



## [SDDirect COVID-19 Pandemic Blog Series](#)

### **Threats and opportunities for civil society during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Jessie Meaney-Davis (Senior Technical Specialist) and Barry Smith (Principal Consultant: Governance & Inclusive Services), SDDirect, 15 May 2020

***Civil society organisations are playing an indispensable role in the pandemic response, but the context presents real dangers. Civic space, civic rights, citizen voice and civil society resourcing must all be defended. Future resilience to shocks like COVID-19 depends on a robust civil society sector and a fundamental pivot by all sectors in the direction of a more equal, inclusive world – in which active citizenship for all is valued and nurtured.***

**Civil society is mobilising to address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.** Around the world, despite restrictions on movement, expression and assembly, active citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs) and social movements are mobilising quickly and adapting their work to respond to COVID-19, support their communities, share vital information and fight disinformation. They are reaching out to governments and businesses, keeping them informed of the community impacts of the crisis and the specific needs of groups most affected by the pandemic. They are testing out new forms of citizen participation in public policy-making to address the crisis. They are collecting the evidence needed to improve the current response – and respond better to future crises – and they are finding innovative ways of holding governments accountable for their decisions and actions. Human rights and environmental groups are deploying creative tactics to continue their activism, while many organisations, representing women, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ people and other groups that are uniquely impacted by the pandemic, are successfully [advocating for a more inclusive and gender-informed response to the pandemic](#).

**However, government responses to the pandemic threaten to constrain civic space.** Prior to the pandemic, [civic space was already under attack internationally](#). In recent years, many governments have introduced laws and policies that restrict people's freedom of association, their right to peaceful assembly and their participation in policymaking, monitoring and accountability. CSOs have faced greater legal and regulatory limitations on access to funding and advocacy on politically sensitive human rights and environmental issues. Movements and organisations representing the rights of women, LGBTIQ people and indigenous peoples have been experiencing increasing backlash, often violent, from governments, traditionalist or nationalist leaders and extremist groups. As many countries introduce and enforce [new COVID-19 emergency measures](#), these negative trends may be reinforced. It is all the more urgent that national and international actors work together to defend civic space.

**COVID-19 emergency restrictions on civic freedoms could set the scene for a longer-term clampdown on civic voice.** Restrictions on movement and assembly have been introduced in many countries, and sometimes used as cover to suppress the voices of activists and groups. For example in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, [peaceful women's rights demonstrators were arrested](#) for holding an

International Women's Day protest against domestic violence in early March 2020, even though there were no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Kyrgyzstan at the time, and a ban on protests had been lifted. [Reports are increasing of similar abuses](#) where emergency measures have been applied arbitrarily, discriminately, or for political gain. Emergency restrictions in some places may set the scene for further erosion of fundamental rights that will be difficult to reverse.

**Censorship, combined with curbs on information, transparency and freedom of expression, may become entrenched and be used to silence civic voice.** Some states have censored information about coronavirus and governments' handling of the pandemic, and some have restricted access to public information. In China, doctors, citizen journalists and commentators shining a light on the pandemic and the government's response have been [threatened, censored, arrested, put under surveillance, or disappeared](#). Discussion of the pandemic has also been [censored](#) on the popular messaging platform WeChat. In Thailand, officials have targeted whistle-blowers for sharing information about shortages of supplies and related corruption, while other countries, such as Iran, have restricted access to information by [banning print media distribution](#). In Brazil, Mexico and El Salvador, deadlines and requirements for public institutions to respond to [freedom of information requests](#) have been suspended.

**Intrusive public surveillance and policing measures could be expanded and continue beyond the pandemic.** Governments have introduced digital surveillance of citizens to monitor, track and contain the virus. China, South Korea, Italy and Israel have been using smartphone software and/or location data to monitor citizens' movements, and in China citizens' health status is reportedly [colour-coded and shared with police](#). In several Africa countries, where police and military have been given extraordinary powers to enforce lockdown regulations, there have been reports of [excessive violence and abuse by the security forces](#). Such forms of surveillance and social control could persist in some countries after the pandemic, posing a threat to already circumscribed human rights activists and civic groups.

**Emergency executive powers could be extended and abused.** Many governments have declared states of emergency or taken other steps that give increased and sometimes unrestrained powers to the executive branch, with little or no oversight and in some cases no end date clearly specified. In Cambodia, [a new emergency law](#) grants wide-ranging powers to government, and anyone found to be obstructing or noncompliant with the pandemic response could face hefty fines and jail sentences. Since the law was introduced, at least 17 [activists and critics of the regime have been arrested](#), including members of the banned opposition party. In the Philippines, President Duterte, who has been granted broad emergency powers to deal with the pandemic, has said he will order police and military to [shoot anyone who 'creates trouble,'](#) raising concerns that he may use these powers to punish opponents. The proliferation of emergency executive powers is particularly worrying in countries like Ethiopia where [previous emergency decrees have led to widespread human rights abuses](#).

**The global economic downturn threatens the sustainability of CSOs, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.** The COVID-19 crisis is reducing the fundraising income of many CSOs. In April 2020, [a survey by Bond](#) in the UK found that 86% of international non-government organisations were either considering or actively cutting back their overseas programme implementation, including postponement of activities, closing country offices, or limiting income to global programmes. Another [survey](#) of 125 CSOs in low- and middle-income countries found that as of April 2020, two-thirds of CSOs had taken at least one cost-cutting measure, most commonly cutting back services, and almost half of CSOs reported that they would have to close in the next three months unless they secure additional funding. Many local CSOs in low and middle-income

countries, particularly women's rights organisations, disabled people's organisations and organisations representing sexual and gender minorities, were already chronically underfunded before the pandemic. For people who are socially excluded and [disproportionately impacted by the pandemic](#), these organisations are indispensable for inclusive service delivery, the protection of their rights and an effective COVID-19 response. It is likely that new forms of civil society mobilisation around rights and social inclusion may emerge from the crisis. But if local public fundraising, philanthropic donations and aid budgets decline in the medium to long-term, crucial rights-based organisations representing excluded people may face an existential threat.

**What can be done to realise the full potential of civil society's pandemic response and advance longer term change?** Some key messages and recommendations from [civil society representatives](#) and [analysts](#) include:

- In line with international human rights law, COVID-19 emergency measures should be proportional, timebound and subject to regular public review and scrutiny; should be based on good scientific evidence; and must not be arbitrary or discriminatory.
- Governmental, private sector and philanthropic institutions should push back against expansion of restrictions on civil rights and civil society.
- Donors should partner with CSOs, support innovative collaboration among CSOs, and help CSOs to connect with government and private sector pandemic responses.
- Public and private sector donors should prioritise funding and support for organisations in low- and middle-income countries; open channels for more flexible funding of CSOs, including unrestricted funding to support their core operational costs; and sustain funding for vital work that was underway prior to the pandemic.
- International development organisations, businesses and governments should listen closely to civil society and citizen voices at the grassroots to ensure that the response to COVID-19 is relevant, equitable, inclusive and effective.
- In the context of the pandemic, CSOs need to act collectively to defend civic space, promote inclusion and active citizenship, roll out innovative multi-stakeholder partnerships and transform the immediate crisis response into an opportunity for broader systemic change.

Follow [Social Development Direct's COVID-19 blog series](#) for more updates on how the pandemic has impact on from a social development, gender and inclusion perspective different – and how to ensure an inclusive response.