an immediate imperative is to ensure that civil society actors' engagement with donors does not expose them to unnecessary risks even in the event of adverse developments regarding civic space and the local political environment. There is widespread sensitivity to this issue among the donors interviewed for this study, manifesting itself, for instance, in cautious online communication about their collaboration with civil society actors or in pragmatic adjustments to planned activities. Nevertheless, the case of Belarus serves as a cautionary example in this regard, as the post-election crackdown saw some civil society organizations prosecuted with the help of documents that they had retained due to donor reporting requirements. This suggests a need to further strengthen safeguards and to even more critically review the suitability of standard processes and formats for acute crisis settings.

## Recommendations to Donors

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that support to civil society could be a relevant instrument for donors seeking to help resolve crises and foster sustainable stabilization – at least in settings where some basic conditions are in place, as discussed in the final section of this chapter. However, even where circumstances are favorable, the current approach to civil society support is likely to prove inadequate for achieving impact on immediate crisis dynamics, and would need to be significantly enhanced.

More specifically, six recommendations emerge from the analysis.

### 1. Engage civil society actors in fragile settings as part of a broader political strategy.

Consider carefully which overarching political goals will guide the overall approach to a given context, which plausible trajectories out of a local crisis situation appear politically desirable within this framework, and how the support to specific civil society actors will make these trajectories more likely. To do so, consider options for civil society support in conjunction with engagement with incumbent elites as well as other instruments of stabilization policy. Ascertain that the strategy for supporting civil society resonates with local dynamics and priorities rather than imposing external templates.

### 2. Establish flexible funding and project approval mechanisms for crisis settings.

Consider reserving a budget share for new initiatives with civil society actors immediately related to acute crisis situations (with flexibility to use these funds in different countries, as needs and opportunities arise). Establish significantly simplified application, assessment and approval processes for projects funded through these resources. Regarding approval mechanisms, focus on ascertaining strategic relevance, mitigating the risk of major unintended effects on crisis dynamics and protecting the safety of civil society partners, while reducing administrative requirements as

much as possible. While balancing such propositions with necessary compliance and documentation rules will be challenging for many organizations, dedicated civil society funders seem institutionally much more likely to meet these objectives than multi-purpose funders or ministerial bureaucracies.

## 3. Design measures to support civil society in crisis contexts at the country/ portfolio level.

To make the greatest possible difference with limited resources, select partners and projects in such a way that the overall portfolio reflects the defined strategic political aims. Ideally, identify bundles of initiatives that are complementary and mutually reinforce one another beyond each individual project. Initiatives that strengthen relations between different civil society actors can be highly valuable, but be wary of creating artificial institutional structures (such as umbrella organizations) that may hinder inclusion and dynamism. While they can initially generate additional work, such efforts can be supported by pragmatic tools. A concrete example of such a tool that follows the four-step logic shown in Figure 2 is provided along with this study. Designing portfolios in this fashion will also help streamline activities and reduce ongoing efforts on projects with low impact or unclear strategic relevance.

Figure 2: Steps to Strategically Develop a Portfolio of Measures to Support Civil Society Actors in Acute Crises



1. Analysis of the crisis context
2. Analysis of civil society actors and their impact pathways
3. Analysis of external actors and development of concrete civil society goals
4. Development of measures
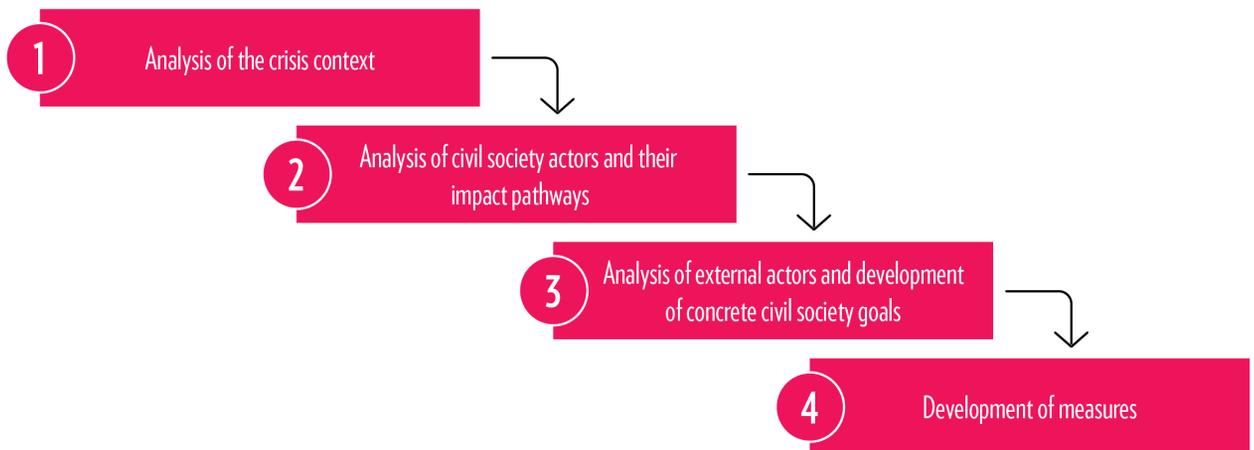
## 4. Invest in (closer to) real-time, context-specific knowledge to inform civil society-related activities.

Civil society support is an area where achieving significant impact and averting unintended consequences requires substantial contextual knowledge. In addition to the expertise of each organization's own staff, cultivating networks of (ideally local) experts to provide targeted input at key stages of program design as well as sharing analyses with like-minded partners (also see below) are efficient approaches to access

additional know-how when needed. Despite the importance of trusted key individuals, continuously broadening this network and ensuring diversity of perspectives is critical to avoid blind spots and biases.

## 5. Strengthen exchange and strategic coordination on civil society activities across organizations from the same country, as well as among donors with compatible objectives.

While strong informal networks often exist between relevant actors, more structured formats for coordination could further reduce gaps and duplications between portfolios and allow for greater resource sharing (e.g., strategic priorities, analyses of local actor constellations). In the German case, there is potential to generate synergies from closer collaboration between the German Federal Foreign Office and political foundations without compromising the latter's independence. Given that many projects with civil society involvement and relevance for political stabilization are conducted by development cooperation actors (in the German case, namely BMZ, GIZ and KfW), interactions with development organizations should also be strengthened, particularly with regard to aligning on priorities and sharing relevant resources and knowledge. In settings where civil society support emerges as an important instrument for achieving key political objectives, this should also be reflected in the interactions among like-minded donor countries. While collaboration at the level of strategic portfolio planning may often prove politically challenging, improved mutual transparency on relevant activities and the sharing of resources could already substantially help to increase impact toward common objectives.

## 6. Provide units and staff members involved in the implementation of civil society projects with pragmatic guidance on steps to take in case of sudden changes to the local situation.

This guidance should place particular emphasis on helping avert immediate threats to civil society partners such as violent repression or arrests that may arise from a sudden political crackdown, but also address opportunities that a dynamically changing situation may present. Take immediate action to strengthen preparedness as soon as there are signs of an intensification of crisis dynamics. If an acute crisis indeed materializes, focus first on supporting partners' emergency measures as much as possible. In this context, ensure that communication on the possibilities and limitations of support is honest and transparent in order to avoid raising expectations that donors may not be able to fulfil. Once the immediate crisis situation has subsided, adjust ongoing activities and risk management. In the medium term, strategically develop the project portfolio corresponding to the new context. Examples of relevant measures in each phase are provided in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Key Steps in the Phases of an Acute Crisis Response

| When signs of impending acute crisis accumulate | When acute crisis materializes | As soon as immediate emergency situation has subsided | In the medium-term |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Strengthen preparedness** | **Support partners' emergency measures** | **Adjust ongoing activities and risk management** | **Strategically adjust project portfolio to new context** |
| • Internally discuss crisis scenarios and implications for civil society partners | • Transparently communicate possibilities and limitations of assistance | • Decide on short-term approach for each ongoing activity (continuation, significant adjustment, suspension) | • Decide on further approach to suspended projects |
| • Align on available measures to support partners' protection against personal harm (e.g. political support, assistance with emergency logistics) | • Align with partners on immediate risk mitigation in ongoing activitie | • For continuing projects: ask partners to review adequacy of measures to mitigate risks | • Update aims and priorities for civil society support and develop portfolio accordingly |
| • Contact partners for their assessment of the situation and to align on emergency communication | | • Assess whether new, specifically crisis-related projects can and should be initiated | |

# Limitations and Outlook

The above recommendations focus on making donor engagement with civil society actors in crisis settings more strategic. However, this should not distract from the fact that this study also fundamentally highlights the limitations of such efforts as an instrument of stabilization policy. Although the examined cases show how aspects of donors' own approaches in Belarus, Sudan, Lebanon, and Mali have hindered their ability to influence crisis dynamics, none of the case studies conclude that more or different support to civil society actors in itself would have likely resulted in a substantially different crisis trajectory.

This does not imply that such efforts are irrelevant – indeed, helping civil society actors survive and maintain a degree of vibrancy as they work toward societal change in the face of often extremely challenging circumstances is an important accomplishment in its own right and should not be understated. However, what it does mean is that civil society support should not be the principal or only instrument used to address crisis contexts, but should always be seen as one part of a broader stabilization toolkit to be deployed on the basis of a coherent strategy.

Moreover, civil society support is an instrument whose usefulness is particularly dependent upon local circumstances. Ultimately, whether and under which conditions the proposed approach for strategic civil society support will successfully advance crisis mitigation objectives is a question that cannot be answered empirically at this point, as no donor has seriously implemented it. Still, it seems clear from the case studies and the counterfactual discussions that even the most well-designed endeavor can only be promising if two basic conditions are in place:

**1.** There are local civil society actors with strong legitimacy in at least substantial constituencies and a certain degree of organizational capacity;

**2.** At least some of the civil society actors are open to the idea of accepting substantial foreign support.

> **Civil society support is an instrument whose usefulness is particularly dependent upon local circumstances.**

Where either of these basic conditions are lacking, preserving civic space for activities toward long-term change may indeed be the most that donors can hope for. Where both conditions are in place, the level of ambition and focus of support should still account for the political context: In a more permissive environment, donors can adopt a more ambitious civil society strategy aimed at actively influencing crisis dynamics, while extremely repressive environments may only allow more defensive support to civil society groups and the protection of activists. Even in cases where options are limited to such defensive measures, donor efforts would benefit from defining this objective in clear terms and systematically designing activities on this basis. The steps recommended in this study can therefore help donors improve their engagement with civil society in general, in addition to opening up the possibility of leveraging these activities for stabilization purposes where the conditions are right.