

DIVERSE INFLUENCING APPROACHES IN CLOSING CIVIC SPACE CONTEXTS

EXPERIENCES FROM OXFAM AND PARTNERS

APRIL 2025 - FOR EXTERNAL USE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a global context of constant and multiple political and humanitarian crises, we are witnessing situations of increasing suffering and human rights violations in multiple countries where civic space has been closed or is closing. Some of these crises are at the forefront of media and governments' attention – but also aid actors, while others may fade into the background. **Civil society actors must constantly adapt to navigate complex and dangerous contexts and continue to influence stakeholders within and outside their countries.**

This paper is intended for allies and donors to share our lessons and recommendations and to enable dialogue with them on diverse strategies used to influence change in contexts of closing or closed civic space. **We present here a summary of an in-depth learning exercise conducted in 2024 in five countries where Oxfam is working, across four different regions.** A mix of focus groups and interviews with partners, allies, and staff was conducted, and each country team developed its own documentation, while contributing to an overarching learning document, from which this short paper was extracted. According to [Civicus monitoring](#), two of the countries studied are labelled 'closed', two 'repressed', and one 'obstructed'.

The purpose of the exercise was to **identify diverse influencing strategies** that civil society actors, including Oxfam, have been using or testing with key stakeholders to support, protect, or reopen spaces for civic participation, freedom of expression, and collective action.

We therefore wanted to learn with Oxfam staff and partners how they adjust their strategies to advocate for policies, practices, and structural changes within the contexts in which we work on social justice and democratic values, and how to maintain visibility with international community and institutional / governmental actors. We also wanted to highlight how they can be supported effectively by the international community and institutional/governmental actors. We did not aim to evaluate the success of every strategy, but rather to collate and discuss the strategies being used and their adaptation.

Safety and security are two paramount principles applied throughout the learning exercise. To protect the anonymity of staff and partners, the names of countries or direct references to initiatives have been left out of this summary paper. We acknowledge that all contexts we studied are very different and that civil society organisations and communities are not homogeneous. However, the strategies, considerations, and recommendations distilled here are applicable (with adaptation) in different contexts where civic space has been closing, jeopardising the essence of civil society's role and the lives of their staff and activists.

Following this introduction, we describe the different influencing strategies that emerged from interviews, discussions, and document reviews (section 2). Next, we draw the reader's attention to critical considerations when working in closed or closing contexts and provide associated recommendations for action (section 3). We conclude the paper with a set of lessons learned from the learning process (section 4).

2. INFLUENCING IN DIVERSE WAYS

For Oxfam, 'influencing' refers to a range of systematic efforts to bring about changes in the structural causes of poverty and injustice, which includes changes in unequal gender and power relationships, policy, practice, attitudes, behaviours, and social norms. Therefore, influencing includes different interventions, at the local level with communities, and at national, regional, and global levels with powerholders and brokers, guided by power analysis in each context.

In contexts where outspoken and public campaigning and advocacy with high visibility can be difficult and implies severe risks to the safety and security of activists, we wanted to explore the diverse ways in which we are still able to do some influencing work even in challenging contexts. These are not necessarily new, but all have been adapted to challenging contexts with the knowledge and hard work of staff and partners, with a view to mitigating risks but also learning how to adapt while maintaining a focus on values, and long-term change objectives.



Working inside and outside the country

This strategy involves working within the country on programmes with local partners while using Oxfam's external connections and network of former staff, access, legitimacy, and reputation as levers to influence multilateral institutions and external governments (e.g. EU and European national states Lobby Tours, US Congress Lobby), working with Oxfam branches and teams strategically located in Brussels, Geneva, Washington, etc. It is always preferable to ensure our partners can join delegations and lobby tours and are supported to put forward evidence and clear demands to institutional powerholders. This takes support and accompaniment from Oxfam, but also reliance on their strong network and relationships. The success of this strategy also requires having not only the support of country specialists and delegations within the EU or regional institutions (African Union, ASEAN, SICA, for example), but also engagement with lawmakers and politicians of government members of these institutions.



Shift targets and narratives as spaces evolve

When it becomes too dangerous to advocate privately and/or publicly with decision-makers (politicians, powerful private companies with strong government protection, etc), organisations may have to work with other stakeholders, either as targets of influencing themselves or as intermediaries, if they are better placed to influence others. For example, and depending on the context, allies could be religious leaders, local chiefs, or even members of the judiciary.

In other situations, if the priority becomes shifting the negative narratives about civil society with the public, the target may become general publics,

and INGOs/NGOs may be supporting local social movements, youth or women's rights organizations that aim to assert their legitimacy and promote an alternative to the dominant narrative. For instance, in some contexts, a values-based narrative, communicated via storytelling, has been helping to build trust and cohesion within civil society first, before dissemination with the public. Therefore, beyond raising awareness, working on narratives aims to redefine the relationships of organisations with each other and their communities.

As part of shifting targets, prioritizing informal spaces with like-minded actors to deepen shared understanding of challenges, hear each other out and build trust, solidarity and exchange knowledge can go a long way in aligning values and agendas, making loose coalitions stronger and more ready to act together. For example, in some situations, bringing exiled organisations together with organisations still working in the country, and creating a safe space for dialogue has been critical to alleviate tensions and agree on common agendas.

In some contexts, some spaces may still be open with influential actors outside the state and at the local level with powerful stakeholders. It is important to keep reviewing power analysis and be clear about who to engage with and not, and why. Likewise, some topics can be acceptable to address for some groups of stakeholders and not for others. Understanding the political economy but also social and cultural biases in the context, helps identify entry points for dialogues between civil society and powerful actors.

When risks are too high to target national level institutions and powerholders, shifting to regional influencing can be more advantageous, if regional spaces and actors carry weight, but it is also important to constantly search for other means of action (via diplomacy, donors, etc.).



Programming as an effective way of influencing longer term change

Long-term development programmes can offer opportunities to influence practices and social norms at the community level, when outspoken advocacy and campaign strategies are difficult to implement. Oxfam may adopt operational neutrality in programmatic interventions to retain its presence at the local level and when they are bound by a broad MoU with the government/regime. If the agreements with government authorities require very specific submission of programme design and activities, certain thematic 'entry points' could be considered politically safer than others (for example humanitarian assistance, sustainable agriculture, or even gender). Long-term programme development work can contribute to strengthening future influencing work by focusing on core organizational capacity.



Strengthening the localisation agenda

Locally led development is now a broadly accepted approach in INGOs and donor circles. Various platforms gathering stakeholders from local to global levels, such as the [Grand Bargain](#) or the [Ringo](#) project, have developed strong arguments on power and resources shifting towards locally led partnerships and solutions. This has helped INGOs operating in closed or closing contexts to make the case for more adaptive practices regarding local partners' funding, decision making on programme design and delivery, and for changes in monitoring and evaluation practices.

Many INGOs have supported influencing at the local level through local actors and movements for years but now have a more public commitment to the localisation agenda, including accelerating shifting power to local partners. For instance, in Oxfam, there has been important investments in strengthening core capacities of women's rights organisations at the national and local levels, standing by their fights against gender-based violence and regressive patriarchal norms, and making more visible the contributions they make to communities' social cohesion and well-being. Some INGOs also emphasize more the need for care and self-care and the importance of managing risks without transferring them to local entities.



Diverse forms of Partnerships

Oxfam has been working with local implementing partners, strategic partnerships and consortium partners as the main ways to deliver change for decades. In many programmes and countries, gender and power analysis provide evidence how women's rights organisations and feminist activists have been targeted, and the backlash against women's rights. The commitment to [feminist principles](#) has therefore broadened how Oxfam is defining but also engaging in partnerships.

In closing or closed contexts, working with broad alliances or multi-stakeholder platforms can help deflect scrutiny applied to INGOs at the national level on sensitive issues such as land rights or corruption linked to extractive industries. In very closed contexts, the engagement must remain somewhat informal, less public, and based on principles of confidentiality, mutual trust, and sharing of risks. The influencing is more subtle and leads more to learning and sharing experiences rather than hard hitting lobbying. It also leads to building solidarity and long-term commitment to collaboration.

At the national and local level, leveraging some donors' consortium models can lead to powerful diverse partnerships, where local actors complement each other and are in the driving seat (lead the consortium, implement interventions, but also design influencing strategies), while Oxfam can take a technical support role to strengthen capacities of local actors to engage directly with donors and powerbrokers. Even if programmes implemented under these partnerships do not directly aim at protecting or expanding civic spaces, they can definitely have a strong positive impact on strengthening civil society actors and supporting their sustainability.

In less closed contexts, participating in large movements and alliances helps connect local struggles to global campaigns and diffuse the attention on one specific actor.



Producing evidence-based data

When direct political programming on human rights or social justice becomes impossible, some organizations resort to shifting gears and focus on research, partnering with academic outfits with strong credibility.

Rigorously led research can divert scrutiny and limit threats of defamation.

Accessing public data can also be a challenge, either because it is not made available or it is not credible – and therefore cannot be used for advocacy or to hold governments to account. Think tanks and CSOs that collect their own data, and evidence can become knowledge brokers and indirect advocates, sharing it with academics or consultants who are seen as publicly more legitimate, and engaging in formal and informal policy dialogues.

Conducting research with universities is also a good way to engage with youth and students and raise their awareness of rights. Strong research needs to be matched by professional communication that strategically looks at target audiences and determines what messages are most effective through what channels. ‘Educational’ non-branded content may be the safest way to build support but also build capacity for others to relay messages or counter misinformation.



Alternative and digital media

Some organizations have developed new competencies in participatory media as ways to empower communities, amplify their messages in a more authentic way, but also as an alternative to more visible (and branded) campaign and advocacy practices, such as research reports and policy briefs. Participatory filmmaking and documentaries as well as individuals’ blogs/creative messages can be used and disseminated to the public in contexts where some spaces remain open, and not all media is censored.

Social organizations are increasingly turning to digital platforms to amplify their voices and impact. This growing trend, accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic, is crucial, especially for engaging younger generations, even with the inherent risks.

More traditional movements and groups, notably feminist activists, are aware of the need to unite their views and voices on social media to avoid fragmentation, but also to amplify the voices of ‘ordinary’ people.

Online spaces, however, are increasingly restricted and there are inherent risks for activists to post stories, articles, and photos that could identify them and put them at risk of being prosecuted or harassed. There are also risks of infiltration and hacking for groups or organisations using less secure platforms to exchange and store sensitive information.

Multiple oppressive governments have understood the power of mobilization of social media platforms, especially before and during elections, and frequently forbid or limit access to them. Slowing down, turning off internet, or criminalizing the use of VPN during unrest or when they want to control flows of information is now very common. Online activists are also tracked and regularly persecuted.

It is therefore essential to support partners and allies, as well as staff, with context-specific information on digital security threats, tools, and tactics to manage risks.

3. CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Navigating closing and closed civic spaces is the 'new' normal. The diversity of the influencing strategies illustrated above must be considered as an integral part of how civil society organisations work, and each one is valid in itself.

Below are a set of critical considerations for allies and donors, each followed by a set of recommended actions.

Oxfam's role and added value



Standing by in solidarity with local civil society goes hand in hand with supporting them in navigating their contexts in practical ways:

Context and power analysis: Local organisations are experts in their own context but may need simple tools to monitor political changes from the local to the national levels, or methodologies on how to use **collective understanding of power dynamics among stakeholders** to make decisions and spot opportunities for influencing.

Technical capacity: Again, local staff of organisations have tremendous skills and knowledge but often request support and tools on **influencing** approaches as well as thematic knowledge, and how various thematic areas intersect. They also seek support on **risk management and mitigation** for both on-the-ground activities and digital communication and data management.

Gather evidence and communicate: Some organisations defer to specialist human rights organisations or women's rights organisations to help them document human rights violations and impacts on people and assess how best **to frame and disseminate facts and testimonials** to ensure safety for people and organisations, making decisions about using names and brands strategically.

Unrestricted core and flexible funding: When organisations are financially stable and their leaders feel safe – both personally and for their families – **their capacity to influence is enhanced**. For organisations working in restrictive civic spaces, a significant requirement is access to flexible funds for logistical and legal assistance, quick adaptation to the volatile context, response to community and family needs, and leveraging sudden opportunities. Only then can organisations and their staff build the resilience necessary to pursue their mission.

Civil society organizations value partnerships of mutual learning, exchange of technical expertise, and flexible funding

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ① **Adopt a holistic approach to supporting civil society organisations:** A strong civil society is essential as a precondition for long-term social change. Therefore, it is necessary to prioritize **organisational development** of civil society actors, and their networks made vulnerable by adverse conditions. This **includes all the needs and requirements mentioned above**. If organisations, their staff, and the networks and coalitions they form are in constant turmoil, they cannot foster positive change for others. In addition, political crises are usually accompanied by other consequences of civic space closure, such as humanitarian, social and economic with a multitude of needs, that require flexible funding terms and catering to individual care needs. Mainstreaming 'civic space' in donors' strategies - or better yet, setting up stand-alone programmes - makes this holistic approach more feasible.
- ① **Maintain investment in risk mitigation and digital security:** Human and financial resources are essential to anticipate and manage risks and to ensure physical, legal, and digital security. This helps **mitigate regressive legislation and surveillance techniques**. Efforts need to be pursued to further join up thinking about how technologies and digital civic space can and should be leveraged for influencing in closing and closed contexts.

Ways of working



Adaptive ways of working aligned with a decolonial and feminist approach

With circumstances and levels of risks changing on a daily basis - and at times when the urgency of the humanitarian response poses dilemma in the ambition to shift power - it is essential to revisit and adjust how to work and collaborate with civil society organisations.

Moving from management to accompaniment and mentoring helps build equal trusting partnerships: This approach has proven effective in these contexts, where powerful actors assert their dominance through divide-and-conquer tactics. It enables local actors to conduct their own analysis and develop strategic interventions based on their understanding of how change happens. It also builds trust among partners and with the overseeing INGO/donor, as it fosters transparent and ongoing dialogue. It requires lighter and more flexible donor updating processes and reporting requirements, in terms of level of detail, frequency, and partners' information shared.

Well-being of staff and partners is as important as structure and programmes: When repression and violence become the norm, and when activists spend months or even years in exile under precarious conditions and multiple sources of stress (isolation, xenophobia, financial insecurity, fear, and mistrust), it is of the utmost importance to support both the structural organizational needs (establishing a status abroad, setting up office, physical and digital security, funding programmes, etc.) as well as **the well-being and psychosocial needs** of staff and their beneficiaries. Both require significant financial support and open, responsive ways of managing relationships and contractual commitments.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ✓ **Provide flexible operational funding and oversight:** To help civil society organisations exercise their role as agents of change, it is necessary to **address and resource all the different challenges that affect them**, considering the personal, institutional, operational, strategic, and security dimensions. In addition, flexible, operational day-to-day programme management is the only way to effectively work in shrinking civic spaces, and generic donor and internal audits requirements often do not apply or need to be waived. While following agreed-upon accountability principles, teams working on the ground need to be trusted to make their own decisions to stop or continue their activities and adjust budget allocation accordingly.
- ✓ **Support coalitions and solidarity platforms:** in closed and closing civic space, organisations tend to withdraw from coalitions for fear of being targeted by association. However, **joining forces and breaking silos created by fear is required to survive but also to amplify collective impact**. Creating safe spaces for partners and allies to engage in debates and identify what prevents genuine collaborations allows them to come up with **areas of compatibility and support their well-being** while acknowledging their differences. Members of these coalitions and platforms may be located inside or outside the countries they support.

Measuring impact



Understand and value different dimensions of 'impact'

For each context, it is necessary to manage expectations and agree collectively on what is 'possible', and how to measure change. This takes a planned and intentional process, and may involve quick 'continue, pause, or stop' decisions based on a collective assessment of progress and risks.

In closing civic spaces, 'progress' may be equal to 'what is possible': This may require accepting that at times progress will be uneven and reflecting this accordingly through quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It could include measurements that focus more on process and consider knowledge production and dissemination as part of impact measurement.

Sharing learnings inspires solidarity: It can also enable practical suggestions. This is particularly important for sensitive issues and for marginalized groups, such as women, indigenous/ethnic/religious minorities, as well as groups with diverse identities based on sex, gender preferences, and age.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- ✓ **Enable flexible and adaptive Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL):** To measure change in policies and practice realistically, it is necessary to adopt a MEAL framework that fully considers the challenges of the context. This includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches and flexible periodic reviews of short- to medium-term results against planned achievements.
- ✓ **Value continuous documentation as part of the learning:** It is important to keep track of adjustments made during the implementation of programme and influencing activities, as these reflect emerging priorities for influencing or new entry points that are grounded in the reality of the population under an oppressive government or in exile.
- ✓ **Promote and invest in safe ways to share learning and lived experiences:** Staff and partners value the sharing of lived experiences and understand the importance of taking time to reflect, individually and collectively, to learn and improve capacity to respond to future crises, mitigating risks while seizing opportunities. These processes can also strengthen peer support, understanding and respect of diversity, and solidarity.

4. LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSIONS

The nine-month learning journey was punctuated by reflection moments with various groups of contributors. In addition to the considerations and recommendations above, we conclude with some final lessons that strongly emerged as cross-cutting in the influencing work done in contexts of closing civic space.



Conditions that make Oxfam 'pivot' in these closed contexts

For country teams working in closed or closing contexts, conducting research, context, power, political economy, and risk analysis is entirely embedded in how they work daily, with staff and with partners. This is critical for trust building but also enriches the analysis. Similarly, security protocols and trainings are shared with partners and beyond. Decisions to change programme focus are based on collective analysis of how change could happen in a particular context and how can Oxfam contribute to that change.

Most decisions happen daily, are operational, and require everyone involved to be empowered to make them.

This ability to adapt quickly requires understanding and commitment from top leadership and donors of the need to adopt such a flexible approach, strong local leadership, and consistent communication with key stakeholders about the reality of the operational challenges, while maintaining basic due diligence and financial compliance.

Oxfam's triple mandate – humanitarian, development, and influencing – its size and structure, and its operational presence in many countries where civic space is closing or closed, make risk management extremely complex. In addition, the speed of information dissemination and levels of intelligence gathering of governments can trigger fast chain reactions to global advocacy and campaign messages disseminated elsewhere in the world.

Risk management and mitigation decisions require clear, transparent, and empowering protocols, ideally shared across various levels of decision-making and with donors. The lines can be blurry between strategic and operational decisions, and local leaders should be empowered to make critical decisions quickly.



Risk is managed at different levels



Looking for opportunities in times of crisis and maintaining hope

In closed contexts, hope is survival. Most conversations with partners and staff members during the learning process were very inspiring, showing not just resilience but a positive outlook that change can and will happen.

It is important to celebrate small successes, spot windows of opportunity, and support local actors to innovate and experiment.

In all the contexts we worked in for this learning process, Oxfam has strong credibility: It stands in solidarity with the people and with local partners, even when they must flee the country or when they are directly persecuted, such as journalists and women leaders.

Retaining credibility depends on standing by organisational values and maintaining loyalty to partners and allies. It also takes political commitment, using diplomatic and political connections to defend the rights of partners and providing them with continued technical and financial support.



Hearing and protecting the voices of partners: Standing by our values



Defining success and adjusting expectations

In closed and closing contexts, defining success requires acceptance that we may take one step forward towards an objective one day and two steps backwards the next. Success could mean survival, maintain the status quo, or meet basic daily needs for specific populations. It could also mean small intermediate steps, like the ability to maintain community cohesion through community-led solutions to local problems.

While in closing and closed contexts, the overall vision can remain ambitious, the scenarios to get there must adapt to the reality on the ground. It is therefore wise to move away from rigid logframes and instead retain a Theory of Change that sets pathways for change that can be revisited periodically.

ANNEX – KEY PUBLISHED OXFAM RESOURCES

Oxfam Influencing for Impact guide: A comprehensive guide to help organisations and activists design their influencing strategies, step by step.

Space to be heard: Oxfam's global goals and approach on civic space.

Civic Space Monitoring Tool (EN, SP, FR): Framework to analyse different dimensions of civic space and track trends at local and national levels.

Handbook on Influencing the EU on Civic Space (FR, SP, EN): Outlines ways in which CSOs can effectively influence the EU and its 27 Member States to promote, protect, and enable civic space.

ABOUT OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 21 organizations, working with its partners and allies, reaching out to millions of people around the world. Together, we tackle inequalities to end poverty and injustice, now and in the long term – for an equal future. For further information visit www.oxfam.org

This report was produced by the Civic Space Knowledge Hub, a network to connect, multiply, and amplify Oxfam's work on civic space.

For questions and comments contact [The Civic Space Knowledge Hub](#)