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Stiftung

EU Support to Civil Society and Good Governance

Trends and Challenges

Richard Youngs

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PREFACE



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One of the priorities of the EU's foreign and development policy is to support "good governance". Only through legitimate state institutions can political, economic and social reforms be sustainably implemented. Therefore, good governance is a key factor for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The EU contributes to good governance in third countries through policy dialogue as well as financial and technical assistance. Under the "DICI-Global Europe" instrument, 1.36 billion euros are allocated to the thematic programme on Human Rights and Democracy for the 2021-2027 period. The bulk of the EU's development aid in this regard is channelled directly to state institutions.

At the same time, the EU emphasises that good governance cannot be realised without a strong and independent civil society. Civil actors must be able to actively participate in political decision-making processes and thereby often enjoy a high degree of legitimacy, particularly at the local level. In recent years – in part due to advancing digitalisation and the Covid-19 pandemic – civil activism has become more dynamic and informal. This will require working with lesser-known partners from civil society and adopting a systemic approach.

This publication addresses the role of the EU in supporting civil society for the purpose of promoting good governance. The topic is of central importance, in particular given that civil society is coming under mounting pressure worldwide (keyword: shrinking spaces) at a time when the EU's normative role is frequently challenged by growing autocratisation. How can the different elements of good governance support be defined? How have EU policy instruments evolved over the years? What can be done to make international funding for civil society more effective?

This study provides valuable answers to the above questions and numerous recommendations for the EU and political foundations on how to support civil society. I hope they will be taken into account.

I wish you an interesting read.

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EU Support to Civil Society and Good Governance

Trends and Challenges

Executive Summary

The EU supports civil society worldwide and thereby contributes to strengthening good governance.

This report¹ assesses the role of EU support to civil society as a contribution to improving good governance in third countries. It first unpacks the different elements of support for good governance, distinguishing between its political and apolitical strands. It establishes a framework based around direct and indirect forms of civil society support in the good governance agenda. This serves as a template for assessing EU policy developments and their different levels of political impact.

The analysis then offers a comprehensive overview of EU support to civil society organisations during the 2014 to 2020 multiannual financial framework (MFF), examining ways in which the EU's policy instruments evolved in these years and how effective such civil society support was in advancing the good governance agenda. It next assesses changes to the EU toolbox that are now being introduced for the 2021 to 2027 MFF period, pointing to the improvements but also possible setbacks for civil society support in these new arrangements. The report finds that the EU has introduced a range of improvements to its civil society support to ensure that funds get to a wider range of recipients, in more timely fashion and for initiatives more aligned with local priorities. Yet, there remains considerable scope to increase the quantity and quality of civil society support and a need to give it more political weight in the face of adverse trends in democratic governance around the world.

The report concludes with recommendations for how the EU can improve its civil society support and specific measures the HSF and other foundations could adopt to help meet European objectives. These recommendations argue there is a need to:

- sharpen political support for CSOs at risk in repressive environments;
- fuse direct and indirect approaches to good governance;
- make civil society support more strategic;
- focus on emerging activist initiatives;
- generate local resources; and
- link support for individual CSOs to wider political-structural challenges.

Elements of good governance and civil society

This report assesses the challenges facing EU support to civil society organisations (CSOs). The EU offers considerable support to CSOs in a large number of countries around the world. One of the reasons it does so is the conviction that a strong and independent civic sector is vital for good quality governance. This first section briefly outlines some of the key considerations related to different concepts of good governance and civil society, establishing some conceptual parameters before turning to examine trends in EU civil society support.

Civil society refers to organised entities operating in the space between the individual and family, on the one hand, and the state and political sphere, on the other hand. Civil society bodies include professional advocacy NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) but also other civic organisations like informal activist networks and community organisations.² This report uses the umbrella term of CSOs.

The EU's definition of civil society refers to: "all forms of social action carried out by individuals or groups who are neither connected to, nor managed by, the State."³ In its monitoring of civil society support, the OECD uses the definition: "Any non-profit entity organised on a local, national or international level to pursue shared objectives and ideals, without significant government-controlled participation or representation."⁴

Good governance has long been a contested and complex term, subject to varying interpretations. There are different elements of "good governance" and a key difference between what might be termed its political and apolitical strands. The apolitical notion understands good governance to refer to efficient, rules-based public decision-making and policy implementation. In its most political dimension, good governance is often understood to require good quality democratic participation and accountability and strong protection for human rights.

In the 1990s, the World Bank took a lead role in developing a framework for international support for good governance and offered a relatively apolitical notion of the concept; the bank did not have a remit to press for democratic reforms and operated cooperation programmes in many autocratic states – in these cases, it aimed to improve the efficiency of public administration within such non-democratic confines. Gradually, international organisations embraced more political understandings of good

The term "good governance" is complex and subject to varying interpretations.

governance, on the grounds that improvements in policy-making effectiveness needed to be sustained through open and accountable politics and constitutionally enshrined rights. In donor praxis, the dividing lines between good governance, civil society and democracy support become more blurred.

The Council of Europe has developed twelve principles of good governance: free and fair elections; responsiveness; efficiency and effectiveness; openness and transparency; adherence to the rule of law; ethical conduct; competence and capacity; sustainability and long-term orientation; sound financial management; human rights, cultural diversity and social cohesion; and accountability.⁵ The United Nations suggests good governance has eight major characteristics, being: participatory; consensus-oriented; accountable; transparent; responsive; effective and efficient; equitable and inclusive; and in accordance with the rule of law.⁶ Some individual criteria in these lists can be supported and advanced without touching on the most sensitive political questions related to the nature of political systems. Yet, it would clearly be impossible for any country to meet all the criteria without reasonably good quality democratic politics and strong human rights protection.

The EU has generally adopted a somewhat flexible approach to defining these key terms but has for many years tended to imply in its external policy documents that good governance, democracy and human rights broadly go hand in hand with each other.⁷

Around two-thirds of EU development aid for "good governance" has gone to state institutions.

Linking civil society and good governance. Most EU support for good governance goes to governments and public administration bodies; indeed, around two-thirds of EU development aid for "good governance" has gone to governments and state institutions.⁸ This reflects the fact that much of the EU good governance agenda is concerned with improving the efficiency and capacity of state bodies and government decision-making rather than with the democratic elements of governance. Such aid falls outside this report's remit. Rather, this report is concerned with support specifically for civil society and how this contributes to good governance.

Following from the definitions above, and for the purposes of this analysis, it can be said that civil society support has a **direct and indirect** impact on good governance. This requires a two-level definition of the role that civil society support plays in the good governance agenda:

At the **direct** level: The most directly political elements of support to civil society that aims to enhance respect for democratic norms and human rights, as the leading-edge and most sensitive elements of the good governance agenda.

At the **indirect** level: Support that aims to empower civil society for certain policy objectives that are not expressly about political aims but rather more developmental, economic, educational, health or climate goals. This support can be seen as contribution to good governance in a more indirect sense of strengthening civil society actors to influence public-policy decisions and act as a counter-weight to governmental power through societal engagement, even though it does not directly confront regimes for their overarching governance shortcomings.

The direct and indirect approaches overlap. However, they are not fully in line with one another. It is not certain that all indirect support does actually contribute positively to the broader parameters of the good governance agenda; indeed, this question has been a matter of much debate and contention for many years. Support for CSOs to deliver basic services related to development may in some contexts compensate for dysfunctional state management and make it easier for regimes guilty of bad governance to endure. Many experts have expressed concern that the EU's more technocratic, apolitical forms of good governance support have struggled to have enduring impact.⁹

Assessing the 2014 to 2020 period

This section provides an overview of EU support to civil society around the world in the 2014 to 2020 period aligned with one multiannual financial framework (MFF) cycle. In line with the definitions discussed above, it examines both direct support to CSO capacity and technical assistance that indirectly included engagement with CSOs. It considers evaluations of EU support in this period and how funding trends evolved in both quantitative and qualitative ways.

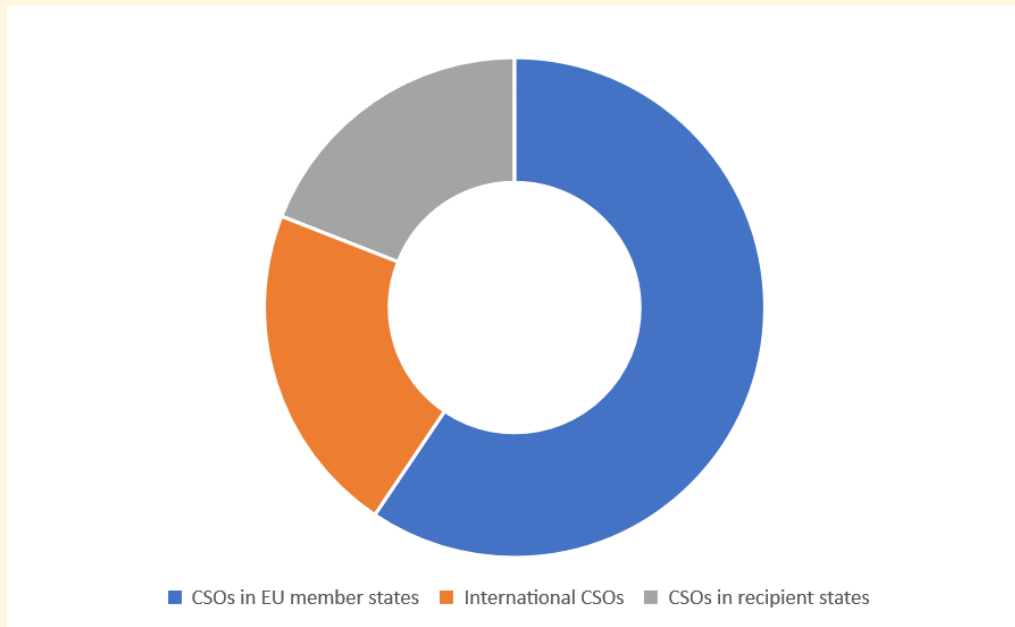
Overarching trends in funding

In recent years, EU financial support to CSOs has increased.

In general, amounts of funding for civil society increased during the 2010s. In absolute terms, the top donors to CSOs were, in order, the US, the European Commission, the UK, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. The amounts of US funds were far greater than any single European donor: in 2017, 7.1 billion dollars of US aid went through or to CSOs compared to 1.9 billion dollars of European Commission aid.¹⁰

In 2017, aid for donor country-based CSOs was 13.5 billion US dollars compared to the much lower amount of 1.4 billion for CSOs based in developing states.¹¹ In 2019, the European Commission channelled 2.1 billion US dollars of its aid through or to CSOs: 18.6 per cent of this went to CSOs in recipient states, 58 per cent to CSOs in EU member states and 21 per cent to the big international CSOs.¹² Funding **through** CSOs was much higher than funding to CSOs for their own capacity-enhancement and political role (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Allocation of 2.1 billion US dollars of European Commission aid toward CSOs in 2019



Source: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/c0ad1f0d-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/5e331623-en&csp=b14d4f60505d057b456dd1730d8fcea3&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=chapter>

Nearly half of all donors' CSO aid was related to social services, especially projects helping advance development goals, a third to humanitarian relief like projects supporting people displaced by conflict; direct political funding, projects aimed at improving individual rights, for instance, was minimal compared to these priorities. OECD data for all DAC donors shows that in 2019 11.4 per cent of Official Development Assistance (ODA) was channelled through CSOs for donor-initiated projects, only 0.1 per cent to CSOs for their own projects and capacities.¹³ The World Bank increased its support for independent monitoring by local civil society groups of the bank's investments.

EU instruments

In broad terms, in the 2010s, EU civil society programmes improved in many crucial ways and kept funding at relatively high levels. This was notable given that other areas of EU good governance policies arguably weakened in this period as the Union moved towards a more realpolitik foreign and security policy.

Civil Society Roadmaps present guidelines for funding.

The European Commission's communication of September 2012 on "Europe's engagement with Civil Society in External Relations" lays out the basic policy goals for CSO support. This document establishes the broad policy guidelines that currently guide the EU's commitment to support CSOs and the generic thematic priorities of this support.¹⁴ To guide funding, EU delegations in 107 countries agreed Civil Society Roadmaps for 2014 to 2017; 56 of these were renewed for 2018 to 2020. The Roadmaps mapped EU and member state funding with a view to cutting out duplication and fashioning a joined-up strategy across all European donors in each recipient country.

In the 2014 to 2020 period, EU funding for civil society came from multiple sources in a complex and multi-layered funding structure. Some of this support to civil society was aimed directly and expressly at improving good governance, some of it was indirectly related to this agenda and some of it had little link to governance issues.

The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)

The most directly political stream of funding came through the **European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)**. This amounted to around 160 million euros each year from 2014 to 2020, a 20 per cent increase from the period before 2014. The EIDHR supported CSOs in 110 countries covering only civic organisations from non-EU states. It was the main tool of support to both local and international organisations promoting human rights through country-based programmes and theme-based global calls for projects. The EIDHR had a specifically rights-oriented remit and was able to fund CSOs without host-government approval.

From 2014 to 2020, the EU supported CSOs from 110 non-EU countries with 160 million euros annually through the EIDHR.

The largest number of EIDHR projects went to local CSOs; 45 per cent compared to 26 per cent to international organisations. As the local grants were generally smaller, international organisations received a larger share of total funds: 47 per cent compared to the 33 per cent going to local CSOs. Yet, in this period a higher number of projects for international CSOs were specifically for those to sub-grant funds on to local activists.¹⁵ Changes to the implementing regulation (the rules applying to the granting of EU aid) gave a degree of additional flexibility that allowed funds to be spent more quickly and to go to individual activists as opposed to CSOs. A higher share of support than in previous periods was funded outside calls for proposals, enabling the Commission to pinpoint specific CSOs needing quick support.

Examples of major projects included the Commission's Supporting Democracy initiative that provided just under 5 million euros for experts to work with civil society actors in the latter half of the 2010s and a CivicTech4 Democracy initiative that gave 5 million euros to support civic activism through digital technologies. The EIDHR still operated in some tough environments; for instance, by the end of the decade, it was almost the only source of support to CSOs in Russia. In this period the EU undertook a dramatically increased number of consultations and forums with CSOs and delegations now have almost daily contact with key human rights defenders. The EIDHR funded activists specifically to feed in their ideas and positions to formal EU human rights dialogues and decision-making processes.¹⁶

The main change in focus in the 2010s was the attention given to supporting civil society facing direct threats, dangers and attacks; this accounted for 25 per cent of EIDHR funding in this period, with around 10 per cent of funds now given on a confidential basis, reflecting the new risks facing activists across the world. The EIDHR's Emergency Fund for human rights defenders has channelled funds at speed when defenders face a moment

of acute risk. The EU has funded a Human Rights Defenders Protection Mechanism, known as Protectdefenders.eu. Under this, a consortium of 12 international NGOs has provided emergency grants for relocation, individual security and legal support. By 2020, Protectdefenders.eu had provided over a thousand emergency grants, training for 5,000 human rights defenders (HRDs) at risk and given some kind of other support to over ten thousand HRDs.¹⁷

The EIDHR became increasingly about such emergency support and defending civic space, while the CSO-LA programme (below) focused on longer-term general capacity-building for civil society. Support for CSOs working on migrant rights was an emerging EIDHR priority, and civil society covering lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights also attracted an increasing amount of funds in this period. While most EIDHR funds went to CSOs, around a quarter was set aside for election observer missions; many civil society bodies criticised this as being too high a percentage as it took resources away from them.

**From 2014 to 2020,
the EIDHR took on
a more political flavour.**

The Commission insisted that the EIDHR took on a more political flavour in this period, with a slightly more equal balance between democracy and human rights – democracy having traditionally received far less attention than funding for core human rights. The increasing amounts for democracy support went mainly to new forums of citizen participation and projects on the freedom of expression. Some also went to parliaments and political parties; while these new avenues usefully corrected a neglect of these important areas, they also diverted some funding away from civil society. Notwithstanding EIDHR efforts to develop a more political profile, civil society groups generally criticised the EU for becoming more cautious and channelling funds to soft, apolitical CSO projects, as regimes became more onerous in their oversight of external funding.

The civil society organisations – local authorities programme (CSO-LA)

The other relatively general and geographically cross-cutting source of civil society support was the **civil society organisations and local authorities (CSO-LA)** thematic programme situated under the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). This had a particularly strong focus on strengthening CSOs and local authorities to support internationally agreed development goals. Like the EIDHR, the CSO-LA programme could also be used to fund CSOs in states in which the EU did not have a formal development programme and without government approval. The DCI channelled additional funds to CSOs through a 5 per cent unallocated reserve and a fast-track crisis fund.

The CSO-LA programme under the DCI aimed to enhance CSO's role as development actors and in improving good governance. It disbursed 1.9 billion euros between CSOs and local authorities in the 2014 to 2020 period. Civil society roadmaps guided CSO funding in individual countries and prompted consultations between EU officials and activists. Most funding was decided through calls for proposals managed by delegations in each country; while these calls set priorities that CSOs had to adopt, they were increasingly framed in ways that allowed for local CSOs' own ideas and priorities to drive project proposals. The period saw the shaping of support tailored to country specificities in this way. In several places, civil society went a step further and became co-owner and co-shaper in the funding profile, alongside the EU delegation.¹⁸

An independent evaluation reached a largely positive view of the CSO-LA programme, finding that it had supported effective projects and improved whole-of-EU approaches towards civil society. The roadmaps in particular helped join Commission and member state funding aims in more concerted unity, reach more rural and marginalised groups, and widen consultation with CSOs. The evaluation found that challenges remained, however, in scaling-up from project-level to political impact; in most countries no assessment was carried out of how the programme as a whole related to or played into the overall political situation. The programme funded many more projects on service delivery than political-governance issues and it was less than fully clear how the strong preference for supporting CSOs for service delivery functions actually helped any improvement in governance indicators on issues like accountability. Many funds were channelled towards apolitical projects in order to evade the closing civic space problem; CSO support may then have looked effective at project level but was not meeting the stated ambition of keeping civil societies open as a component

CSOs as development actors and its role in improving good governance.

of good governance. Indeed, the cases studied in this evaluation remain highly repressive or have clearly experienced dramatic deteriorations in good governance standards – in Brazil, Chad, Indonesia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Senegal, South Africa, Tajikistan, Uganda, Zimbabwe.¹⁹

Other instruments

Several other EU instruments provided support to CSOs on a scale that was more modest or not so central to the funds' core remit. The Instrument contributing to Security and Peace (IcSP) funded civil society organisations involved in conflict crisis management. Additional CSO support came from geographic budget lines. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) provided civil society support in the candidate countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey. It focused mainly on supporting civil society to play a positive role in a country's pre-accession preparations, and in particular to monitor governments' compliance with EU membership requirements and legislation and regulatory harmonisation. The IPA also provided more standard human rights and democracy funding that was directed at CSOs in the candidate countries.

The EU set aside 5 per cent of the European Neighbourhood Instrument's bilateral envelopes to civil society.

The Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility (NCSF) ran from 2011 to 2013 under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument and aimed at civil society development in the ENP region; many NCSF projects ran into the latter half of the decade. The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) replaced this from 2014 and allocated funds to strengthen the capacity of local CSOs to ensure government accountability and local ownership over domestic reform processes.²⁰ For this purpose, ENI funds helped CSOs to be involved in preparing, implementing and monitoring EU assistance in the priority sectors of cooperation identified with partner governments. The Commission set aside 5 per cent of the ENI's bilateral envelopes to civil society. The ENI also had a flexibility cushion of 10 per cent for unforeseen needs, part of which went to CSOs for quick support. In 2017 the EU committed a further € 170 million for CSOs up to 2020 in the eastern part of the neighbourhood, the so-called Eastern Partnership countries.

Evolution and challenges

Beyond these empirical data and trends, several wider challenges and changes were influential in this period. During the 2010s, the EU moved to improve several aspects of its civil society support. These changes responded to longstanding criticisms and also to the ways in which global civil society was itself undergoing profound change in this period. In an effort to harmonise policies, the EU created a centre of civil society expertise in the European Commission's Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG Near) to draw common lessons and best-practice guidelines across different countries and regions. Cross-cutting issues of particular relevance included the following:

Wider range of recipients and new funding modalities. Responding to concerns that most funding was previously going to a fairly static and select group of large, urban CSOs, the EU developed new rules to allow sub-granting – the practice of the EU providing funds to one recipient body for this to pass funds onto a number of other organizations. Under these rules, an increasing share of EU funding was channelled through intermediary bodies to smaller civil society organisations. Many of these were based in rural locations and many had relatively loose and fluid structures. This development was also designed to help get some support to organisations in fairly restrictive environments where direct EU support was difficult. The Commission began to listen more to these local civic actors before defining its calls for proposals, in an effort to make its core funding procedure less top down. In the same line, the EU pursued a mainstreaming of civil society support through the 2010s. This involved support for CSOs as part of other, mainstream development aid focused on economic, social, health, or education programmes and was not labelled civil society support as such.

CSOs under attack. Civil society became more defensive in the 2010s and EU support responded to this change. In recent years, more of the EU's funding has gone directly to protecting activists from state repression. EU democracy support has shifted towards pushing back against attacks on civil society, disinformation and interference with electoral integrity. The EU responded strongly to the growing threats to civil society around the world. This has been achieved through the EIDHR's Emergency Fund and the ProtectDefenders.eu initiative, which have stressed the need for round-the-clock support to human rights defenders facing immediate risk.

The EU faced criticism and new developments to improve its support to civil society.

New activism. In this period, a general trend accelerated towards more informal activism and more explosive mass protests. Civil society is no longer the same preserve of formally structured and registered, pro-European CSOs. In response, the EU made an effort to broaden its support beyond highly formalized NGOs to engage with individuals and nonregistered entities. In Turkey, the innovative Sivil Düşün initiative encapsulated this approach and provided over 1,500 grants. And the EU continued to fund some newer civil society actors even in tough cases such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Russia and Zimbabwe.

The EU tended to shy away from supporting pro-democracy mass protests.

However, the Union tended to shy away from offering funding support for pro-democracy mass protests; in large-scale revolts, EU statements nearly always called for restraint and dialogue. As the EU did little to get support to civil society involvement in protests, it was left partnering with semi-autocratic governments at the moment when democratic protests managed to dislodge these regimes from power – leaving many activists with the impression that the EU has been a barrier to rather than enabler of democratic transition. It did tentatively explore engagement with groups linked to protests without directly supporting protests themselves, but only to a very modest degree. In an era of popular revolts, the EU has stuck to its preferred template of smooth and non-contentious political change.

Migration priorities cut across good governance. The civil society component of migration policy became increasingly prominent in this period, with mixed consequences for the good governance agenda. A major expansion occurred in the late 2010s in funding related to containing migration inflows and managing the humanitarian consequences of large-scale movements of displaced people. This became the fastest growing area of EU external funding and a significant share of it went to civil society organisations. To the extent that this was directed at protecting refugees' human rights and at efficient governance mechanisms in providing them with services, it overlapped with the good governance agenda.

The EU set up its Madad Trust Fund to provide support for Syrian refugees in countries like Jordan and Lebanon. By 2020, this fund stood at over 2 billion euros, with contributions from 21 member states, and a focus on helping civil society bodies manage service delivery and rights-enhancement (like access to education) for the displaced population. Most high profile was the EU's awarding of 6 billion euros for refugees in Turkey. The EU then established a larger and separate Emergency Trust Fund for Africa that allocated 4 billion euros up to 2020 to stem migration from North and sub-Saharan Africa. Much of the funding from this was directed at security aims such as strengthening border controls and migration management in the recipient countries, although the fund also had a "governance" tranche, part of which benefitted CSOs working on human rights and governance reforms related to migration.

Covid-19 Pandemic. In 2020, the Covid-19 emergency prompted the EU to redirect portions of its development assistance to deal with the health emergency. This involved taking funds from other sectors and releasing it quickly for emergency relief and Covid-related measures in the developing world. Some of this funding went to CSOs working on the pandemic. Yet to some extent the good governance agenda has taken a back seat in the emergency, for understandable reasons. The EU has provided funds to Iran, Venezuela and Syria to head off possible instability in the health crisis.²¹ The EU stressed that emergency measures introduced to deal with the pandemic should not be used as a pretext for extended authoritarianism. Yet the priority in 2020 was on dealing with the pandemic.

In 2020, the EU needed to redirect portions of its development assistance to deal with the pandemic.

Changes currently underway

This section assesses the changes to funding and other elements of the EU toolbox that are now coming on stream for the post-2020 period within the new MFF. It examines several new instruments, assessing their advantages but also possible disadvantages for civil society support. The section pays close attention to the EU's new commitment to get support to less traditional forms of civil society actors as these gain weight around the world. The impact of Covid-19 on EU civil society support is also assessed.

Recently, the EU provides more funding for new types of democracy activism.

Revamped funding instruments. In March 2020 the Commission published an updated Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy promising inter alia to provide more funding for new types of democracy activism. In the early months of 2021, the EU institutions together with EU delegations agreed on a number of strategies necessary for moving forward with implementing this, including a new iteration of Civil Society Roadmaps, Multi-annual Indicative Programmes (MIPs) and Human Rights and Democracy Country Strategies. The MIPs in particular identify the priority areas of EU cooperation with partner countries, releasing funds for commitments from the Action Plan, including civil society support. Around a third of EU delegations have prioritised good governance, democracy and human rights within their respective country MIPs.

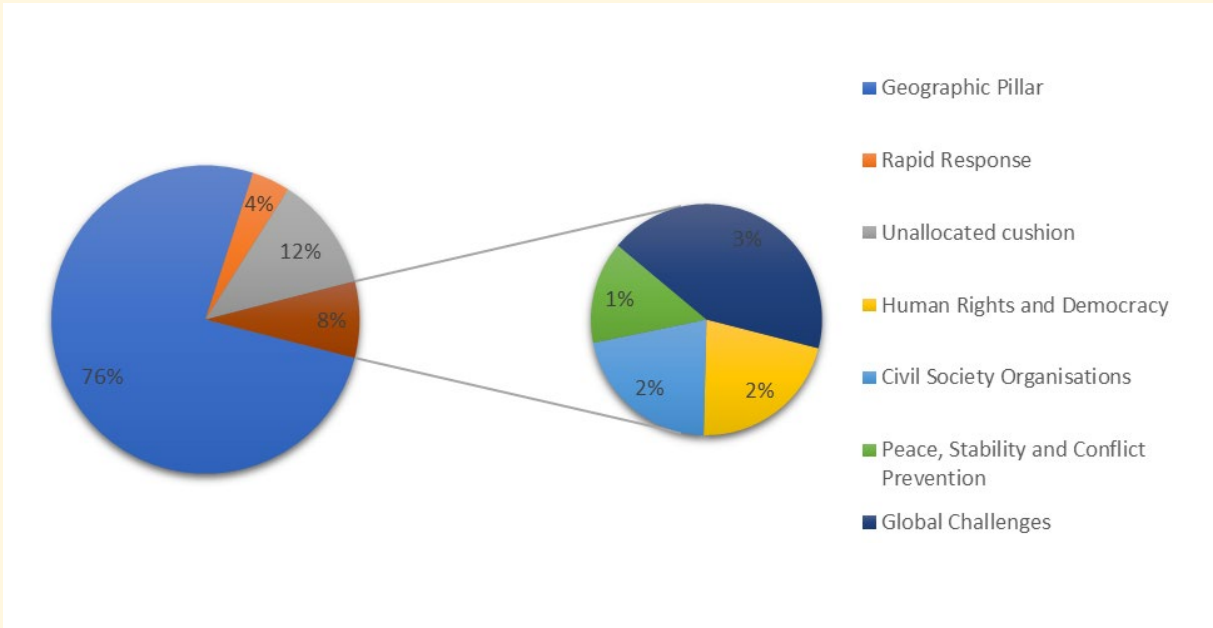
The third EU Gender Action Plan (GAP III) that covers the period 2021 to 2025 is also now unlocking and guiding new funds for CSOs working on women's political empowerment and participation. In 2021, the EU has similarly introduced several new regional strategies that formally promise upgraded civil society and good governance support. These include a new Partnership Agreement between the EU and members of the organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific State; a new EU Integrated Strategy in the Sahel; and the document providing for a "Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A new Agenda for the Mediterranean".

A "Team Europe" coordination effort has recently begun on democracy support, led by the European Commission. Under this, the member states and EU institutions commit to coordinating their civil society support for democracy more effectively, replicating the Team Europe joint approach they adopted for Covid-19 emergency aid. The Commission has released additional funding of 5 million euros for various CSO projects linked to this initiative. The fact that the EU chose democracy support as a theme for this new Team Europe approach suggests a certain prioritisation of this area of policy and a better coordination of CSO support across European donors and programmes. At the time of writing, eleven member states have signed up to support this initiative.

The EU's new 2021 to 2027 budget, or multiannual financial framework (MFF), includes a modest increase in human rights and democracy funds – although member states insisted the size of this increase be reduced from the Commission's initial proposal and funds used for other purposes, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Under the new MFF, the EIDHR ceases to exist as a separate instrument. Rather, funding for human rights and democracy is now available as one of four thematic programmes under a catch-all instrument called the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). This thematic programme is allocated 1.36 billion euros for the 2021 to 2027 period, up slightly from the 1.30 billion euros allocated to the EIDHR for 2014 to 2020 (Fig. 2).

In the EU's new 2021 to 2027 budget, human rights and democracy funds got modestly increased.

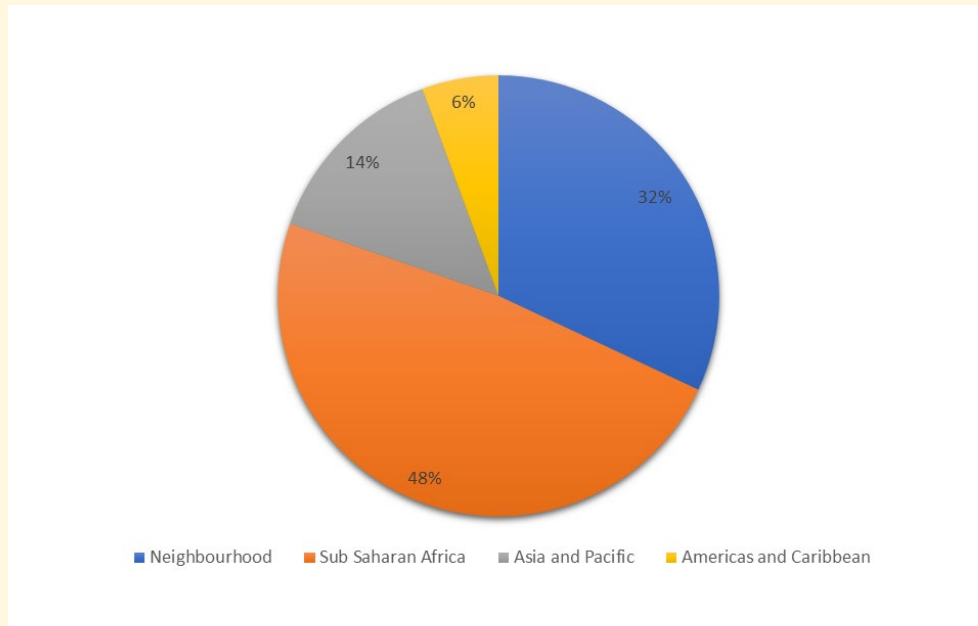
Figure 2: 79.5 billion euros NDICI budget allocation with an emphasis on the thematic pillar



Source: https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/factsheet-global-europe-ndici-june-2021_en.pdf

In addition to the human rights and democracy programme, a new CSO thematic programme is endowed with another 1.36 billion euros; slightly less than the 1.4 billion that went to the CSO-LA funding instrument for 2014 to 2020. Only part of the CSO programme will be spent on projects related to human rights and democracy. The (previously EIDHR and CSO-LA) provision for funding not needing to be approved by third-country governments is now extended to all CSO support under the new thematic programmes. These thematic allocations are dwarfed by geographical allocations that make up nearly 80 per cent of the NDICI total; around 15 per cent or nine billion euros of these geographic budgets is slated go to democracy-relevant programmes. Five per cent of country aid programmes in the neighbourhood are slated for civil society. The budget also includes an emerging challenges cushion, 200 million euros of which will go to human rights and democracy support, while additional democracy support may also be possible from a rapid response actions reserve.²² (Fig. 3)

Figure 3: Regional envelopes of NDICI's geographic pillar worth 60.39 billion euros



Source: https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/factsheet-global-europe-ndici-june-2021_en.pdf

Coherence and impetus? The Commission insists these changes will benefit democracy funding in general and civil society support in particular. Policy-makers maintain that the single instrument should allow for quicker pro-democracy funding and for money to be shifted around. They also suggest that the new democracy and human rights envelope will inform bilateral aid programs for recipient countries more strongly than it has in the past. Certainly, many of the changes respond to long-heard calls for greater coherence and streamlining. Many assessments during the 2010s pointed to the need to improve links and complementarity between the many different sources of CSO funding. This now appears to have been done, with the streamlined funding structures of the 2021 to 2027 MFF.

There are outstanding concerns, however. Some civil society actors still fear that the new structures may not guarantee civil society funds quite as firmly as is currently the case, when governments are pushing for money to be diverted to other priorities like migration control and counterterrorism. The new structures do not guarantee full complementarity and coherence, with some separation persisting between thematic and geographic funding. To some extent this is inevitable, of course; funding has to be divided up somehow. Still, we have heard concerns that civil society priorities could suffer.

Recently, the EU is placing more stress on mainstreaming CSO support into geographic and sectoral programmes.

Trends and priorities. In the post-2020 period, the EU is further extending the directions that civil society support was beginning to take in the 2010s. The European Commission is placing more stress on mainstreaming CSO support into geographic and sectoral programmes. It aims to work more with member states (as Team Europe builds on and goes beyond existing joint programming) and the European development banks. Its core aims under the civil society thematic programme are support for enabling environments, CSO capacity and CSO participation in policy dialogues around EU policies. It is devising a new global initiative on the enabling environment for civil society. The civil society thematic programme focuses on general capacity building while the democracy and human rights programme is homing in more directly on defending activists from government attacks.

A priority EU aim is to channel more funds to local actors and away from large CSOs; 80 per cent of EU civil society funds are now managed by delegations so as to follow local priorities. The updated Civil Society Roadmaps now reflect more extensive local CSO involvement and influence over priorities. The Roadmaps provide the most inclusive process for taking on board CSO views; this is becoming a more structured, systematic and continuous process and will now cover implementation as well as policy design. Regional forums also allow for more local CSO input. The Commission is moving beyond traditional consultations with CSOs as these forums are carried out more at a local level to give space for grassroots groups.

The Commission is increasing direct funding to grassroots groups. It is significantly increasing sub-granting to reach small community-based groups. Commission officials stress that they now as routine ask international CSOs specifically to support local groups and act as an "umbrella" bringing together often quite polarized community organizations. They insist that their top priority for the current financing period is to reach out beyond the traditional set of CSO recipients and ensure that money reaches newer,

smaller organisations based within local communities and engaged in projects specifically relevant to those local contexts. They feel that the new, streamlined MFF structure enables them to make progress on this long-stated aim in more concrete ways than has been the case up to now.

A declared priority is to reach out even more to informal civic movements. This emergent trend is tightly related to two substantive concerns. The first is with the COVID-19 pandemic, to the extent that informal movements formed in the shadow of the health emergency are now so crucial to delivering effective support and relief in so many countries around the world – especially in those where states and more formal CSO sectors have been flat-footed and too hierarchical to respond with efficacy. Health related civic activity is now set to become a primary focus of EU support to civil society and will be integrated into a range of other developmental- and service-oriented funding over the next few years. The pandemic has acted as catalyst for this kind of informal civics and EU funding is already moulding itself to this trend.

The second substantive concern is the challenge of maintaining support in highly repressive contexts where states are expressly and purposively targeting CSOs on a more systemic basis and in more draconian ways. Many activists have begun to adopt more informal strategies in order to avoid repressive attention from regime authorities, and in some countries this is giving a more flexible feel to civil society. Donors are in the process of reacting to this ongoing process of adjustment and trying to adapt their funding processes to take it into account.

Linked to this is the question of how funding patterns respond to mass protests. In many countries and communities, the turn towards informal civic organisations has been associated with protest mobilisation. This presents a conundrum as the EU cannot directly support protest movements. However, it is trying more now to get established CSOs to engage with these. It is offering more operating grants and more predictable long-term funds beyond project support. It is operating more in local languages and more in response to crises rather than multi-year EU-set project themes.

One implication of some significance for this report is that these features of civil society support have a very different feel to the traditional good governance agenda. They are concerned with helping civil society organise in fluid ways around particular thematic emergencies and with keeping some degree of civic infrastructure functioning in increasingly hostile environments. This strand of funding takes some of the attention away from formalised CSOs working constructively with state bodies around issues of

Informal activism is on the rise in high-pressure environments, making it more difficult to fund CSOs.

openness, transparency and efficiency – the standard kind of approach to good governance. These more traditional elements of CSO support have not disappeared but they are offset now with a civil society agenda that is imbued with very different dynamics. This agenda has a lot to do giving civic activism greater legitimacy and presence at a very local level, and less to do with formal agendas of structural, technocratic governance reform. In this sense, the distinction between the civil society and good governance agendas may be set to grow wider in the current financing period.

More specifically, the Commission is devising more flexible digitally based ways to reach out to CSOs in very repressive environments, through small scale local and sometimes digital actors. A new unit being set up on digital technology in the European External Action Service (EEAS) will inter alia boost support for digital activism. The Commission now aims to get funds to individuals more than before; this is more about their autonomous agency and is a form of support less tied to EU-related norms or institutional themes.

Reflection has intensified in 2021 over the link between the way that EU funds are used, on the one hand, and European geopolitical priorities, on the other hand. The EU institutions are formally committed to injecting more of a geopolitical overview into funding trends and programmes on the ground. Still, progress towards implementing this declared aim is proving a challenge in practice and concerns arise over whether the geopolitical focus could be more of a problem than fillip to civil society support. A related debate is about whether the EU should try to operate more globally or focus on its neighbourhood to fill potential gaps as the US's strategic attention focuses more on the Indo-Pacific.

The EU shifts more funds towards CSOs when reducing funding for governments.

Redirected aid. Another current priority is to shift more funds towards CSO recipients as and when the EU reduce funding for governments. Distancing itself from the regime in Belarus, the EU made 50 million euros quickly available for Belarusian civil society and has offered a 3 billion euros package to incentivise reform – much of which would be for civil society, if and when the EU were to spend this full amount. In Afghanistan, the EU is trying to make sure new emergency relief and other support to the population goes through CSOs and not the Taliban government. It remains to be seen whether such redirecting of funds becomes more commonplace within EU external policies, but such moves could represent a significant boost to overall civil society support. EU officials highlight that redirecting is taking place more frequently, often bringing in international CSOs to take on funds quickly and then channel these to local initiatives in a way that protects projects from government intimidation.

The European Endowment for Democracy. It is also worth mentioning the current expansion in activities of an actor that is becoming more active in this field: the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). The EED is now significantly increasing the number of grants it gives to civil society and in the current period becoming a more prominent player in CSO support. More EU and other funding now flows through the EED and follows its self-defined "unconventional" approach to targeting support at innovative areas of civil society that have traditionally not received support. While not a part of formal EU support and thus outside this report's remit, it is important to keep in mind that the EED now represents a significant arms-length channel for European civil society support that has the capacity to provide politically sensitive support in challenging environments. The EED foregrounds a "bottom-up approach to good governance", prioritising activists and media start-ups; its work is generally defined more as democracy than good governance but many of its projects are for classically good-governance type issues like transparency and monitoring public spending.

The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) foregrounds a bottom-up approach, prioritising activists and media start-ups.

Since it became operational in August 2013, the EED has funded over 1,500 initiatives. It offers the benefit of quick, collaborative and flexible support to a broad range of actors, including political movements and individual activists, media and non-registered CSOs in an attempt to target those actors that are not financed by other donors or under other EU aid instruments. The EED is supported by the European Commission, 23 EU Member States, the UK, Canada, and Norway. One of the aims is also to help emerging CSOs later to obtain larger support from the European Commission and other institutional donors. The EED is currently ramping up its civil society support and taking this in innovative new directions. An increasing share of its support is now not fully revealed in order to give recipients more protection.

The EED gave a record 28 million euros of CSO support in 2020, and this amount is set to remain high in 2021. It now provides over 300 grants a year, compared to only around 100 in the mid-2010s. It has adjusted its operations to offer emergency support to help CSOs continue working amid the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Seeing the particular value in the political role of media and its monitoring roles in political environments that are becoming more restrictive, the EED now gives around 40 per cent of its support to independent media outlets and social media initiatives.²³

Recommendations

How to make the EU's support for civil society more effective and wide-ranging in its ambition?

There are many ways in which European support for civil society could be made more effective and wide-ranging in its ambition. This report suggests just a select number of improvements that could be made. It proposes **three** ways in which EU civil support could be strengthened and **five** ways in which other funders (like political foundations) could step-up their contributions to this agenda.

Sharpening EU civil society support

Shifting funds in difficult political contexts

While funding levels for CSOs are relatively high, a better balance between government and non-governmental cooperation would make more resources available to civil society actors. The vast majority of EU good governance funding still goes to state bodies. In democratic states this has often helped underpin political reform processes; but in authoritarian countries it can inadvertently empower non-democratic governance and facilitate what is at best a very narrow, technocratic understanding of "good governance." A slightly more even distribution of EU funds between state and civic actors would help drive a wider and better-quality approach to good governance.

In the last several years, the EU has begun to explore ways of exerting pressure on governments. This is a response to the clear erosion of democratic governance around the world. The EU introduced a global human rights sanctions regime at the end of 2020 and in 2021 has used this on multiple occasions, for example in relation to repression in Belarus and Myanmar, the detention of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and human rights abuses against the Uighur minority in China. The EU has also suspended or held back tranches of aid, for example recently in Ethiopia. As a complement to such restrictive measures, the EU could make a more systematic and formalised effort to shift its external funds away from governments and into civil society partners. This would serve as a flanking measure to sanctions and aid suspensions.

The EU has begun to consider such a strategy in a small number of cases. The Belarus example cited above indicates the general direction of travel in EU thinking. However, this logic is still not implemented on a regular

basis or in any far-reaching manner. In consequence, local CSOs complain that EU restrictive measures risk actually depriving them of funds to act as good-governance watchdogs.

To take this idea forward the EU should introduce a new **aid reassignment procedure**. Where democratic governance scores fall by a certain amount in a given country, the EU should be obliged to consider shifting a given percentage of aid from state recipients to CSOs – and to justify openly a decision not to do so. A process triggered by predetermined indicator thresholds like this would have some degree of objectivity, even if complete automaticity would not be possible given other determinants of aid allocation.

Fusing direct and indirect approaches to good governance

The direct and indirect approaches to good governance described in this report both have merit. They each play a necessary and important function within the EU's overall external funding profile. Yet striking the right balance between the two approaches is a difficult policy calculation that will vary across different recipient countries, and it must be questioned whether the EU gets this balance right. The EU has tended to rely rather too heavily on very indirect approaches, expecting highly political change to flow from largely apolitical support programmes that eschew direct political sensitivities.

The EU's contribution to good governance could be made more effective if ways could be found of **fusing direct and indirect approaches** together. It has begun to make some moves in this direction, working for instance with the Open Government Partnership as a way of linking civil society with more traditional institutional "integrity" programmes.²⁴ The EU has increased support to civil society under its various strands of mainstream development aid, supporting CSOs to help deliver social development and other objectives. This represents an indirect contribution to good governance, building civic capacities but without directly funding programmes working on political governance and rights-based issues. A degree of fusion could be created by the EU adding more political types of civil society support to its indirect civic-capacity building initiatives under its non-political development assistance. The EU could make a commitment to accompany each of its indirect CSO support programmes with a more directly political component. Each funding initiative for developmental service-delivery functions, for instance, could contain at least some support for governance-oriented political CSO support linked to that particular sector.

Fusing direct and indirect approaches to good governance could increase effectivity.

The EU could make support to CSOs more strategic and coherent in the framework of EU foreign and security policy.

Foreign policy links

Even where the EU institutions are undertaking valuable and well-designed programmes of civil support, these are often left somewhat disconnected from the broader elements of EU foreign and security policy in any given third country. The EU needs to ensure that its civil society and good governance programmes are more meaningfully and coherently nested within its overarching external relations, as well as vice versa. EU policy-makers will naturally insist this is indeed already the case, and yet the practical implementation of such coherence invariably leaves much to be desired. Indeed, CSOs have strongly criticised the EU for moving towards an approach to geopolitics that clearly clashes with its commitments to support good governance and democratic civil society organisations. The inconsistencies between high-level diplomacy and on-the-ground projects seem to have intensified in the last several years.

The EU of course needs engagement with nondemocratic regimes for strategic reasons but could do more to use this engagement for leverage over civil society issues. It could push for **CSOs to be involved in its strategic engagements** and partnerships more fully and meaningfully. The EU has many strategic dialogues now with partner states around the world. Many of these governments are implementing fierce restrictions against civil society actors. The EU should make such political trends a core element of its strategic dialogues as these are clearly detrimental to its good governance agenda. There is little use in the EU speaking of shared democratic values with the likes of India, South Africa, or Latin American democracies when these same states are targeting civic freedoms.

Ideas for other actors: stepping up

In addition to these changes to EU policies, other actors involved in civil society support might consider the steps they can take to help ensure that European policies have a stronger impact on good governance reforms. Five such ideas are as follows:

Engage with unfamiliar civil society partners

While the EU has used sub-granting to reach out to smaller and newer civil society organisations, the EU institutions can still be cautious in their engagement with the more politicised and contentious activist groups. Foundations and other private actors could do more to fill this gap in targeting unsupported civil society. While the EU does much to focus on support to governments for good governance reforms, other actors could have more leeway to engage with more political actors in civil society. This should involve more effort to reach those informal civic groups that may not be especially supportive of the EU or the West or particularly liberal but that have an interest in good governance improvements in their localities.

Newer types of activists have emerged in recent years outside the realm of formal, structured CSOs and have become increasingly important parts of civil society as a whole. These emerging actors are still under-represented in EU funding profiles. CSOs stress that while the EU now has many more channels than before for building in local civic views and specificities, more consultations are still needed to target informal initiatives. Other funders and foundations could do more to rectify this oversight, following the EED and some others already trying to move in this direction. Support for these newer civic actors may not take the form of traditional direct grant funding, but other forms of support. This might centre on advice, logistics, tactics and network building and help for them to shadow the more formal institutional elements of EU good governance support.

Foundations and other private actors could engage more with unfamiliar and newer civil actors.

Countering captured or shadow civil society

Funding CSOs that do not operate independently from the state is problematic.

Closely linked to this issue, funders could do more to offset the longstanding "GONGO" problem. The issue of EU funding for so-called Government-operated non-governmental organization (GONGOs) – civil society organizations that de facto function at the government's behest – has been debated extensively for over two decades. The problem is becoming more acute, however, as many governments around the world create their own "shadow civil society" that largely advances their own agenda. There may be instances where EU funding is worthwhile even where the EU knows that civil society recipients are closely tied to the government. But the prevalence of GONGO funding more generally represents a serious problem for the EU's good governance agenda – to the extent that a separation between executive power and the civic sphere is a core prerequisite for good governance.

Other funders should do more specifically to confront this challenge. They should publicise the most damaging cases of EU support for "civil society" recipients that are not genuinely autonomous from the state and push hard for the EU to lay down clearer red-lines against funding GONGOs that egregiously infringe basic democratic and human rights norms. Other funders should then make a point of searching for independent, critical civic actors to support in these cases, expressly and openly justifying this funding as means of offsetting the negative impact of GONGO funding on good governance.

From actor-centered to systemic approach

The EU has made a particularly strong effort in recent years to focus on defending individual human rights defenders from government repression, legal challenges and attacks – much more of its funding and diplomatic attention now rightly is directed at this aim. Yet good governance requires a more systemic focus on safeguarding democratic space that is under attack in a large number of countries around the world. External funding needs to move beyond protecting activists to making civil societies more institutionally resilient. This needs to become a more prominent part of other actors' funding, especially where regimes are expressly threatening the core tenets and conditions of independent civil societies. In cases where EU funding is focused on protecting individual civil society leaders, other funders could flank this support with programmes that gather CSOs together to design templates for how to make the whole civic ecosystem stronger and more resilient.

Help local funding

Foundations and other funders should make a concerted effort to help CSOs obtain their own funds and raise money from local sources. This would help the good governance agenda as it would make CSOs stronger and more legitimate with their domestic constituencies. It would make them less dependent on external funders and better able to resist regime restrictions and attacks. Civil society entities need advice and assistance to think through how they could provide local services to generate their own resources. Increasing numbers of volunteers are getting involved in community-level civic campaigns and this very local focus offers an opportunity to change CSOs' business models. External funders could assist this process of adjustment and take more risk than formal EU bodies in trying to modify the core funding relationship between them and local civil society.

Donors should support CSOs in generating resources from local sources on their own.

Better link between civil society to politics

A major challenge is to improve the relationship between civic activism and mainstream politics. Dynamic forms of civic activism often need to translate their momentum and high profile into agendas within the sphere of party politics. Only in this way can they contribute fully, constructively and in detail to political reform options. In recent years, increasing numbers of CSO leaders have moved into government after democratic breakthroughs or created their own political parties. Some of these political strategies have been successful, many have not.

Donors should support CSOs in improving the relationship between civil activism and politics.

Non-EU funders would be well placed to focus on building better transmission belts between civil society and party politics. Few of the EU's programmes work specifically on helping the transition from protest to politics, so this is a niche area of work that needs to be fully covered. Civil society can fail to make a maximum contribution to good governance where it fails to engage with mainstream politics; but civic activism can also lose influence if it ends up too co-opted by party politics. Funders could try to help CSOs strike the right kind of balance in this difficult transition.

Conclusion

While significant improvements have given much international civil society funding clearer focus and influence in recent years, there are steps that both the EU and other funders can take to sharpen its effectiveness.

The ideas suggested here are only a selection of the improvements that need to be made. Running through the various, specific policy ideas above are a number of core, wider tenets that need to act as defining threads for future civil society support. Funders need intervention logics that embrace countries' overarching politics and not just the sector in which service-delivery and other programmes are being run. Funders need to move from a mindset of supporting individual projects to accompanying CSOs over the long-term in their political strategies aimed at tempering human rights abuses and autocratic governance. More funding is needed for initiatives aimed at improving the whole civil society ecosystem rather than prioritising – as at present – those that help CSOs improve specific policy objectives in very specific sectors. And finally, more support is needed for CSOs to build links and alliances with other civic actors at the global and regional level as these will be increasingly important well beyond the normal kind of capacity-oriented funding project.

Funders should accompany CSOs over the long-term and take holistic approaches.

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Endnotes

- 1 This report draws from material gained through 13 interviews, carried out on condition of anonymity. These interviews took place in autumn 2021 with representatives of the European Commission (four from INTPA, one from DG NEAR), the European External Action Service (three), EED (two), European Partnership for Democracy, OSF and Open Government Partnership.
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