

Provisional draft interim findings: ‘Dilemmas in sustainable development and civil society in Bangladesh and Zambia’

The research project ‘Dilemmas in sustainable development and CSOs in Bangladesh and Zambia’ studies local civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bangladesh and Zambia, as well as European CSOs working with or funding these CSOs. In these countries, legal and extra-legal measures have evolved that could affect the operations of CSOs in various ways. The project investigates how CSOs have evolved in this context and looks at the implications for policies aimed at promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

Provisional draft interim findings

- State actors are constraining CSOs in both Bangladesh and Zambia. The Government of Bangladesh has implemented regulations monitoring, and often preventing, foreign-funded CSO projects and requiring NGO registration, leaving room for suspension of registration. CSOs also suffer from extra-legal measures, such as digital and physical surveillance and intimidation by military and civil security agents. The Government of Bangladesh no longer protects freedom of association or expression, instead arresting people for posting statements online or gathering in public. The Government of Zambia has created, but not effectively implemented, an NGO Act. Many Zambian CSOs have decided not to comply with government registration requirements. The Government of Zambia clamps down on CSOs through threats and persecution using other pieces of colonial legislation, and the courts have sometimes supported repression (particularly when criticized). In both Bangladesh and Zambia, increasing government control of the media restricts CSO opportunities for voice in the media.
- Businesses are also constraining civil society in Bangladesh and Zambia, both individually and through interest associations. In Bangladesh, some businesses intimidate local CSO and union representatives (and sometimes their relatives), so as to prevent them from advocating for labor issues, such as freedom of association and living wage, and for some environmental causes. Some firms and associations have close ties to the military and police in case of (expected) strikes in order to intimidate and clamp down on workers and environmental activists. In Zambia, mining companies seek to undercut the authority of CSOs that promote worker rights by funding parallel industry-friendly CSOs and through public relations (PR).
- Many CSOs in Bangladesh and Zambia have disappeared or gone ‘off the radar’, operating out of the public eye, in response to repression. Various CSOs formerly engaged in advocacy now focus on service delivery, or have shifted from rights-based to needs-based advocacy. CSOs in both Bangladesh and Zambia have become more cautious in targeting the government when lobbying and in campaigns, but they have not moved away from advocacy in relation to the state altogether.
- European service-oriented CSOs try to adjust to regulatory restrictions and maintain good relations with the government. Advocacy-oriented European CSOs focused on labour, the environment and human rights generally adjust to their local partners’/offices’ demands, and support them in advocacy.

Policy messages

- Embassies could play a positive role in alleviating the pressure on civil society and highlighting the responsibilities of business.
- It is worthwhile to consider the activities of businesses towards civil society in the context of the engagement of Dutch firms with corporate responsibility and human rights due diligence in their supply chains.
- In some cases, the European Union may be the proper avenue through which to address these issues.
- There is continued demand by CSOs for flexible funding schemes.

- In some cases, the personal reputation and ‘celebrity’ of CSO leaders can prevent intimidation, repression and prosecution, because the government fears a backlash when it clamps down on these individuals. Northern CSOs could use this to their advantage when partnering with local CSOs.

Knowledge products

- Fransen, L., Dupuy, K., Hinfelaar, M., & Zakaria, S.M. (2018). *Adjust, resist or disband?* Paper presented at the University of Amsterdam, 7 December 2018.
- Dupuy, K. (2019). *Development diverted? The impact of closing civil society space on the SDGs.* Paper presented at International Studies Association, Toronto, 27 March 2019.

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Weblink: <https://includeplatform.net/new-roles-csos-inclusive-development>