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**2015**

## **RETHINKING CIVIL SOCIETY AND SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY**

**Richard Youngs**



# Rethinking Civil Society and Support for Democracy

*Richard Youngs*

*Rapport 2015:01*

*till*

*Expertgruppen för biståndsanalys (EBA)*

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ISBN 978-91-88143-03-7

Printed by Elanders Sverige AB  
Stockholm 2015

Cover design by Julia Demchenko

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# Preface

Sweden has a long tradition of providing development cooperation with the aim of strengthening democracy and respect for human rights. Democratic development has been a thematic priority for many years, and support for this constitutes a large share of Swedish aid. Over the past ten years there has been an increased focus within the Swedish democracy and human rights portfolio on supporting civil society organisations, including ‘actors for change’. Support for ‘democratic participation and civil society’ accounts for approximately 40 per cent of total Swedish aid to support democratic development. Support to and through civil society organisations is substantial, not only with reference to support for democratic development but as a proportion of the entire Swedish aid portfolio.

In parallel to this trend in Swedish development cooperation, there has been a change in the structure and character of civil society organisations globally, and in the conditions for civil society organisations to freely organise and to act. The changes have resulted in a debate among researchers and experts on the implications for development cooperation and how donors should respond to these shifts and challenges. In light of this, EBA invited Dr. Richard Youngs, an expert in international relations and support to democracy, to review the debate on recent changes in civil society and their potential consequences, and to give recommendations on how donors like Sweden – with a comparatively strong focus on supporting civil society organisations – should adapt their support.

There are different views on the novelty, magnitude and possible importance of the changes in civil society. The author argues that there has been a clear shift in the character of civic activism and engagement, with new issue-based networks and diffuse social movements existing in parallel to traditional civil society organisations. At the same time, non-democratic regimes are increasingly imposing legal and practical restrictions on the ability of civil society to act and receive external funding. There are differences between countries and regions, but in several cases the changes are of such a magnitude that donors will need to adapt and respond to the changes in suitable ways.

The changing nature of civil society offers a range of opportunities for donors but it also calls for new strategies and approaches. Some long-standing assumptions about support to civil society and what

constitutes ‘good democracy’ may need to be discussed. Youngs recommends donors to use a balanced approach that combines support to different kinds of civil society actors. He argues that donors need to reach new civil society actors and calls for more experimentation, flexibility and innovative measures. But, he also argues, addressing many of the challenges requires greater coherence between civil society support and other aspects of foreign policy, as well as closer coordination between support for civil society and other forms of support for democratic development.

For Sweden’s democracy and civil society support to fulfil its goals, there is a need to thoroughly assess changes in the environment and adapt support accordingly. Today, Swedish support for democratisation and civil society is guided by several government strategies and channelled through a large number of different organisations. In order to follow the author’s suggestions, it may also be necessary to address the management and organisation of support to civil society to ensure a balanced, flexible and coherent approach. We hope that this study will provide inputs to coming discussions and decisions on Swedish strategies and support to civil society organisations.

The study has been conducted in dialogue with a reference group led by Ms Julia Schalk, member of the EBA. The responsibility for the content of the report rests fully with the author.

Stockholm, April 2015



Lars Heikensten,

Chair



# Sammanfattning

En betydande del av internationellt bistånd kanaliseras till och genom organisationer i civila samhället. Många givare kan tänka sig att öka detta stöd ytterligare samtidigt som de är måna om att stödet ska ge så stor effekt som möjligt.

En utmaning i detta sammanhang är att civila samhället håller på att förändras. Under de senaste åren har nya typer av sociala rörelser vuxit fram. Det handlar bl.a. om organisationer som agerar och protesterar på nya sätt. Samtidigt genomför många regeringar världen över insatser som är inriktade på att göra det svårare för organisationer i civilsamhället att agera och att ta emot extern finansiering.

I ljuset av dessa förändringar måste givare se över sitt stöd till civila samhället i utvecklingsländer. De kan dra nytta av de möjligheter som framväxten av nya medborgar-rörelser innebär, men de behöver också parera de negativa sidorna med de nya rörelserna och det faktum att regimer lägger restriktioner på icke-statliga organisationer i många länder.

Rapporten ger rekommendationer om hur givare bör förhålla sig till de förändrade förutsättningarna. Den fokuserar på stöd som syftar till att främja demokratiska reformer och demokratisk utveckling. Utifrån en beskrivning av hur civila samhället har förändrats under senare tid genom framväxten av nya former av politiska protester som drivs av löst organiserade grupper, behandlas frågan vad dessa grupper är inriktade på och hur de skiljer sig från mer 'traditionella' organisationsformer inom civila samhället.

Sammantaget visar förändringarna på en utveckling mot ett mer aktivt medborgarskap. I rapporten redovisas de analyser och den debatt som har förts om hur de nya civila rörelserna påverkar den demokratiska utvecklingen och hur utvecklingen varierar mellan olika delar av världen. Framväxten av nya typer av civila medborgarrörelser innebär stora fördelar och potentiellt kan de bidra till att demokratin utvecklas och fördjupas, men det finns också tydliga risker. Utmaningen för biståndsaktörer blir att utforma strategier som kan utnyttja den positiva potentialen och samtidigt minska eventuella negativa effekter av stödet.

Hur förhåller sig då givare till de nya utmaningarna? Agerar de på ett effektivt sätt? I rapporten redovisas exempel från hur Europeiska

unionen förhåller sig till det förändrade läget. Det finns flera initiativ på EU-nivå som syftar till att svara mot de aktuella förändringarna. Samtidigt som det finns nya initiativ på området, är den allmänna bilden att givare behöver göra mycket mer för att på ett ändamålsenligt sätt förhålla sig till den pågående utvecklingen inom, och de nya förutsättningarna för, civila samhället.

Rapporten utmynnar i rekommendationer inom fem områden:

**Nya aktörer och brobyggande aktörer:** Sverige och andra givare bör använda sig av en strategi som går ut på att man tillämpar ett balanserat förhållningssätt gentemot civila samhället och som möjliggör att man samarbetar med ett brett spektrum av olika aktörer. Givare bör kombinera stöd till mer konfrontativa sociala rörelser, som utgör en kontroll av staten, med stöd till aktörer som har en mer brobyggande funktion gentemot statliga institutioner.

**Nya aktörer och nya modeller?** Givare bör experimentera och samarbeta med nya aktörer inom det civila samhället. Vidare bör givare använda en mer explorativ ansats i förhållande till den etablerade kunskapen om civila samhället och dess roll. Det gäller även frågan om olika modeller för demokratisk utveckling. I takt med att givare samarbetar med olika typer av aktörer, inklusive nya proteströrelser och traditionella lokala organisationer, finns det även behov av att reflektera över vad som utgör 'god demokrati' och vilken betydelse dessa olika grupper kan ha i att stärka en demokratisk utveckling. Snarare än att bara fokusera på frågor som handlar om hur och var man ska ge stöd, bör givare även överväga vilka möjligheter som finns med olika demokratiska modeller.

**Restriktioner för civila samhället:** Under de senaste åren har mer än 50 regimer infört en rad begränsningar för internationellt stöd till civila samhället. Mer raffinerade tekniker innefattar t.ex. att sätta stopp för organisationers möjligheter att verka utifrån tekniska restriktioner. Givet hur situationen ser ut för civila samhället bör givare ta utmaningen på allvar och anamma en mer systematisk strategi som svar på de restriktioner som idag finns i många länder. Den negativa trenden med allt fler begränsningar i olika sammanhang måste hanteras som en del av en bredare strategi. En alltför defensiv insats kan bli kontraproduktiv. Det är därför viktigt att givare använder sig av flera utrikespolitiska verktyg, och att man säkerställer ett samstämmigt förhållningssätt mellan stödet till civila samhället och övrig utrikespolitik. Innovativa åtgärder och flexibla finansierings-

mekanismer kan också användas för att möta de nya utmaningarna. Samtidigt är det viktigt att givare visar öppenhet och är transparenta med sitt stöd så att det inte uppfattas som alltför politiskt.

**Stöd till informations- och kommunikationsteknik:** Givare bör anamma ett balanserat och nyanserat förhållningssätt vad gäller informations- och kommunikationsteknik (IKT) kopplat till civila samhället. Detta i syfte att kunna använda den potential som tekniken möjliggör. En allmän kritik handlar om att IKT-insatser är alltför inriktade på att utbilda enskilda individer och inte tillräckligt fokuserade på att bidra till en gynnsam miljö som skulle kunna möjliggöra politisk påverkan. Givare bör fokusera mer på insatser som är inriktade på infrastruktur och på att nå ut till nya grupper. Möjliga negativa effekter av förbättrad IKT – som det faktum att tekniken även kan vara till hjälp för regimer – måste hanteras på lämpligt sätt. Positiva exempel, som visar på att IKT kan användas för att främja mer transparenta styrsystem på lokal nivå, skulle kunna användas för att främja genomförandet av större politiska reformer.

**Civila samhället, bortom proteströrelser:** Sverige och andra givare bör göra mer för att koppla samman civilsamhällsaktörer över landsgränser. Syftet med en sådan ansats är att uppmuntra till ömsesidigt lärande mellan grupper som har deltagit i protestaktioner under de senaste åren, men också att identifiera alternativa förhållningssätt i förhållande till att bara protestera. Ett sådant initiativ skulle kunna svara mot behovet att givare går från att fokusera på kapacitetsutveckling av enskilda organisationer till att främja civilsamhällets aktiviteter så att de kan kanaliseras in i representativa organ och leda till verkliga förändringar.

Rapporten avslutas med bredare reflektioner kring betydelsen av att givare skyndsamt anammar en mer nyanserad hållning till de utmaningar som de pågående förändringarna med ett snabbväxande globalt civilsamhälle innebär. Den främsta rekommendationen är att givare bör anamma ett balanserat förhållningssätt när man utformar sina strategier. I sammanhanget är det viktigt att givare förstår att såväl de positiva som de negativa förändringarna har intensifierats under senare år. Följaktligen, är det viktigt att vara både smidig och flexibel i relation till de nya förutsättningarna, utan att för den skull glömma tidigare lärdomar från den del av civila samhället som inte har förändrats i lika hög grad.

# Summary

Support for civil society organisations is now a core element of official development assistance. Donors are generally committed to increasing their funding for civil society in developing states. And they want to make sure that such support is fully effective.

The challenge is that civil society is changing. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of new social movements, engaged in innovative types of protest. Analysts and activists debate how far the patterns of civil society activity are indeed changing. And they express different views on whether these new social and protest movements are good or bad for democracy. At the same time, governments around the world are making it more difficult for civil society organisations to function and to receive funding.

In this context, donors need to rethink the way they support civil society in developing states. They can take advantage of new opportunities presented by new civic movements; but also need to temper the downsides of these protest movements and think about how to push back against the new restrictions being placed on non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

This report contains an assessment of how donors should respond. It does not consider all elements of civil society support, but rather those elements most directly related to fostering democratic reforms.

An overview of the way that civil society is changing is presented. It points to the way that political protest has become driven by loosely organised social movements. It highlights the extent to which such activism is focused on a changing set of issues, and how it differs from more ‘traditional’ forms of civic organisation.

The report stresses how this embodies a more active citizenship. It looks at the related analytical debates about the relationship between democracy and these new civil society trends – including the way that this differs across regions. It points out that evolving forms of civic organisation show great advantages and the potential to contribute to democratic deepening – but that they also exhibit clear shortcomings. The challenge will be to harness their positive potential, while designing strategies that can mitigate their less welcome features.

The report then examines whether donors are beginning to react to the new challenges in an effective way. It looks at European Union

(EU) programmes as an illustrative example of new thinking. It uncovers several new EU initiatives that do seek to reflect the changing shape of global protests and civil society. It also stresses, however, that in more general terms donors need to do a lot more to respond to the scale of change afoot within civil society movements across different regions.

The report moves from this analysis to five policy recommendations:

**New actors and bridge-building actors:** Sweden and other donors should use a balanced approach vis-a-vis civil society support and engage with a broad range of civil society actors. Donors will need to embrace two perspectives on the role of civil society at the same time, i.e. to combine support for more confrontational social movements representing a check against the state, with support for actors that have a bridge-building function in relation to state authorities.

**New actors and new models?** Donors need to experiment with new civil society actors, and to adopt an explorative approach in relation to the established understanding of civil society and different models of democracy. When engaging with a broader spectrum of actors, including new protest movements and customary organisations, there is a need for donors to review and reflect upon what constitutes ‘good democracy’, and the role to be played by these different groups, including their potential for strengthening democratic development. Rather than only focusing on tactical questions on how and where to support, donors will need to explore and consider the possibilities of different models of democracy.

**Re-opening closing spaces:** In recent years, over 50 regimes have introduced legal restrictions on support for civil society organisations. More subtle restrictive techniques include closing civil society organisations on technical grounds. Donors should take the challenge of these ‘closing spaces’ seriously and need to adopt a more systematic and better organised strategy for re-opening the narrowing space that now restricts civil society in many countries. Dealing with the backlash must be part of a broader strategy, but it should not be overly defensive since that may engender counter-productive repression. It is important for donors to respond to the changes in a political way, and to ensure coherence between civil society support and other aspects of foreign policies. Innovative measures and flexible funding mechanisms are also important in meeting and circumventing

the backlash. Donors should be open and transparent about the support. In addition, they may use different approaches to depoliticise their civil society support.

**Support for information and communications technology:** Donors need a more balanced and nuanced approach to supporting information and communications technology (ICT) within civil society, if this is to fulfil its pro-democracy potential. A general critique of European support is that it is too oriented to training individuals, and not sufficiently focused on the ‘enabling environment’ for ICT to have a political impact. Hence, donors need to focus more on infrastructure and to put an effort into targeting new groups. In addition, the adverse effects of ICT – the ways in which it helps regimes too – need to be addressed. The positive examples of using ICT to promote ‘open governance’ at local level could be used to take the next step to promote broader political reforms.

**Linking civil society, beyond protest:** Sweden and other donors should do far more to link together civil society actors across borders, preferably in cooperation with non-traditional democratic donors. The purpose would be to encourage mutual learning between social movements that have participated in major protests in recent years, but also search for positive alternatives beyond simply protesting. Such an initiative would respond to the need for donors to move from focusing on capacity building for individual organisations to ensuring that civil society activities channel into representative bodies and real change.

The report concludes with broader reflections on how important the stakes are in this debate – and the reasons why donors will need to show greater urgency and nuance in fully meeting the challenge of a fast-evolving global civil society. The key recommendation to donors is to have a balanced approach in rethinking civil society support. Donors will need to recognise that both positive and negative change has intensified in recent years. Consequently, they need to be agile and flexible in their response to the new circumstances, without losing the lessons already learned from the less changing part of civil society.

# Chapter 1: Overview - the need to rethink civil society support

Support for civil society has been a central part of official development assistance (ODA) for many years. It has become an increasingly prominent part of ODA, as a category of funding in its own right, as one dimension of democracy support, and within most mainstream sectors of development aid. It is of particular relevance to democracy support because – as we shall see – of the way that political dynamics are changing around the world.

Much has been written about such civil society support. It has been the subject of hundreds of project evaluations, as well as more analytical assessments that focus on the generic role of civil society in democratization. However, in recent years the context for civil society has changed, and these changes are far-reaching enough to merit a reconsideration of donors' support for civil society organisations.

## Evolving challenges for donors

In recent years, a cluster of new challenges and opportunities have arisen that effect civil society support. New kinds of civic actors and protest have appeared; new forms of organisation have taken shape; and at the same time, new regime tactics have narrowed the space for civil society support in some countries.

In many regions, at least some parts of civil society have taken on a new vibrancy. Protests have spread to many countries, across different cultures and regime types. It also becoming apparent that new forms of social protest based on information communications technology are inspiring, but are also in some senses problematic. They can bestir effective protests against regimes. But they also risk undercutting the kind of alliance-building and compromises normally carried out through traditional mass membership organisations, like political parties. It is also not clear that 'new' urban movements dovetail well with more traditional organisations representing (some more successfully than others) rural populations in poor societies.

There is today a wider variety of civil society organisations that look very different from the standard, capital-based, professionalized advocacy NGO that represents the most common type of partner for

many (although not all) international donors. This is part of a broader debate that is gaining traction over different ‘varieties of democracy’ that might merit encouragement. Some types of civic actors – such as Islamist movements in North Africa and the Middle East – press for distinctive forms of democratization. Today, in many countries civic movements may militate for democracy but not be especially ‘liberal’. For international actors, there may be sharper trade-offs between supporting democracy and supporting liberal rights.

The changes to (some parts of) civil society have engendered sharp division within the civic sphere. New urban movements sit uneasily alongside traditional, rural organisations that in many developing states are still those relevant to a far larger number of people. While new features to civil society are evident in all regions, they have extended further and had more of a notable impact in some countries than in others – as we will see below. Some analysts see the new shape of civil society as positive for democracy; others fear that its impact is highly problematic and destabilizing. It is unclear how external actors can influence these new trends – if at all, but they will need to take them into account.

A more clearly negative development relates to the tactics that non-democratic regimes today employ to neuter international civil society support. These tactics go from the overt banning of external civil society funding to more subtle means of limiting donors’ political space for working with civic leaders. Donors have yet to design an effective way of working in this less favourable context.

These trends – positive and negative; structural and policy-specific – are unlikely to be temporary blips. Rather, they will colour the whole context of democracy and human rights support over the long-term. Evidence of what works and what does not work must be closely inspected and some long-standing assumptions about civil society support need to be interrogated.

## Sweden – a donor with strong focus on democracy and civil society

The changes represent a particular challenge for donors like Sweden given its relatively strong focus on democracy and human rights, and its support to and through civil society organisations.



Democracy and human rights is a thematic priority in Swedish development cooperation, and financial support for these issues has increased substantially over the past few years. The overarching objective of Swedish aid is to create preconditions for better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression. One of the sub-objectives is “strengthened democracy and gender equality, greater respect for human rights and freedom from oppression”. Greater opportunities to assert civil and political rights and a vibrant and pluralistic civil society and strengthened democratization actors are prioritized features of Swedish support.<sup>1</sup>

Sida’s democracy support amounts to more than 5 billion SEK annually, which makes it a cornerstone of Swedish development cooperation, accounting for some 30 percent of Sida’s total disbursements.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the focus on democracy support is a comparatively strong feature of Swedish aid in comparison to other countries. In the field of democracy assistance, Sweden is the largest proportionate donor of all OECD DAC countries.

Over the past ten years there has been an increased focus on supporting civil society organisations within the Swedish democracy and human rights portfolio. Democratic participation and civil society accounts for approximately 40 percent of the total portfolio.<sup>3</sup> For several years, Sweden has been one of the leading funders of civil society across the world. In terms of regional distribution, most of the Swedish democracy support goes to countries in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by Asia, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and Europe. A large share of Swedish support is channeled through intermediary organisations in Sweden and in developing countries.

In the past few years the Swedish government has put an extra emphasis on supporting ‘actors for change’ as a complement to other development cooperation in support for democracy and human rights. A Strategy for Special Initiatives for Democratization and Freedom of Expression was launched in 2009 with the purpose of strengthening agents of change – primarily individuals and civil society organisations promoting democratization and freedom of expression.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2014 a.

<sup>2</sup> Sida, 2013 a.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Sida, 2013 b.

In the strategy for special initiatives for human rights and democratization (2014-2017) there is continued strong focus on civil society organisations and change agents as important means for strengthened democracy and gender equality, greater respect for human rights and freedom from oppression.<sup>5</sup>

Support for democracy and to civil society organisations is also guided by other government strategies such as the one for support through Swedish civil society organisations (2010-2014) in which there is a clear focus on democracy and human rights. In addition, in many strategies for regional and bilateral cooperation, democracy and human rights are prioritised, and support is often provided to and through civil society organisations.

Given the scale and character of Swedish democracy support, getting the civil society support right will be crucial to the 'poverty and repression' remit that guides Swedish development cooperation.

## Report aims

This report will assess the nature of the changing context of civil society, and the implications for donors like Sweden, with a comparatively strong focus on civil society. It asks:

What are the implications of the changing conditions described above for the way that donors like Sweden should design and carry out its civil society support?

How far should 'new civil society actors' be supported? What are the advantages and disadvantages of supporting them? Where are the boundaries, and are there forms of distinctive civic groups that should not be supported?

How can 'new civil society' be supported in a way that enhances, rather than cutting across, more established parts of civil society and actors like political parties and parliaments?

What variation is required in the way that civil society is supported across different regions?

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<sup>5</sup> Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2014 b.

How strong is our ‘knowledge base’: How much do we know today about what is working and what is not working in donors’ civil society support? Is there enough evidence to draw conclusions and put forward recommendations on how to approach these new challenges and opportunities?

How can donors like Sweden design its aid to reduce the risk of regimes’ ‘pushback’ against civil society support?

What potential is there to ensure partnerships with non-traditional donors help rather than hinder the civil society agenda in non-democratic or weakly-democratic developing countries?

## Structure

In order to address these questions, the report proceeds with chapters on the following subjects:

First, an overview of the way that civil society is changing, and the related analytical debates about the concept of civil society, the relationship between democracy and these new civil society trends – including the way that this differs across regions. Second, a review of civil society perspectives on external support, and its implications for how donors may need to rethink and adjust their civil society support. Third, a short overview of some recent trend in EU support. And finally, a set of recommendations.

A final point of clarification: there are many evaluations that have focused on internal management issues in donor organisations, and in assessing ‘impact’ in terms of quantifiable outputs at project level (the number of training session or toolkits produced, for example).<sup>6</sup> While this report draws on these evaluations, its focus is expressly different. Rather than replicate the extensive amount of such project-level assessment, this report takes a more over-arching and analytical look at how the very concept of civil society is changing. It aims to stimulate debate on some of the most basic parameters of civil society – something that the report argues is necessary if donors like Sweden wishes to provide successful support. The recommendations are pitched at the level of macro-level guidelines for how civil society

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<sup>6</sup> Sida 2013 a.

support can be rendered political more effective; the report does not aim primarily to propose micro-level changes to funding modalities.

## Definitional points

Political scientists have debated the definition of civil society for many years. This report does not offer a theoretical examination of different models of civil society. But, it is necessary to clarify that its aim relates to specific parts of these definitional debates. The report's remit is not to look at every aspect of civil society support; this encompasses a huge range of projects and initiatives, especially within the sphere of mainstream development aid and service delivery objectives. This report is more narrowly concerned with the role of civil society as a *component of support for democratic reform* – that is with civil society's expressly political value in enhancing countries' degree of democracy.

In its broadest sense, civil society is defined as the sphere of non-coercive association between the individual and the state. This definition that pointedly extends well beyond organized forms of voluntary associations that are instrumental to a particular policy purpose. In conceptual terms civil society can be defined both as an intermediary space between the individual and the state, and as a set of actors with political and social functions. These are not mutually exclusive definitions but stress different aspects of civil society's role. There is no consensus on exactly where civil society starts and stops – that is, on which actors should be included and excluded. For some, civil society's essence is social movements and interest groups; others adhere to a wider notion of class, sectorial and professional activities.<sup>7</sup>

Without entering into theoretical academic debate, there is a crucial conceptual divide that is of practical relevance to this report. Analysts have traditionally adopted one of two angles. One is the liberal concept of civil society as a check on the state and government (a view first associated with John Locke). The other is a more republican concept of civil society as a sphere of building social identities and acting as a transmission belt between the private sphere and the state (a notion with roots in Tocqueville's idea of 'schools of democracy', and work by modern sociologists such as Robert Putnam). The focus

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<sup>7</sup> For a full discussion and summary of historical definitions, see Edwards ed. (2011), especially section one. See also Keane (2010).

on social capital has often been seen as an antidote to state shortcomings in the development sphere.<sup>8</sup>

Most practical efforts related to democracy support refer to the political function of civic organisations. However, some work of a less overtly political nature may also have an indirect benefit to democracy – there is much debate on whether this rightly counts as part of ‘democracy support’ or is too indirect to qualify.<sup>9</sup>

The report does not adopt a single definition of civil society; rather, it explores how recent trends enjoin us to rethink both the analytical parameters and operational utility of civil society as part of the democracy agenda. Indeed, it will make the case that a more fluid and flexible framework is required. The liberal definition of civil society should prompt donors to strengthen support to new movements mobilizing against the state. The more republican notion should encourage donors to focus more on how civil society can assist in improving the quality and legitimacy of state institutions. Rather than privileging one definition over another, the juncture calls for a *conjoining of civil society’s different and equally necessary functions*.

## Key recommendations

In telegraphic form, the report’s five main recommendations are as follows:

1. Sweden and other donors need to combine support for more confrontational social movements with cooperation for bridge-building actors that seek to link different parts of civil society, political society and the state;
2. Donors need to experiment with non-traditional actors keen to explore variations to established concepts of civil society;
3. Donors need to adopt a far more systematic and better organized strategy for re-opening the narrowing space that now restricts civil society in many countries;

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<sup>8</sup> For a summary of these two models, see Held (2006), also Hahn-Fuhr and Worschech (2014) and Putnam (1995).

<sup>9</sup> Burnell, ed, (2000), Carothers (1999).

4. Donors need a more balanced and nuanced approach to supporting information communications technology within civil society, if this is to fulfill its pro-democracy potential; and

5. Sweden and other donors should do far more to build partnerships linking civil society actors across borders, including through cooperation with non-traditional democratic donors.

## Chapter 2: Changes to civil society

This report's rationale flows in large part from the fact that recent years have witnessed fundamental changes to the structure of civil society in many developing countries. These changes present opportunities for donors but also raise more problematic question marks over the value of external support to civic initiatives.

Today, civil society is a more contested concept than it was in the moment of liberal optimism following the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is also a far more divided sphere. The division between 'old' and 'new' civil society is currently the subject of much debate amongst activists. Some analysts argue that the 'newness' of today's civil society is exaggerated. But this old-new divide is an increasingly potent phenomenon with which external support for civil society stills struggles to come to terms.

At the same time, in part because of the diffusion of civil society activism, regimes are restricting the conditions under which external support can find its way to recipients. Donors have belatedly woken up to this challenge, but have generally not fully seized its gravity. New restrictions imposed by non-democratic (and even some democratic) regimes constitute a new feature of civil society, not a temporary or ad hoc distortion.

### A new generation of civic actors?

An important debate in most societies today is about a younger generation seeking more direct models of democracy based on digital technology and crowd sourcing, and what these demands mean for concepts of both representational and direct democracy. Of course, mass mobilization has occurred at many moments in history; in this sense, the protests witnessed around the world with increasing frequency in recent years are perhaps not quite as 'new' as routinely described. But, civic dynamics have begun to shift in a more systematic way – in a manner that is relevant both in an analytical and policy sense. As the International Civil Society Centre puts it: 'change itself has changed' and today requires international civil society

organisations able to survive a whole range of more turbulent ‘disruptions’.<sup>10</sup>

Today, political influence is wielded through diffuse social movements at least as much as through traditional CSOs. These movements offer a form of ‘counterpower’ as they link together different issue-based networks. They are about changing social values and sharing cognitive identities. They tend to reject standard forms of leadership. They have expressly not forwarded policy programmes, rather listing a long litany of generic injustices. Their focus is on raising consciousness. Their importance lies in the very *process* of networking rather than in any specific substantive goals. Membership of such movements is most often occasional and shifting; individuals protest but then do not invest huge amounts of time or effort in developing serious and implementable detailed proposals for any one civic body. Protests have been predicated on an uneasy mix of students, unions and an urban underclass. Today’s civil society is more about diffuse networks, selective participation, actions as ends in themselves, civil disobedience, and symbolism.

Crucially for this report: these innovations have often emerged in developing countries and then inspired protest movements in the West. Their origins are diverse. Some techniques, such as local budget monitoring, come from community-level initiatives in Latin America. Some found early expression in the countries of the former Soviet Union as activists fought against regimes’ repressive clampdowns and the diminishing effectiveness of standard NGOs in the early 2000s – one example being Ukraine’s Orange movement in 2004. And some were forged in the heat of the 2011 Arab revolts that presented a new and inspirational template for activists around the world – Egypt’s Tahrir square protests being particularly influential in this regard.<sup>11</sup>

The influential London School of Economics (LSE) annual civil society survey notes that in recent years global civil society has shifted in its emphasis from professional NGOs to broader citizen activism. It has rebalanced from international-level social forums to more locally rooted concerns, with a particular vibrancy of loosely organised movements in the developing world. And such movements have, the

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<sup>10</sup> International Civil Society Centre (2013)

<sup>11</sup> Castells (2012); Mason (2011); Flesher Fominaya (2014); Naidoo (2010).



survey finds, become more radically questioning of the democratic effectiveness of traditional civil society forms.<sup>12</sup>

Ishkanian and other experts talk of a ‘second generation’ of civil society emerging – especially in the former Soviet space, in the Middle East and in the especially testing conditions of China. These are based around informal campaigning for extremely local issues, like preventing particular infrastructure projects. However, they see such issues as the concrete manifestation of corruption, oligarchic capitalism and persistent authoritarian dynamics. The groups are not professionalized and indeed often have a negative view of the professionalized NGO sector. Unlike the latter, they may reject support from international sources. Indeed, they maintain that outside support has distorted the agendas adopted by professional NGOs, making them more accountable to external than domestic actors. The second generation initiatives want to be seen as broad-based and inclusive movements, not ‘opposition’ activists aligned with certain political parties or political agendas.<sup>13</sup>

There are those who argue that the trends are not entirely new and are anyway limited to a small number of geographical sites. They suggest that today’s protests largely mimic old-style direct action, or that the newer forms of organisation are more prevalent in the rich Western countries than elsewhere. Such scepticism is a healthy corrective to accounts that rather easily assume the whole civic sphere to be radically different today to anything that has gone before. It is certainly true that more empirical evidence is still needed from across the world to determine what precisely is changing and what is not changing in the realm of civil society – a task well beyond the limited scope of this report. Moreover, it remains difficult precisely to draw a definitional line separating what can be defined as ‘new types of social movements’ from older-style NGOs.

However there are signs that new trends are afoot. It would be shortsighted for donors not to react or to dismiss the fluidity of today’s civic spheres. Protests and new forms of civic activism have rocked a large number of very different countries. Just in the last two years, such civil society revolts have been seen in Brazil, Turkey, India, Thailand, Russia, Ukraine, Bosnia, Egypt and Bahrain – to name but a

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<sup>12</sup> Anheier et al (2012).

<sup>13</sup> Ishkanian (2014). For broader background, see the classic Keane (2003), and Mendelson and Glenn (2002).

few examples. Experts have chronicled in detail the emergence of a different kind of civic activism across eastern Europe. They stressed the new forms of organisation that underpinned demonstrations in Russia in 2011 and that now characterize the beleaguered Russian opposition. Many accounts have uncovered the central role of new, loosely organized social movements in the Arab spring. Studies of Turkey's recent protests provide another example. In addition, Latin America has been identified as another site where forms of social organisation have evolved, mixing newer technologies with more traditional forms of identity. There are inevitably differences between countries and regions, but there is clearly something going on that is different and that applies across most parts of the developing and emerging worlds.<sup>14</sup>

The new actors provide new channels for processes of legitimization especially in countries where formal democratic representation and civil society organisation face obstacles. More informal deliberative processes in the developing world open a path to democratic innovations and different models of democracy.<sup>15</sup> Critiques from the Global South have for some time suggested that greater participatory democracy is particularly promising outside the West, as here the gap between political representatives and the public is so large that thicker participatory mechanisms are welcome.<sup>16</sup>

Many new civic groups are based on consensual deliberation. There is a trend towards 'autonomy' that entails democracy not just protecting individual rights but also according citizens the capacity and effective independence to exert influence and hold decision-making accountable – a trend prominent outside the West as developing states and emerging economies seek variations to the Western model of democracy.<sup>17</sup> New forms of organisation are emerging that are increasingly lauded as having representational legitimacy. The recent trajectory of this civic activity has been about 'guaranteeing heterogeneity' across different parts of the developing world and a taming of formal institutional structures.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Beichelt et al. (2014); Youngs (2014), chapter 2; Krastev (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Della Porta (2013).

<sup>16</sup> Gaventa (2006).

<sup>17</sup> Held (2006) p. 263-271, p. 307.

<sup>18</sup> Miszlivetz (2012) p. 62 and p. 64.

‘Advocacy democracy’ is a concept now much touted and apparently in increasing demand. The key to such deliberative and participative forms is not just the fostering of civic forums per se but the notion that these shape preferences - rather than democracy just being about aggregation of pre-existing interests and positions.<sup>19</sup> There is more debate on the possible spread of Swiss style ‘semi-direct democracy’, for example in the resurgence of local, customary mechanisms in Africa.

Many theorists argue that moves to re-legitimize democracy must be built around loose forms of deliberation and localism, even cutting across the traditional container of the nation state, around smaller units better able to defend against centralized institutionalisation. In developing and emerging economies this localism is the flip side to globalism, as communities seek ownership over distinctive forms of political organisation.<sup>20</sup>

These trends exhibit a certain commonality across regions. At the same time, the issue of geographical variation has become prominent. In some places, local movements have grown out of religious identities (the Arab world). In some places they can be focused mainly on economic questions (Latin America), in others on questions of political-national identity (eastern Europe and Central Asia) and very specific political grievances. Some are hyper-modern while in some regions debates over traditional forms have resurfaced.

The notion of civic watchdogs more effectively monitoring public policy resonates with many local level initiatives in non-Western states. Charles Tilly has argued that the crisis of politics today reveals just how much effective democracy hinges upon the ‘integration of interpersonal trust networks into public politics’.<sup>21</sup> Pippa Norris uncovered changing forms of critical citizenship.<sup>22</sup> John Keane has written of a more watchful and interventionist civil society sitting at the heart of a ‘monitory democracy’ that is taking place in India, Africa, Latin America and elsewhere, as something different from standard Western-style civic organisation and understandings of democracy.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Dryzek (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Bohman (2007); Dryzek (2006).

<sup>21</sup> Tilly (2007) p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Norris (1999).

<sup>23</sup> Keane (2009).

## Good or bad for democracy?

It can be argued that, in many senses, these structural changes are positive and welcome. The emergence of new civic actors and more confrontational protest activity represents a benign, healthy and to-be-expected playing out of the way that democracies are supposed to resolve differences. The middle class has become more active across the world as its attention turns to non-material grievances, like political freedoms.<sup>24</sup>

From this point of view, the changing nature of civil society activity offers a series of opportunities for donors. It requires donors to adjust many elements of their funding mechanisms but it does not call for any fundamental soul-searching over the essential relationship between civil society activity and democratic quality. Critics have said for many years that civic activity needs to widen out beyond the familiar circle of professional NGOs; and now this has happened, and should thus be welcomed and going with the grain of what critics have urged donors to do for the last decade.<sup>25</sup>

The new civil society activity is in many ways more effective and more agile. Internally, today's protest networks allow ideas to emerge in a more democratic way. Interesting innovation is afoot.

Other analysts are more skeptical. They argue that the explosion of protests shows that something is pathologically wrong with democracy. The eruption of more conflictive civil society activity around the world in recent years denotes a mal-functioning, a misfiring of the long-supposed connection between civil society and democratic quality. The much celebrated 'new' movements and actors have not prevented a general 'democratic recession' or some notable reversals of transition opportunities, especially in the Middle East and eastern Europe.

These skeptics base their case on the argument that today's new civil society actors are almost the antithesis of the democracy-enhancing qualities that civil society organisations have traditionally been assumed to possess. Indeed, they most commonly exhibit a visceral dislike of the traditional NGO community – and can often

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<sup>24</sup> Fukuyama (2014).

<sup>25</sup> For this positive take see in particular Della Porta (2013) and Castells (2012).

hold donor funding to be part and parcel of what they are mobilizing against.

The critical line is that today's protests are about atomized and disgruntled individuals; they reflect individual demands not coherently thought-through group interests. Today's protestors oppose and seek to undermine governmental power; but they have no ideology, no comprehensive governing manifestos of their own. They propose no solutions. They oppose certain policies (austerity, elite corruption) but have no systemic alternative worked out; indeed as a whole protestors advocate the whole array of totally incompatible options, from more state to more market, from more internationalism to nationalist parochialism. Critics say they are hyper-libertarian rather than democratic. And crucially, this is why they have failed to bring democracy to Russia or the Middle East.<sup>26</sup>

These initiatives have often been successful in their local campaigns; traditional democracy NGOs criticize them for being 'bought off' by elites who are all too willing, in populist fashion, to 'save a park' without any threat to their political power. Especially in Eastern Europe and the southern Caucasus it has been rare for new civil society activity to be channeled towards a set of coherent, achievable goals in relation to regimes and the state.<sup>27</sup>

Critics insist that, contrary to much received wisdom, the rise of these groups has not been caused by social media and ICT advances, but by a loss of faith in governance itself. They do not even seek to replace one government with that of a different colour; all holders of political power are equally condemned as illegitimate. Disruption has become an end in itself. Participation in politics today stands at odds with political representation. Critics lament that civic movements are today anti-institutional; they do not seek actively to strengthen the institutional checks and balances of liberal democracy but rather seek direct action as a means of circumventing the channels of representative democracy. In places like Brazil and Turkey they now see elections as increasingly meaningless, as embedded, self-serving elites remain in power and/or citizens' concerns remain unaddressed.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> One the best of the more critical takes is Krastev (2014). For gentler and more balanced critiques, see: Saward (2003); Ginsborg (2008); as well as material from IDS/Sussex University research project "Unruly Politics"; Khanna (2012).

<sup>27</sup> Beichelt and Merkel (2014).

<sup>28</sup> Krastev (2014).

Popularity is garnered by individuals with followers on Twitter, Facebook and in the blogosphere – rather than by group-based political engagement. Some observers stress that banal, single issue social movements are not able to generate collective action. Sceptics argue that civic protest now occurs in a form that cuts worryingly across democracy's representative institutions, such has the been the focus on participative dynamics in recent years.<sup>29</sup>

A related and vital concern is that new urban social movements have little contact with those living in rural communities and not mobilized in the same overtly political sense. In rural locations, forms of organisation do not look particularly new. The attention focused on urban protests dangerously deflects from the far larger pool of disaffected citizenry living in rural communities – and less consideration has been given to the need to enhance democratic civic capacity at this level.

In sum, many skeptics see the strength of new social movements as more of a threat to, rather than a regeneration of liberal democracy. They no longer provide a transmission belt between the individual citizen and the political sphere (parties and government). In several countries they have made the forming of new political parties harder and less likely.<sup>30</sup> For one of the most influential theorists of democracy, we now face a wholesale 'counter-democracy'.<sup>31</sup> In a broader sweep of temporal development: today's movements may not be optimal from the point of view of developing the kind of deeply-rooted social capital that can make the difference between successful and dysfunctional democracy.<sup>32</sup>

The skeptical accounts surely underplay one crucial distinction: protestors in non-democratic states have taken to the streets demanding the basic, core institutional features of liberal democracy, even as protestors in Western democracies complain these have lost their meaning. The irony is that many protests in non-Western authoritarian states today press for the core features of what is traditionally labeled as Western, liberal democracy, at the same time as

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<sup>29</sup> Krastev (2013) p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> Krastev (2014).

<sup>31</sup> Rosanvallon (2008).

<sup>32</sup> Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993).

protestors in Western democracies agitate for radical alternatives to this democracy.<sup>33</sup>

This report contends that both the positive and sceptical interpretations have merit. It is necessary not to paint an overly uniform picture of civil society. There is clearly more variety of civic actors today. Some mean to engage the state, critically but with the idea of improving the quality of democratic citizenship in a way that contributes towards the state providing effective policy solutions. Others are clearly more fundamentally against governmental power, even of a formally democratic kind.

## Restrictions on civil society

The evolving structure of civil society feeds into another challenge. As civil society actors have changed tactics and become more confrontational, so have non-democratic regimes responded in kind. Regimes are no longer a passive variable in the unfolding of civil society support.<sup>34</sup>

That is, there is particularly specific challenge that heightens the need for a more political rethink: regimes now target international support as one weapon in their broad arsenal of self-preservation techniques. Regimes have become more astute and cleverer in neutralising democratic dynamics; international donors are now constricted in their operations, but the challenge is magnified even beyond this by the way that regimes now purposefully seek to disrupt the whole range of factors that are traditionally seen as causal factors of democratic transitions.

In recent years, over 50 regimes have introduced legal restrictions on support for civil society organisations. More subtle restrictive techniques also include closing civil society organisations on technical grounds, like failing health inspections; creating shadow civil society bodies, youth movements and political parties; the use of new ICT to compile lists of opposition supporters who then suffer ‘subtle’ forms of reprisal, such as losing jobs, health benefits or education places; and

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<sup>33</sup> Krastev (2014).

<sup>34</sup> This section borrows extensively from Carothers and Behrenmacher (2014).

cooperation between authoritarian regimes to hand back opposition exiles to each other on a more systematic basis.<sup>35</sup>

Even democratic governments have introduced restrictions. That is, while in some countries the problems for donors and international foundations are part of a general anti-democratic backlash, in others they are more specific targets within a generally benign and still-reformist political context. Even in partially democratic states like Morocco, the authorities have begun to intimate civil society representatives expressly for their cooperation with European donors and projects.

Democracy promoters have to deal with direct threats to their own operations in addition to regimes' tactics that render the whole in-country context less auspicious. Many of these new resistance tactics are crafted with both internal and external pressures in mind; they may not be exclusively or directly aimed at international democracy support projects but they serve to complicate such assistance even further. Such measures may not explicitly outlaw democracy support, but they make it harder for external actors to meet technical requirements; find willing recipients who are not worried about the effect on their credibility of partnering with Western organisations; to take risks; to gain legitimacy; to prize would-be reformers away from regimes; and to craft inclusive coalitions between domestic actors.

This all represents part of regimes' ever-widening and sophisticated implementation of the backlash against democracy support. It raises some profound and searching questions about the wisdom and propriety of democracy support. The danger appears greater today of outside support being counter-productive: democracy promotion efforts are indubitably the cause of regimes clamping down far more than was previously the case. Donors like Sweden must reflect on the very fundamental question of whether the backlash can indeed be countered sufficiently for democracy support still to be worthwhile.

Donors must not unduly despair. Regimes' innovative tactics have caused heightened problems for democracy promoters. But autocrats themselves worry that they constantly need to reinvent such tactics to keep ahead of social demands for more open government. Of course, the spread of democracy to some new countries suggests that the backlash itself has not been entirely successful.

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<sup>35</sup> For a general overview of new authoritarian techniques, see Dobson (2012)



## Possible policy implications

Policy implications of the trends described above are not easy to decipher. Donors are obliged to strike a very fine and difficult balance: they must do more to draw out the positive potential of the new structures of civil society, while also being more attentive to correcting its imbalances. They must understand the new trends in civil society as being both galvanizing of democratic quality, but also a possible danger to foundations of smooth-running representative institutions.

The challenge is to promote a civil society that is more ‘liberal’ and less ‘liberal’ at the same time: one dimension of donors’ policy must be to widen the net of support to include those ‘new actors’ that are more confrontational with the state and towards established concepts of political order. But another element of policy must be to support more consensual routes to political influence and to tighten the linkages between the ‘new’ and ‘old’ components of civil society, and between civil society and the the state – not something at the forefront of the liberal concept of civil society’s function being to restrain more than empower the state.

Getting this balance right is taxing enough. But the task is made even more difficult by regimes’ ever-more inventive tactics in response to new civil society vibrancy. As we will see in the final chapter, this enjoins donors not only to fine-tune this civil society support but also to dovetail this far more tightly and effective with the high-political diplomacy of civil society support.

## Chapter 3: Civil society perspectives on external support

This chapter looks at the implications of civil society support in relation to the trends outlined in chapter two. The chapter also pays particular attention to research on how recipients assess donors' approaches to civil society support. These assessments of the existing knowledge-base on civil society impacts lay the foundations for a wider consideration of how such support needs to be rethought.

### Have donors compounded imbalances?

If current trends in civil society do have negative implications for democracy, as outlined in chapter two, donors have (even if unwittingly) made these worse. Tension between professional NGOs and grassroots organisations is not entirely donors' fault; it is in part a product of internal factors too. However, donors have compounded the division.

There are two very different criticisms made against donors. The first is that donors have favoured CSOs that are *not adversarial enough*. The second is that donors need a *more consensual* understanding of civil society, in light of current political trends.

*More confrontation?* Critical voices make a significant distinction between CSOs and social movements. Donors fund the former, they argue, in a way that shuts out, contains or tames those social movements that push for more radical versions of democracy or more far-reaching policy changes. These movements are about communicative spaces for consensus-building that are explicitly held to be an alternative to, what their participants see as, the rigid hierarchies of representative democracy. They are about contestation not about polite civility and the acceptance of status quo boundaries – and because of this they are unduly ignored by donors.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Della Porta (2013). See also, reports from conferences on civil society, co-hosted by Sida and Uppsala University: Faith in Civil Society – Religious Actors as Drivers of Change (2013), and Global Civil Society – Shifting Powers in a Shifting World (2012) ([www.csduppsala.uu.se](http://www.csduppsala.uu.se)).

The standard criticism is that donors have been primarily responsible for creating somewhat artificial or ‘engineered’ spheres of civil society. This is now a well-established point made in all evaluations and more analytical accounts of civil society: namely, that donor activities have led to an inaccurate and unhealthy conflation of ‘civil society’ with a layer of professional and overtly political, advocacy NGOs. These have squeezed out the more organic growth of looser, grass-roots organisations, rather than helping the latter in their goals of effectively influencing state bodies. The division and tension between civil society bodies that receive external funds and those that do not is now routinely understood to be one of the main factors that have held back democratic consolidation.<sup>37</sup>

This has generated a crucially important suggestion: there is a need for donors better to understand how their preference for certain types of civil society actor and engendered certain types of reactions amongst domestic actors in recipient countries – and that these reactions have not necessarily been conducive to smooth and comprehensive processes of democratization. Research has charted the emergence of non-institutionalized, volunteer-based civic initiatives that are worryingly ambivalent or even hostile to donor’s democracy support agenda.<sup>38</sup>

*More consensus?* The somewhat conflicting interpretation of current trends is that donors need a less adversarial picture of civil society. Extensive studies of the different dimensions of civil society support conclude that the unduly strict separation between civil society support and engagement with regime elites has blunted the reformist impact of donor initiatives. These studies argue that this calls for donors to be more open to a different conception of civil society. To date, they have ascribed to a highly liberal notion of civil society has a counter-force to the state, when what is needed is a more republican understanding of civil society as a more cooperative transmission from the citizen to positive problem-solving through state policies.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ishkanian (2014). Early critiques of the narrowness of civil society support include Burnell and Calvert, eds (2004); Gibbon (1995); Mamdani (1995); Kasfir (1998).

<sup>38</sup> Ishkanian (2014).

<sup>39</sup> A prominent theme through Beichelt, Hahn-Fuhr, Schimmelfennig and Worschech (2014).

This speaks to a notion of civil society as complementary rather than adversarial to the state; more about constructing networks of trust than simply restricting the state; more about a means of community development than the bold assertion of individual rights. It is a concept of civil society associated with writers such as Charles Tilly, amongst others.<sup>40</sup>

The implication is that donors should move away from supporting a small number of potential change-agents who are openly hostile to the government (outspoken ‘liberal’ critics of the regime) and towards supporting a more generic accumulation of social capital that allows effective pro-democracy activism as and when the opportunities present themselves. This should involve initiatives involving a wider range of CSOs, that focus on joint socialization between civil society and state insiders.<sup>41</sup>

## Civil society and half-way transitions

It is necessary to stand back and relate these assessments to the broader dynamic of democratic transition. It is this dimension that is normally absent from civil society evaluations.

The above kinds of assessments relate to a key feature of political change, increasingly common in recent years: civil society support has helped much pro-democracy activism but also contributed toward *incomplete* democratic transitions.

The role of civil society in transitions is now recognized to be more varied and complex than previously assumed. In the early transitions of the third wave and those in central and eastern Europe, support for civil society was seen as a means of helping modest advances in political liberalization that would then ‘snowball’ into full democratic consolidation. This assumption now looks more questionable.

The process of political transition is now understood to be subject to many divergent influences that militate against a smooth ‘snowball momentum’ from islands of civil society strengthening to the full unfolding of high quality democracy. The way in which many third wave transitions initially seemed to be playing out helped breed the

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<sup>40</sup> Tilly (2007).

<sup>41</sup> Hahn-Fuhr and Worschech (2014).

view that small-steps of political opening generate a self-sustaining momentum towards a natural end-point of democratic consolidation. But the end of this 'transition paradigm' was declared over a decade ago.<sup>42</sup> Policy-makers insist they no longer base their strategies on such assumptions. Yet, in practical terms transitions are still widely seen as imbued with a kind of inherent forward movement that transcends momentary setbacks.

Political trends during the last decade suggest an even greater 'bumpiness' in processes of political change. They raise more serious questions over the idea that limited political liberalization transmutes incrementally and inexorably into positive system-level reform. In some countries it is difficult even to ascertain whether a 'transition' is underway or not. Elements of democratization co-exist with aspects of de-democratization. Forward and backward movement occurs simultaneously.

The implication is that significant amounts of civil society support have been poured into countries that then undergo formal political openings only to see a subsequent backlash restrict civic space.

In the terminology of political scientists, political change has become more path-dependent. Recent developments in places like the Middle East and the post-Soviet states heighten the sense that hybrid conglomerations of democracy and autocracy are becoming more prevalent. In these countries, a degree of space is allowed to civil society and much international funding to CSOs continues. Yet, these semi-democracies erode the very meaning of democracy, as elections produce majorities unrestrained by the rule of law and able to curtail individual rights. Democracy of sorts can co-exist today with very constricted civil society; or, conversely, the latter can expand while democracy if anything deteriorates. Critics charge donors with having been insufficiently aware of the challenge of hybridity.<sup>43</sup>

Summarizing all these changes, one expert argues that the unique combination of events that produced a certain type of 'transition' characteristic of the 'third wave' – the model that placed civil society as core protagonist and which posited a spill-over from CSO support to systemic political change – no longer pertain. Pressure for democracy continues, but a different conception of change will be required, as

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<sup>42</sup> Carothers (2001).

<sup>43</sup> Diamond (2002).

states are set to fluctuate between weak democracy and weak autocracy.<sup>44</sup>

## Civil Society Views

One strand of research has focused specifically on the views of CSOs themselves.<sup>45</sup> This research has uncovered a number of widely-accepted lessons from civil society support. Comprehensive projects based on interviews with civil society recipients reveal that the latter make a range of criticisms. These include the claims that:

- donor agendas still fail to link political reform objectives to other local concerns;
- much democracy assistance deepens more than it ameliorates the kind of domestic polarization that militates against democratic deepening;
- donors have allowed regimes to neuter reform dynamics in efforts to link state and civil society; and
- donors' other policy strands need to be far more tightly dovetailed to democracy objectives to provide the latter with sufficient political backing.

Civil society organisations most commonly call for smaller, more flexible grants distributed directly by embassies. Local stakeholders still want donors to get out of national capitals and to implement programmes that are allowed to change over time as circumstances evolve. They also want greater flexibility not to have to publicize the support they receive from international organisations.

A frequent complaint is that funds are forthcoming for 'projects' that civil society organisations have to, in some sense, 'invent' rather than for their normal day-to-day functioning and core business. There is broad agreement on the need to shift from product to process, from 'Western' values to 'local' values. But translating this into programmable principles is not judged to have advanced enough.

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<sup>44</sup> Plattner (2014).

<sup>45</sup> This summary of CSO views draws from a large-scale research project on democracy assistance carried out by FRIDE in 2010-2011, and funded by a consortium of seven donors, involving fieldwork in 19 countries. See [www.fride.org](http://www.fride.org)

Some concern emerges that donors can appear ‘behind the curve’, with models rooted especially in the revolutions of central and eastern Europe, when many of the ways in which civic groups organize and communicate have changed significantly in the last twenty years. Growing criticism is directed at training initiatives in this domain. This is especially true of training on elections, party development, manifestos etc. that local actors deride as ‘pre-formatted’ and of limited practical use. Basic capacity and organisational training is now seen as less useful than it was in the first decade of democracy assistance.

Recent experience in many target states suggests that their civil societies are ahead in terms of using new communications technology such as Facebook and Twitter for political purposes. Less of a premium is placed than it was 20 years ago on basic information sharing and teaching communications-organisational techniques – the web almost provides information overload in some cases – leaving stakeholders looking for more ‘macro’ level backing from donors.

There is a widespread criticism that too much funding still goes to and through Western NGOs; many recipients complain of being shoe-horned into arbitrary ‘networks’ at the behest of Western NGOs charged by donors with channeling support to amalgams of local stakeholders. Western NGOs are still seen as heavy-handed in dictating terms and taking the lion’s share of funding when donors support these big international NGOs to build bridges to smaller local organisations.

Civil society organisations say they need greater constancy and continuity, and criticize external democracy promoters for suddenly changing priorities in a way that disrupts reform dynamics. A regular call is for donors to end ‘stop-and-start’ fluctuations in their funding patterns and offer longer-term funding horizons. Recipients want both fewer strings attached to funds and more of an engagement with long-term impact.

CSOs continue to call for better coordination between different democracy promoters. It is widely felt that if donors could at least harmonize their myriad reporting requirements this would be of enormous benefit to local organisations.

Civil society organisations and representatives of state institutions unite in calling for priorities to be set locally. Local stakeholders want greater say over thematic priorities and less burdensome rules for

justifying how they spend foreign funds. Often donors are missing promising ‘access points’ because they are, it is felt, still unwilling to cede control over thematic preferences.

A fine line exists: if donors set the priorities, they are accused of being insensitive; if they follow local demands they risk shoring up a self-perpetuating cottage industry of NGOs. Civil society organisations are often contradictory in wanting less control over their own projects, but more donor monitoring of other recipients’ funds.

Civil society organisations most appreciate local-level projects that assist self-organisation based around issues of practical relevance to individual citizens. Local stakeholders perceive that the democracy agenda has become increasingly disconnected from such concerns – and that this is one of the reasons for it struggling to recoup esteem amongst ordinary people. Donors need to renew their efforts to make sure that macro-institutional aims and templates speak to people’s day-to-day priorities.

Many CSOs argue that more valuable than slightly increased amounts of money, or slightly changed funding rules, would be more effective international pressure on regimes to loosen civil society and other laws. Without such changes, there is now enough accumulated experience to suggest that funding invariably has a relatively limited potential. Local stakeholders are, almost without exception, looking for a much tighter linkage between project funding and the nature of diplomatic relations between donor governments and non-democratic regimes. The lack of such a connection is almost universally seen as a major cause of democracy assistance’s increasingly disappointing record.

## Possible policy implications

In sum, while the notion of supporting civil society as a component of democracy-building is still widely favoured, more critical voices have emerged. Some sceptics believe external actors actually prejudice democratization because they back a very imbalanced and artificial concept of civil society. Others are concerned that while donors have a modestly positive impact they unwittingly help a partial political liberalization that can forestall wholesale democratization. Recipients themselves press for a range of changes to international funding. The positive benefits of civil society support can no longer be quite so



automatically assumed. If the criticisms are to be rebutted, Sweden and other donors need to address the growing chorus of concerns.

## Chapter 4: Promising donor initiatives?

If these are the changes and emerging challenges facing external support to civil society, how far have donors so far responded? European donors have begun to explore new approaches to civil society. Despite the economic crisis, overall funding levels to civil society remain relatively high. Some of the concerns raised in the previous chapters are clearly on the donors' agenda. Several new initiatives offer promising avenues for rolling-out revamped strategies of civil society support. However, in several respects European donors are struggling to keep with changes to the civil society context.

So far, the report has suggested two levels of challenge for donors. First, it has unpacked a set of generic shortcomings to civil society support that have been pinpointed through a series of evaluations and research. Second, it has suggested that the whole nature of civil society is today more of moving target, requiring of donors a more fundamental stock-take that goes well beyond the normal, periodic commitment to increase project efficiency. While donors have made some steps to address these two levels of challenge, they will need to go further in developing their incipient new approaches.

This report has insufficient space to offer a comprehensive assessment of how all European donors are currently meeting the two levels of challenge. However, before moving on to our final recommendations, it is instructive to note briefly a number of new EU-level initiatives and policy changes that do appear to be reacting.

### EU-level initiatives

The European Commission's dedicated budget line for democracy support, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) has for a long time been criticized for its cautious and traditional approach to civil society support. The EIDHR is reactive (through calls for proposals); heavily oriented towards very traditional human rights umbrella organisations; and has very rarely used its ability to fund projects not favoured by regimes. Its calls for proposals have become even more complex and the number of recipient states now exceeds 80, meaning that each country gets an average of 450,000 euros, with none getting more than 3 million euro – amounts entirely incompatible with far-reaching impact. The EIDHR funds many

socially-oriented CSOs, but in many states cannot be said to have made any tangible contribution to democratization.

However, after many critical evaluations, the EIDHR is improving. It has become more proactive and flexible, in part to defend its ground against the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Officials insist it has begun proactively to target more sensitive political projects, beyond the more narrowly defined human rights issues upon which it has usually focused.

The mainstream aid funding channeled through the European Commission is also evolving. After a similar spate of evaluations that pointed to the limited political impact of high levels of funding offered to civil society bodies over many years, the Commission has moved to modify aspects of its funding. Realizing the centrality of context in explaining hindrances to democratic reform, it has committed itself to better understand ‘traditional power structures’ and ‘indigenous communities’ in its democracy and human rights support programmes.<sup>46</sup>

In September 2012, the European Commission and Catherine Ashton forwarded proposals on improving the EU's support to transition countries, promising ‘Swift, tailor-made, comprehensive and driven by the reform countries themselves.’<sup>47</sup> Countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia have been given the lead role in designing their development programmes with the European Commission – albeit with mixed results in terms of democratic reform. In addition, the Instrument for Stability now gives more to projects designed by civil society actors, not merely for traditional conflict stabilisation.<sup>48</sup>

A notable new initiative in recent years is the creation of the European Endowment Democracy (EED). This was talked about for many years before finally being set up in 2013; Poland and Sweden were the two states that pushed hardest for its inception. The EED's very rationale is to offer a qualitative change to civil society support. It has put in place an approach focused on quick delivery of small amounts of support to ‘new actors’, and in particular to unregistered groups and individuals. It is making a particular effort to target online movements in a way that links these into mainstream political activity.

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<sup>46</sup> External Action Service and European Commission (2012) pp. 4-5.

<sup>47</sup> Global Europe, 4 October 2012.

<sup>48</sup> European Commission (2013) p. 31.

EED officials see the organisation as having a catalytic function, offering itself as a clearing-house, honest broker and risk taker. It has gone further than any other source of European civil society so far in reacting to the structural changes to civil society described in the previous chapters.

Experts engaged in the development community have generally concluded that ‘while the importance of politics for development has been recognized for many years, progress in changing practice remains slow’. Much focus has been on building coalitions between CSOs and authorities to work on very specific sectoral reforms – the way tax systems are managed or the forestry sector is run, for example – rather than ‘democracy’ per se. The onus here has been on how positive results have been helped through ‘politically smart and locally-led approaches to aid’ and ‘open-ended, iterative learning processes’.<sup>49</sup> Most parts of development agencies insist that when they support ‘participation’ and ‘accountability’ they are not supporting civil society actors militating for *democratic* participation or accountability, but only more technical versions of these principles to do with the governance of aid and service delivery.<sup>50</sup>

So far, European responses to the ‘closing space’ challenge have been tentative, even though the issue is now taken seriously. The US has become far more ambitious, proactive and political on the ‘closing space’ challenge; it has begun funding projects to help NGOs maintain secrecy from authorities, gain ground over regimes in the ICT battle and participate in virtual training outside the purview of regimes. The EU and member states have not adopted anything so systematic and have mainly sought to bring the UN in to develop rules at the multilateral level that ensure NGOs’ right to receive external funding.

A small number of democracy assistance projects have begun to focus in more specifically on efforts to combat the backlash. One example is the European Commission’s No Disconnect program that was conceived as part of the response to the Arab spring: this provides technical advice to NGOs to circumvent regimes’ use of technology to neutralize ICT. This initiative has spurred a European Capability for Situational Capability platform. Several European governments

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<sup>49</sup> ODI, Aiding reform: lessons on what works, what doesn’t, and why, Event summary, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Carothers and Brechenmacher, working paper (2014).

form part of a Community of Democracies working group aimed at pre-empting problems for civil society activists. Some EU responses have convinced governments to retract draconian NGO laws.

The EU has put liaison officers into many delegations to help activists under threat. The EIDHR has increased the number of small and flexible grants available for NGO personnel threatened by more restrictive measures, to help pay for security, medical bills, relocation and legal help.<sup>51</sup> But in general the problem has not been tackled in a systematic or assertive fashion. European governments have tried a variety of tactics – moving recipients offshore, channeling funds through arms length organisations, outsourcing to non-Western donors, protective technology – but often half-heartedly and so far without consistent success.<sup>52</sup>

EU development cooperation has become more political in its stated aims, with a focus on transition societies and the frequent articulation of political goals.<sup>53</sup> Notwithstanding some minor changes, however, EU agencies still remain ambivalent, at best, over the adoption of more political approaches in actual practice.<sup>54</sup> Civil society support still mostly adheres to a rather apolitical script.

According to one detailed report from the Overseas Development Institute, EU development aid remains focused on fostering accountability and transparency, as a means of supporting better service delivery outcomes, and explicitly as an alternative to a focus on the principles of democracy per se. Most civil society support addresses issues of good governance. This has produced many governance gains, but such support does not always correlate with an improvement in democracy per se. Indeed, transparency and accountability in service delivery have improved in some non-democratic states like China and Rwanda, and remain worse in more democratic states like Malawi.<sup>55</sup> Many involved in European development policies still resist the idea that civil society support should be seen as an avenue into influencing political outcomes directly.

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<sup>51</sup> European Union (2013) p. 79.

<sup>52</sup> Carothers and Behrenmacher (2014).

<sup>53</sup> European Commission (2012).

<sup>54</sup> Carothers and Gramont (2013).

<sup>55</sup> Bergh, Foresti, Rocha Menocal and Wild (2012).

EU support for the rule of law has remained largely technocratic, focused on the outward anatomical structure of legal institutions, not the way that law mediates the power relationships between state and society.<sup>56</sup> Legal aid CSOs are widely supported, along with civic initiatives that monitor judicial corruption. These have helped improve case-load management and access to justice; but the political control over judicial decisions has if anything increased in most states where donors have funded rule of law CSOs for many years.

In sum, the evidence suggests that the EU has begun to recognise the changes afoot to global civil society and to respond to them. There are many promising new initiatives now in the pipeline. The EU offers lessons in this sense to other donors. Yet, most EU initiatives remain tentative and their architects acknowledge the need to advance further, and to make difficult trade-offs in which elements of civil society to prioritise.

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<sup>56</sup> Nicolaidis and Kleinfeld (2012).

## Chapter 5: Ways forward

The foregoing analysis shows that the juncture is difficult. In some ways the combination of bottom-up and top-down pressures raises the question of whether civil society support has had its day. The sceptic might note that external support is now, first, more likely to invite unwelcome attention from regime authorities and second, is also seen unfavourably by ‘second generation’ civic groups. Such support is challenged from below and from above. If it is to have a future, it must adapt.

Strategy needs better to get a grasp of the complex and changing politics of reform and counter-reform. This involves more than the now routine calls for better political analysis in recipient states. Democracy may be reached by unfamiliar paths. Conversely, supporting familiar-looking ‘change agents’ may have limited impact. The role and impact of civil society can be quite contrary across different states nominally ‘in transition’.

Of course, the appropriate tactics will differ according to regime type. Civil society support will necessarily be of a different type in closed authoritarian regimes than in countries undergoing democratization processes. Nevertheless, there are many general challenges that donors must face. The fact that most regimes in developing countries contain a hybrid mix of some openness with some illiberal autocratic elements, reinforces the common importance of these challenges.

In this vein, five areas of reconsideration are needed. These do not amount to specific project-level recommendations, but a series of recommendations that might help redefine overarching donor approaches towards civil society support.

### 1. New actors and bridge-building actors

As this report has revealed, there are diametrically opposed diagnoses of the current difficulties with civil society support. For some observers, external civil society support has been too oriented towards a liberal concept of CSOs representing a check *against the state*. (Within development debates, as opposed to democracy debates, this is aligned with criticism that support for service delivery CSOs has

served a neo-liberal economic agenda of weakening the state). According to this view, support needs to be re-oriented towards what for shorthand we can call a more 'republican' understanding of civil society, within which the latter plays a more cooperative bridging function in relation to state authorities.

For others, civil society's most promising democracy-enhancing potential lies with groups that are more, not less combative. External powers should, from this point of view, adopt a more positive attitude towards more radical civic initiatives including those that are willing to challenge donor understandings of liberal democracy and economic policies.

Sweden and other donors paradoxically need to embrace both these perspectives simultaneously. To date, the tendency has been to support a certain segment of civil society that neither fully captures the 'second generation' of civic initiatives *nor* targets those seeking to play a bridge-building rather than watchdog function. Civil society support has occupied a *safe middle ground*, embracing neither the most 'radical' nor the most 'organic-republican' actors.

External civil society support needs to move outwards from this middle-ground in *both* these directions.

It is this combination that is necessary to address one of the fundamental observations to emerge from this report: the changing structure of civil society activism holds potential but also risks for democracy quality. It needs to be encouraged, but the fragmentation of new activism must also be contained. Civil society that supports new activity but also seeks a *bridge-building* function into representative institutions would be best placed to do this: it can harness the potential of global protest activity while reducing the risk that it morphs into 'disruption for the sake of disruption'. This may help carve some modest space for safeguarding civil society in more closed regime-types, not just those already undergoing a degree of political liberalization. Conceptually, donors must pay more attention to balancing and combining the *critical* function of civic initiatives with their *agglutination* (or interconnection) role.

As the second generation of civic initiatives commonly does not seek external funding, donors need to reassess the best way to facilitate their activities. Getting too close to such groups may undermine their credibility. More attention might be paid to structural conditions – the formal rules under which civil society functions –



rather than direct support to and capacity-building for CSOs (see below). The aim should be to help put new civic activism on a more stable footing.

Bottom-up and top-down reform support need to be harnessed in more mutually-reinforcing fashion in order to alter the underlying structures of state-society relations. This is of particular importance to Sweden, as it has moved away from funding state authorities..

It has been suggested that the impact of external policies in support for democracy can best be measured and understood by zooming-out from an understanding how these fit around the array of specific domestic constellations that generate or impede transition.<sup>57</sup> This places a premium on agile opportunism – tactical flexibility and quick responses to slithers of reform opportunity as and when these appear. It calls for less reliance on standard ‘building block’ models of democracy-building, where donors simply work methodically through capacity-building programmes in each of democracy’s constituent components. It also warrants a mapping of civil society specificities across different regime types prior to designing the appropriate strategy of support for each country.

As part of the bridge-building focus, donors need to strengthen connections between civil society and political parties. This imperative has been noted for many years; support for political party building is still negligible. The changing imbalances between protest movements, and an increasingly denigrated political party sphere makes it more urgent to rectify this imbalance. In most countries around the world, parties are losing members; this compounds a widely perceived global crisis of political representation. Initiatives aimed at tempering the mutual distrust between CSOs and parties are long overdue. This is imperative across different regime-types, but is especially important in the early stages of transition when poor transmission linkages between the civic and political spheres tend to be a major factor in holding back democratisation.

Sweden and other donors need to consider closely the possible discrepancy between those CSOs best placed to further democracy, on the one hand, and those most committed to liberal rights, on the other hand. Many recent experiences suggest that liberalism and democracy may not be quite the conjoined twins they have often been

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<sup>57</sup> McFaul and Stoner-Weiss, eds, (2013).

assumed to be. In most Arab states many advocates of democracy are not especially liberal, while many self-defined liberals remain disengaged from democratic processes. Addressing this conundrum is another priority of particular relevance to Sweden, due to its relatively prominent focus on the kind of gender rights that are so sensitive in places like the Middle East.

All donors, now concur on the need for ‘country-specific’ variation. All would say this is a fundamental aspect of their approach to democratic reform. But, this approach has so far failed, in practice, fully to take on board the changing structure of civil society itself.

This report is not aimed at the level of precise funding modalities; these are the subject of intense and frequent debate within donor agencies. It is relevant to point out, however, that in line with the nature of civil society changes, a greater capacity to identify new actors could be beneficial. Sweden relies heavily on intermediary organisations to do this; or, it works as effectively as it can with relatively limited central capacities to locate partners, under those parts of the previous democracy initiative where this was possible. Some kind of more organized, in-country advisory group structure might be useful – and go with the grain of this report, in terms of having local expertise to understand the very fluid changes that now beset civil society in most recipient countries. The use of open ‘calls for proposals’ is probably not the most effective means of addressing this new environment. The separation within the Swedish development cooperation agenda of the dedicated civil society division and democracy policy advisors makes coherence of this type more difficult, and might be usefully reconsidered.

## 2. New actors, new models?

Civil society support needs to keep pace with the emergence of new types of pro-democracy actors, and draw from this the lessons for the related question of new ‘models’ of democratic accountability. Swedish democracy support policies need to reconsider how they ‘take society on board’ and how they seek to shift patterns of accountability in an emerging democracy.

As the report has outlined, debates have opened up over different forms of civic organisation and political representation. Flowing from this, debates about different varieties of democracy have gained in

resonance across many countries around the world. This is due in part to post-Arab spring reflections (with many in the Middle East seeking a form of democracy tailored to the region's specificities) and in part an apparently superior economic performance of Asian and other rising powers. The understanding of what constitutes good 'democracy' is today up for grabs more than at any time in recent decades.

Of course, many donor agencies say they are positively open to alternative political models, and vehemently reject the criticism that they 'impose' one-size-fits-all templates or an unbending concept of 'liberal democracy' uniformly around the world. This may indeed be true. Yet, in the future there is more scope for concrete civil society support programmes to build in more leeway for exploration and reflection on what represents good 'democracy' per se – and different understandings of the role that civil society is called upon to play in different alternative political models.

This speaks in favour of donors exploring the role to be played by traditional and customary organisations that might not quite fit the standard definitions of civil society. Many analysts go too far in suggesting these kinds of bodies are a superior and entirely benign alternative to 'Western-style' professional NGOs. But there is a case for at least beginning to explore what potential they might have to undergird democracy. If analysts are right that today's global turbulence is triggering a rise in localism, the search for locally legitimate institutions forms is likely to become a more important part of reform processes in the future. One important implication is that in the sphere of democracy support there needs to be a degree of experimentation that takes donors beyond the heavy reliance on service delivery NGOs. The perception that development assistance channeled to service delivery NGOs is part and parcel of a neo-liberal agenda can cause problems in convincing local recipients that the democracy agenda is about *widening* citizens' influence over policy choices.

This is, categorically, not to suggest that definitions of democracy are entirely elastic. Many of the espoused alternatives to 'Western democracy' are in truth not democratic at all; and donors such as Sweden must be attentive to this danger too. Yet, the point to register here is that the challenge today goes beyond simple tactical questions of how and where to spend money, what to require of recipients and how to coordinate with other donors – that is, the kind of questions

upon which evaluation reports normally focus. Rather, donors should today fashion its civil society support with a deeper objective in mind: the need for more systematic joint deliberation with CSO partners on the very meaning of improving the kind of ‘democracy’ being promoted. This recommendation applies to authoritarian, semi-competitive and post-transition states where there is demand for an exploration of different models of democracy.

### 3. Re-opening closing spaces

In response to the ‘closing space’ challenge, European democracy support will need to be refashioned as a more subtle and sensitive endeavour, but must also not become overly defensive.

European donors need to take this challenge more seriously. The most high profile cases have involved attacks on US rather than European organisations, breeding a certain view that EU donors can escape the worst of these measures by disassociating themselves from US policies. But this is an overly comforting basis on which to plan future policies.

Donors need to respond in a more political way, but also without engendering a counter-productive spiral of repression. They need not only to react after-the-fact, but also to get ahead of the curve and adopt strategies able to pre-empt problems between regimes and external funded projects. Because of the closing space challenge, donors need to take the ‘do no harm’ principle far more seriously.

There is on-going debate over how critical the EU should be in its diplomatic responses to cases of new restrictions placed on civil society. Getting these reactions right is important. But even more crucial is to start planning further ‘upstream’ in the process of civil society support, with the aim of heading off dramatic cases of CSO clampdown well before regimes contemplate such actions.

This requires more transparency. Donors will need to define and publicise their aims and guidelines more clearly and more transparently so that they cannot be accused of partisanship or direct political meddling. This is particularly important in those states where the general trend is away from open democratic politics, and where nationalism and distrust of external actor is often part of this trend. Of course, donors may insist that they do not take sides and have

perfectly benign intentions in its civil society support; nevertheless, more could be done in terms of explaining and public diplomacy, and modify rules of engagement, to undermine any grounds that regimes might have to drum up popular support against ‘external agents’.

Much of the focus has been on ICT solutions to protect CSOs. These are necessary but they attack the symptoms not the cause of the closing space problem. Rather than a direct targeting of opposition to the regime per se, sometimes donors will need to take a step back and aim at building a new form of politics over the longer-term.

Most crucially, this challenge requires much greater coherence between civil society support and other aspects of Swedish/European foreign policies. Dealing with the backlash must be part of a broader strategy. Authoritarian regimes can still too easily take advantage of contradictions in democracies’ foreign policies.

One much discussed way forward is to wrap civil society support up within broader packages of development support. Many development specialists advocate this kind of response, even though very apolitical aid has itself not entirely escaped being targeted by non-democratic regimes’ new restrictive measures. If this route were to be pursued more fully, operational guidelines would be required to prevent the more political elements of funding being diluted by mainstream development aid approaches. This would require greater buy-in to the democracy agenda from the development policy community – which may exist in Sweden but is not yet the case in many donor policy-making communities. The crucial criterion here would be for support to service delivery NGOs to build-in elements related to political conditions and the enhancement of democratic capacity – marrying the two core definitional angles taken on civil society, outlined at the beginning of the report. This may be most feasible in states that have some degree of political openness and which received significant amounts of general development aid but where civil society restrictions nevertheless have tightened.

De-politicizing civil society support might also be helped by pooling funds through bodies that can be shown to be delinked from Western strategic interests. If civil society support were coming from, say, the United Nations Democracy Fund autocratic regimes might find it harder to convince their populations that it was being driven by Western security agendas. The Open Government Partnership could be used, as this now includes over 60 states formally committed to

improving transparency standards through mutual peer monitoring and assistance. Closer coordination with the efforts of the Community of Democracies would also be welcome in developing an effective alert or warning system for CSOs in danger.

The lesson may be that it is better not to have a physical presence in-country but rather fund NGOs from outside to work within a recipient state. Donors could, be unequivocally clear on their respect for local laws, while supporting groups that are finding informal ways to circumvent them. Certainly, more flexible funding rules are required to free up the kinds of imaginative funding capable of circumventing regimes' cleverer backlash techniques. Efforts should be made to back innovative measures that democrats adopt in many countries to circumvent new restrictions on their activities. Regime restrictions evolve quickly; local CSOs evolve quickly in return; donors must be more capable of keeping up with this iterative tit-for-tat in the way they react on the ground.

Donors have often increased aid to states introducing highly restrictive civil society laws – sending a mixed message to recipient governments. Some kind of more formal criterion to prevent this from happening could be contemplated. Much more assertive diplomacy, in conjunction with EU and other partners, is required in the United Nations to develop stronger, more binding norms in the General Assembly that safeguard CSOs' rights to received support. Indeed, funds could be made available for building a broader international alliance for civil society organisations to lobby at the global level against NGO restrictions; it is crucial that these alliances include CSOs from non-Western countries.

The new environment also require donors to work more on helping CSO develop local and self-generating sources of support – a huge challenge, but arguably in the long-term potentially positive to the extent that it galvanizes organisations into lessening their dependency on external donors.

#### 4. Support for information communications technology

It is already well established that civil society support needs to focus more on activism organized around information communications technology. However, getting support for this new ICT-based civic activism right is far from straightforward. Much funding currently

being allocated for ICT-related civil society projects is not necessarily being spent in the best way possible.

ICT-based civic initiatives complain that European support is still too oriented to training individuals, not sufficiently focused on the 'enabling environment' for ICT to have a political impact. Donors should further its re-orientation towards these broader structural conditions needed for ICT activism to gain better traction.

For all the hype about ICT, in most countries a very modest percentage of the population is wired and active through new technologies. More infrastructure is still needed in places where online coverage remains confined to a small share of the population. Sweden should make sure its politics on trade and investment do not inadvertently cut across efforts to extend the reach of ICT-based civil society around the world.

Sweden must also follow through on the ramifications of its support for new actors. Many projects have left activists more vulnerable to surveillance by regimes; ironically, much surveillance technology is supplied by the same Western states who provide the civil society support. More systematic follow through is required in this sense: if ICT is to be encouraged, so must its adverse effects – the fact that it helps regimes too – be wholly addressed within Swedish policies.

Sweden and other donors run many good projects on using ICT to promote 'open governance' in relation to very local concerns. These have improved the way that services are provided at a neighbourhood level. The next step that remains to be taken is to link these initiatives to strategies aimed at reform of the political system. This may be difficult to achieve in the most closed regime types, but is essential where political space opens up to some degree – it is in these cases where the full potential of ICT has not been realised because of its disconnection from systemic-level institutional debates.

More support is needed to help 'new actors' move from anti-regime protest to building coalitions and engaging in mainstream politics. Projects on crowd sourcing party platforms should be developed much further, in this sense. In practice, projects under the ICT label tend to favour the 'usual suspects' among donor recipients; while donor officials of course acknowledge this is not the intention, a redoubled effort is required to target genuinely new groups.

## 5. Linking civil societies, beyond protest

Sweden could support a long-term initiative that aims to link together all the different civil society movements that have participated in major protests in recent years – whether they be from Western or non-Western countries. This could be one of the most useful means of developing partnership with non-traditional and emerging donors – an aim which Western donors have espoused for several years but not followed though fully in the sphere of democracy support.

The aim would be to foment mutual learning but also encourage the search for positive alternatives, beyond the act of simply protesting. An initiative such as this would address a crucial aspect of current trends covered in this report: the issue at stake today is often not so much the need to build the capacity of civil society but to make sure its activity channels into representative democratic institutions. Initiatives are needed to ensure that positive alternatives are deliberated and proposed, in order to move forward debates about democratic quality in a constructive fashion. It would also encourage useful two way exchanges between the West and other parts of the world, as today civic protest and discontent is not just a matter of projecting experiences, lessons and best practice outward from the developed to developing world. Sweden can lead the switch from the donor community simply focusing on capacity-building for individual organisations to seeking to shape a broader remoulding of civil society.

As part of such an effort, Western donors can usefully build partnerships with non-traditional democratic donors. States like Brazil, Chile, South Africa, Turkey, India, Korea, Japan and Indonesia are very cautiously beginning to support reform initiatives internationally and engage with civil society actors. Such donors remain wary of ‘Western’ ways of democracy support and suspicious of being asked to sign up merely as implementers of a Western agenda. Yet, their own strategies are evolving. If this report is correct in pointing to structural changes in global civil society, then cooperation between Western and non-traditional donors will be more desirable in the future in support of pro-democracy transnational networks.



## Concluding reflections

These recommendations respond to the questions that were laid out in chapter one. They try to tease out the varied but important implications of changes in civil society for donor policies; suggest ways of balancing support for new actors with existing partnerships; and offer ideas for broadening cooperation with other donors, at both the European and global levels.

By way of conclusion, it suffices to recall the theme of *balance* that, it is hoped, pervades these recommendations. Recent years have produced trends in civil society that are difficult to grasp. This is because opinions have veered from high optimism to profound despair. A new civic mobilization across the globe, and some notable democratic breakthroughs,, have led some to talk of a new dawn for civil society support. The fierce resistance to civil society in some states, along with a more profound questioning of liberal models of economics and politics, have led others into despair over whether civil society support has any legitimacy left at all. Both readings of current trends are convincing; the challenge is to recognise that both positive and negative change has intensified in recent years – and that this is a trend likely to continue. A balance is also needed between change and continuity: while many aspects of civil society are beset by fundamental change, large swathes of the civic sphere remain unchanged and struggle to gain influence in non- or weakly-democratic contexts. Donors need to be agile and flexible enough to respond to the changes, without being distracted from the lessons they have learnt with regards to the less-changing part of the civil society agenda.

The report has deliberately avoided making precise recommendations at the level of project implementation. The five proposed guidelines above address the broader, structural challenges that are likely to condition the future of civil society support in a more generic way. They do not offer a precise menu of new initiatives or projects. Rather, they suggest guidelines for how donors can measure their adjustment to the profound changes to global civil society that are currently afoot. It is hoped that they correspond in this way with the spirit that has motivated this report - namely, that there is a need for donors to consider not just the regular improvements in administrative and operational procedures, but also to take a step back

and respond to qualitative change in the civil societies they seek to empower as part of their democracy support strategies.

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