# DEVELOPMENT NEEDS CIVIL SOCIETY –
## THE IMPLICATIONS OF CIVIC SPACE FOR
## THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Synthesis report for ACT Alliance, April 2019

## Acknowledgements

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyses the implications for development of the recent wave of closures of civic space that has primarily affected human rights-based and liberal democratic organizations - non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs) and the media - in countries around the world. It was commissioned by the ACT Alliance from the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, and included a literature review, 12 desk-based country studies (Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Myanmar/Burma, Nepal, Russia, Rwanda and Zimbabwe), and four country case studies (Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal and Zimbabwe). The study concluded that tighter civic space has different implications for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in different settings, depending on how states use the power they gain from restricting civil society. Despite systematic differences in how this plays out in different political systems, shrinking civic space is overall highly likely to halt or reverse progress towards reducing inequality, insuring inclusion and improving sustainability, because it is often precisely those at greatest risk whom civil society seeks to empower and protect. Many of the poorest and most marginalized are being 'left behind by development'. Key conclusions about the impacts on specific SDGs include that:

- Impacts on **SDG 1**, **End poverty in all its forms every-where**, are unlikely to show up in aggregate national poverty statistics, but without civil society activism to highlight inequalities, exclusionary patterns of economic growth will entrench and deepen divisions. Economic crises and shocks that devastate the poor and marginalized are more common where civil

society is unable to hold governments to account over macroeconomic mismanagement, public services, or emergencies.

- With respect to **SDG 2**, **End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture**, closing civic space entails a reduction of the influence of civic actors on food and agriculture policymaking; more latitude for land- and resource-grabbing, impacting in particular on the livelihoods of small and subsistence farmers and indigenous people; and insulating ruling elites from the political effects of food crises, and from civil society advocacy and media reporting on hunger.

- For **SDG 5**, **Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**, closing civic space is likely to affect poor and disadvantaged women and marginalized groups most directly. Women's rights and gender equality progress is under threat from efforts to deploy regulatory and administrative channels to prevent activists from pushing for gender-equitable policies and programmes, empowering women, or delivering services. Many face stigmatization and backlash from right-wing groups that threaten their personal security and work.

- On **SDG 8**, **Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all**, the study found that while closing civic space may not have visible adverse impacts on economic growth rates, it has been linked to economic crises in the most closed

and repressive countries; political division and conflict over patterns of economic development; exploitation of workers; and suppression of labour rights, including the freedom of association.

- **SDG 10, Reduce inequality within and among countries** is likely to be impacted because closures of civic space help mask the worsening of economic, social and political inequality, pave the way for land- and natural-resource grabs, as well as suppression of labour rights, and further enrich powerful economic elites.

- The achievement of **SDG 11, Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable** is impacted by limiting citizen participation in urban development and governance processes.

- For **SDG 15, Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss**, civil society actors working to protect the environment, forests and biodiversity are under particularly direct attacks and face hostility that prevents them from acting in a growing number of countries around the world.

- Closing civic space impacts directly on key **SDG 16, Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels**, by raising levels of violence against civil society actors and activists; subverting the rule of law; increasing corruption; reducing accountability, participation and representation, and also access to information and fundamental freedoms.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledges to 'leave no one behind' and to 'reach the furthest behind first' are highly likely to be violated by closures of civic space. Changing civic space is likely to generate more unequal and exclusionary development policies and practices, with a significant risk of not only leaving the most vulnerable behind, but also of their dispossession and loss of fundamental rights and voice in relation to the development process.

A key overall recommendation for national governments hoping to earn performance legitimacy by achieving the SDGs is to accept that there are no realistic alternatives to building constructive partnerships with civil society, and that it is in their interests to do so. As a priority step, governments should review legal and administrative restrictions on civil society and uphold their civic and political rights by prosecuting the rising number of crimes against civil society activists, journalists, and others.

For monitoring, evidence and research, it is necessary to recognize that contention over civic space is part of larger national political struggles to do with state power and sovereignty in a globalizing world. The impacts of closing space need to be analyzed within a domestic political context. The data are not available with which to make robust cross-national measures of the relationship between changing civic space and the SDGs, and more intensive data collection and comparative analysis to assess and test the scale of the impacts are needed. However, the space for undertaking research and data collection, or communicating research findings is also being squeezed, as permissions to undertake research are tightened and respondents find it risky or unwise to speak openly.

Donors have made a range of efforts to monitor and combat efforts to shrink civic space, including efforts to make funding for civil society more flexible and responsive. These are important but limited responses to the wider shift in the global normative environment for development, in particular with the rising importance of China as a development partner. OECD/DAC group donors need to recognize and respond constructively to this shift, and can use the platform provided by **SDG 17** Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development to build a case for civic space as a precondition for achieving the other SDGs. SDG 17 draws attention to targets on the volume of aid, knowledge, technology and capacity building; use of government-owned planning and results frameworks; partnerships across state, market and civil society; and the links to the production of statistics and other data in support of the SDGs. A key recommendation is for international donors to use the SDG 17 platform to push back against the closures of civic space, by generating robust evidence about how civil society impacts on development in particular countries, policy domains and settings, to demonstrate convincingly that civic space is not optional for the attainment of the SDGs.

# Table of Contents

# 1.
## INTRODUCTION

The past 20 years saw governments across the world use political, administrative and extra-legal strategies, including violence, threats, de-legitimation, the use of the law to criminalize civic activism and stigmatization, to restrict the activities of civil society. The shrinkage of civic space has had significant, well-documented, and wide-ranging impacts on the personnel and activities of many civil society groups including human rights defenders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), social movements, the independent media, artists and scholars. The restrictions have hit transnational and domestic groups, and those working in cyberspace as well as those on the ground. What are restrictions on the activities of humanitarian NGOs, women's and labour rights groups, champions of the freedom of speech, the independence of the media, and the many civil society actors working in development today, likely to mean for development? What are the impacts of shrinking civic space on development outcomes, specifically the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

This report addresses these questions, attempting to both identify the mechanisms through which the attainment

of the SDGs may be affected, and to assess the nature and magnitude of the impacts in selected contexts and policy domains. The study as a whole was commissioned by the ACT Alliance to build on previous work on shrinking civic space (ACT Alliance 2011; van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012), and civil society responses (ACT Alliance/CIDSE et al. 2014 ). This report summarizes the findings of an extensive literature review on the impacts of closing civic space in development, from which it developed a conceptual framework and a methodology for analyzing the mechanisms through which shrinking civic space impacts on development outcomes (Hossain et al 2018). This approach informed a set of 12 desk-based Country Narrative Analyses (Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Myanmar/ Burma, Nepal, Russia, Rwanda and Zimbabwe) which deepened and refined understanding of the mechanisms. From these, four countries (Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal and Zimbabwe) were selected for primary research tracing the impacts of changes in civic space on selected policy domains and the SDGs. The results of the study as a whole are synthesized in this report. Country case study reports are appended separately.

Although there are varied justifications for new legal, political, and other restrictions on civil society, each effort to do so shares a common aim: for political elites to increase their own control on power, whether that is to retain a predatory hold on lucrative office, defend national sovereignty against foreign values, or push through 'developmental' agendas that violate civil and political rights in the pursuit of growth. How political elites seek to increase or hold on to their power, and the different roles and relationships between civil society, state and market in the process of development, will together determine the implications for development. Taking a 'politics of inclusive development' approach, this report analyzes the implications of closing civic space for the achievement of the SDGs, and specifically for the extent

to which development processes are inclusive, equitable, sustainable and 'leave no one behind', as the principles of the SDGs specify.

This study took a political economy approach to the analysis, tracing impacts on the work of civil society through an analysis of the development outcomes, via an understanding of the politics of inclusive development in each country. The case studies demonstrate some clear and direct adverse impacts of tighter civic space on the SDGs. This report refers to examples of changes in relation to poverty and hunger, gender equality, access to public services, and the marginalization and exclusion of specific groups, all of which are set out in more detail in the country case studies. Less direct but no less important impacts on development can also be traced through the roles (or lack thereof) of civil society in providing a watchdog role with respect to macroeconomic performance and governance, environmental sustainability, and the distribution of economic growth and public services. This more macro-critical role of civil society warrants further attention in a context of tighter civic space. The report discusses the implications for civil society monitoring and further analysis of its own activities, in order to build the evidence base and the case for protecting, and indeed, enlarging civic space in order to achieve the SDGs. It also discusses some of the emerging lessons and conclusions for national governments seeking to demonstrate their performance legitimacy by attaining the SDGs, and for evidence, analysis and research. The report concludes with a brief discussion of the implications for donor pushback against closures of civic space. It recommends that donors and civil society actors use the platform of SDG 17, *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development*, to argue a case for civil society as foundational in clear and verifiable ways for the achievement of the goals themselves, and for adhering to the principle of 'leaving no one behind'.

## Organization of this report

The report is organized into five main sections. Section 2 provides an overview of debates on changing space and the implications for development. Section 3 sets out the main research questions and methodology. Section 4 discusses the mechanisms through which changing civic space impacts on development, while Section 5

discusses findings about how restrictions on civil society were influencing development outcomes in selected settings. Section 6 concludes, with some discussion of the implications for supporters of civil society, research, and donors. An Annex contains the four country case studies: Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal and Zimbabwe.

# 2.
## OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE CHANGING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY[1]

### Changing civic space

In the past decade, governments spanning the range of political types from open and democratic to closed and authoritarian, in countries across all levels of development, from least developed to advanced industrial economies, all sought to restrict the activities of civil society. Civil society refers to voluntary organization that mediates between the state, market, and societal actors and interests. In developing countries, civil society typically refers to formal NGOs and CSOs, often aid- or foreign-funded, involved in service delivery or undertaking a 'watchdog' function by holding government and other actors to account. Civil society is properly viewed as a broader category of actors that includes the independent media; human rights defenders; professional associations; academia and thinktanks; and social movements such as land and indigenous people's rights groups, women's and peasant movements, labour organizations, environmental activists, as well as grassroots and community-based organizations.

Even in developing countries with long histories of civic organization, formal civil society groups in the liberal democratic tradition emerged in a significant way only after the end of the Cold War, with a rapid growth in aid financing to civil society during the 1990s and 2000s. CSOs grew in number and scale in many countries, in a context of comparatively weak regulation and governance. A first wave of restrictions on civil society came with the War on Terror in the early 2000s, and saw regulations in developed countries tighten, particularly on financial transactions. The more recent wave of restrictions in the past five to ten years has taken formal legal, political and administrative forms, including criminalization. Restrictions have also taken the form of informal and extra-legal tactics such as violence, threats, and the domination of public space to de-legitimate and stigmatize civil society actors (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2016; Howell and Lind 2010; Hayman et al. 2014; Rutzen 2015; KIOS Foundation 2015; ICNL 2016; van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012; van der Borgh and Terwindt 2014; CIVICUS 2016, 2015, 2017).

Not all new regulations on civil society have been unwelcome, as weak regulation under the rapid earlier expansion had bred inefficiency and some abuses. In practice, newer restrictions are often a heavy-handed mixture of stigmatization and de-legitimization, selective application of rules and restrictions, and violence and impunity for violence against civic actors and groups. Recent efforts to shrink civic space aim to increase the power of state or political actors (Mendelson 2015b; Hayman 2016; Poppe and Wolff 2017), pushing back against a real or perceived expansion of civil society power (Mathews 1997). Their main targets have been

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1. This section draws on a literature review undertaken as part of this commission; see Hossain, Khurana, Mohmand, Nazneen, Oosterom, Roberts, et al. 2018.

groups from a liberal and human rights tradition, usually aid-funded and with strong transnational links, as well as their allies in social movements, the media and academia. While cultural values and national sovereignty are often invoked to justify restrictions on civic space, there are also material interests, including major land and natural resource projects, at stake in these struggles. Many efforts to silence civil society actors, it seems, do so in order to pave the way for contentious projects to pass without the fear of public scrutiny or effective legal obstacles.

New types of actors and forms of civic action over the past decade also mean that the nature of civic space is changing, in terms of who participates and on what terms, rather than shrinking. The past decade has seen the exponential growth of the digital public sphere, with all its capacities for mobilization and the spread of information and ideas, and its documented role in several recent uprisings and revolutionary movements.

There has also been a rise in right-wing, extremist and neo-traditionalist groups, and of 'unruly' protest groups and movements. At the same time, civil society actors also report efforts at co-optation and pressure to align politically, to achieve a closer or more accommodating relationship with the state. Closing civic space also has important new transnational aspects. The civil society targets of new restrictions are frequently aid-supported, and it is their foreign funding which makes them both an easy target for nationalist politics, and vulnerable to restrictions on foreign financial transactions. In addition, the growing importance of Chinese development aid in many developing countries has shifted the normative environment within which civil society is tolerated. So while efforts to restrict civic space are part of struggles over national political power, they are powerfully shaped by transnational forces, as these reshape relations between state and civil society in a global system.

## Civil society and development

Changes in civic space are likely to have an impact on development in numerous ways, because of the potential and actual contributions of civil society to development. These can be summarized as:

- Institution-building: most notably, enabling the historical emergence and regulation of institutions and values such as trust that underpin economic growth and ensure its sustainability; this includes enabling the management of discontent and difference in relation to the nature and distribution of growth.
- Partnership- and alliance-building: civil society has played an important role in generating international and cross-sectoral support and financing for development.
- Accountability: ensuring governments and other actors face scrutiny and are answerable for their policies and practices; and helping prevent corruption, abuse, and other failures of governance.
- Empowerment and inclusion: raising and amplifying voice among marginalized and disempowerment groups and enabling such groups to organize to claim rights and recognition.
- Protection: defending human rights; protecting vulnerable groups against poverty, violence, or exclusion; advocating for and providing humanitarian, emergency or welfare services.
- Information and communication: gathering evidence and undertaking analysis of the development process;

monitoring and evaluating development policies and programmes; investigating and documenting governance failures, corruption, etc.; raising questions about governmental performance and business practices; wider public communication and education regarding development policies and practices.

The mechanisms through which changing civic space may have an impact on development outcomes thus operate at multiple levels, interacting with each other over different time periods in different ways, depending substantially on their relations with the state. The challenge of attributing development impacts to changes in civic space is compounded by the fact that there may be no simple or direct relationship between civic space and measurable development outcomes. Civil society may resist investments or growth policies that some deem unequalizing or unsustainable, and so put a break on economic growth in the interests of human rights, equality, or sustainability; removing such obstacles to rapid growth are often included among the justifications of so-called 'developmental' states such as Rwanda for restricting civil society – as well as of those of predatory authoritarian regimes such as Zimbabwe. Civil society can have a moderating effect on exploitative or unsustainable forms of development, tempering a tendency that may otherwise prevail for forms of growth that mainly enrich those with power to shape the institutions and processes

governing development, and at the cost of others. A great deal depends on the nature of the political settlement or balance of power in that country, and on whether and how civil society is able to support the mobilization of key actors, groups or ideas, to influence that balance of power. That in turn will shape how and the extent to which civil society and the state can engage over development, with civil society complementing the state where it can, and contesting it where it needs to. Countries in which civic space is restricted to silence critics of a regime pursuing broad-based growth and other 'developmental' policies will experience very different outcomes to those where civil society is being silenced to enable plainly predatory or exploitative policies. Both in turn will differ from situations in which democratic political competition has pushed civil society into closer relationships with governments, or turned them into supporters of the opposition. And yet across countries, common aspects of changes in civic space included efforts to clamp down on both protest movements (particularly around wages, commodity prices and austerity measures) and online activism.

The contributions of civil society to development may be difficult to measure, but it is widely understood that space for civil society to operate is essential to achieving the SDGs, in particular the injunction to 'leave no one behind' (HLPE 2013; PartnersGlobal et al. 2017; OECD 2018). The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda Resolution notes the role of civil society in establishing priorities and goals, and in fostering development partnerships (UN 2015). Civil society played a prominent role in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and is deemed important in discussing, delivering and monitoring the SDGs. That civil society is a critical partner in development effectiveness was acknowledged in the Paris Declaration and follow-up statements. The Accra statement pledged to 'work with CSOs to provide an enabling environment that maximizes their contributions to development', while the Nairobi Outcome Document recognized 'the importance of civil society in sustainable

development and in leaving no-one behind; in engaging with governments to uphold their commitments; and in being development actors in their own right', to achieve the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.[2] Of the SDGs themselves, SDG 16 aims to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'. Efforts to restrict civic space will most immediately and measurably have an impact on SDG 16, as it measures the capacities of NGOs, CSOs, human rights defenders and other actors in the civic space to perform their functions and roles with safety and security.

SDG 16 does not exhaust the pathways through which development outcomes are likely to be affected, but provides key measures of how changes in civic space impact what civil society actors do. Our knowledge of how civil society impacts development also entails assessing how such restrictions impact on the making and delivery of development policies and programmes, and the services and protections different people receive and their capacities to enjoy the benefits of development. A comprehensive measure of the development impacts of closing civic space will need to connect the functions and activities of civil society and the policy and programmatic bases of development with the frontline impacts on human development, including poverty and hunger, gender equality, and health and education outcomes. This entails connecting SDG 16 with development outcome indicators of poverty and hunger, gender inequality, health, education, etc. While SDG 16 offers a valuable set of measures for some impacts on civil society functions and activities, it needs to be analysed together with other SDGs for an integrated analysis of what restrictions on civic space are likely to mean for both development processes and human development outcomes.

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2. SO Development Effectiveness, "CSOs on the Road from Accra to Busan: CSO Initiatives to Strengthen Development Effectiveness"; GPEDC, "The Nairobi Outcome Document," 6.

# 3.
# METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overall approach taken to the research involved a series of steps. First, an extensive search for literature - grey, published, media sources, and organizational reports - addressing changes in civic space and potential implications for development was conducted, from which over 1,000 items were eventually gathered and reviewed. Additional conceptual literature (already in our possession and previously reviewed) also formed part of the review process. Second, from the review a conceptual framework and a methodological approach were developed, as discussed further in this section. The framework included refining research questions further and developing propositions about the mechanisms through which impact may be affected. A third stage involved the preparation of desk-based studies of 12 countries *(Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Myanmar/Burma, Nepal, Russia, Rwanda and Zimbabwe)* which further deepened and refined the propositions, drawing attention to actors and sectors of concern. This provided the basis for the fourth stage of the study, the selection of four country cases (Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal and Zimbabwe) in which to trace through the effects of closing civic space on development outcomes in specific areas of concern for the SDGs.

## Research questions

Taking into account the issues discussed above, the study was designed to assess the impacts of shrinking civic space by asking:

**A.  What is happening to civil society space in the selected countries?**

Through literature review, secondary data collection and analysis, and a small number of key informant interviews, this part of the research attempted to situate the study within the broader politics of inclusion, gathering data to analyse the following:

**i.** How has civil society and its relations with the state and donors evolved over time? (financing, numbers, scale, growth, diversification, regulation, and contention)

**ii.** What roles has civil society played in development processes (e.g. in policy design, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), implementation, and feedback in policy areas), focusing on selected sectors/SDG outcome areas?

**iii.** What / who is driving closure of civil society space, and why? (episodes of contention)

**iv.** What does changing civil society space indicate about elite commitment to inclusive, sustainable and equitable development? What does it imply for state capacity to deliver the SDGs?

**B.  How is changing civil society space affecting the role and function of civil society actors in specified sectors/policy domains?**

Borrowing from van der Borgh and Terwindt (2012), an assessment was made of the impacts of different instruments to shrink civic space (physical harassment and intimidation, criminalization, investigation and prosecution for punitive purposes, administrative and financial restrictions, stigmatization and negative labelling, and space under pressure, including co-optation) on actors in the sector/policy domain. This analysis generated evidence of how these different instruments of shrinking space affect the role and function of civil society in relation to achieving the 2030 Agenda. Specific attention was paid to civil society contributions to the Agenda, again, in terms of:

**i.** Producing and analysing data and monitoring implementation

**ii.** Reviewing and shaping development policies with technical expertise

**iii.** Ensuring that the voices of marginalized and vulnerable populations are taken into account

**iv.** Providing access to groups in remote locations

**v.** Shedding light on ignored or underserved SDGs and pushing for action

**vi.** Raising awareness and bringing more stakeholders on board to tackle the Agenda (PartnersGlobal et al. 2017).

Where possible, data was sought on identified indicators to comment on the implications of efforts to close civil society space for different elements of the policy cycle (policy design, implementation, service delivery and M&E).

**C. How is changing civic space impacting on development outcomes in selected SDGs?**

Development outcomes are likely to be affected by changing civic space. We proposed that the primary mechanism through which this is likely to operate is via impacts on civil society actors and their relationships with state and economic actors, including transnational donors, and on the scope and the nature of their activity in each SDG policy domain.

## Case studies

The cases traced the impacts of formal and informal efforts to restrict civic space through changes in how civic actors engage with selected sectors and domains, in which contention over civic space suggests it may be possible to assess the impacts on development outcomes relatively directly. Through initial literature review, these case studies came to focus on:

**i.** Poverty (SDG 1), through analysis of poverty rates and trends under different conditions of civic space, and civil society involvement in poverty reduction policies and programmes

**ii.** Hunger, food security and nutrition (SDG 2), analysing agriculture and food security policy and outcomes, equity, distribution and rights in relation to land and other natural resources, and roles of civil society in delivering food aid

**iii.** Gender equality (SDG 5), in particular through impacts on the capacities of women's rights organizations to mobilize and empower women, or demand equal rights

**iv.** Decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), including impacts on workers' rights, and on the pace and nature of economic growth

**v.** Economic inequality (SDG 10), through analysis of uneven development policies in countries where social movements and civic groups are unable to demand action for groups left behind

**vi.** Sustainable cities (SDG 11), and life on land (SDG 15), through analysis of the impacts on small farmers, indigenous people, and the urban poor

**vii.** Peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16)

**viii.** The SDG principle of 'leaving no one behind'.

The four countries for the case studies were selected on grounds that:

● There had been contention over civic space, affecting the policy domains likely to have an impact on SDGs 1-6

● They provided a distribution across different political settlement regimes, from a relatively established (if intermittent) democracy with a strong record on inclusive development (Brazil), an increasingly dominant hybrid regime with a mixed record on development (Cambodia), a new democracy with a constitutional mandate for inclusion (Nepal), and a predatory authoritarian regime (Zimbabwe), to enable some comparative analysis

● Interest in and support from ACT Alliance country offices and partners for the study in the sectors or topics proposed.

The methodologies used in individual country case studies are briefly described in the introduction to each. These studies involved brief country visits by IDS researchers working with expert research partners in each country. The methodology emphasized the need to trace the impacts of closing civic space through to the actors targeted most directly and their activities in relation to the SDGs. The areas of contention highlighted most clearly by the literature review were land and natural resource rights, in particular among indigenous, peasant and poor groups, who were affected by harsh restrictions on human rights defenders in those domains; women's and labour rights, in particular the impacts of restrictions on freedoms of assembly and speech; environmental sustainability and 'life on land'; and poverty, hunger and economic inequality. Please note this is an illustrative selection of cases in which the contention has been overt and significant, where these are comparatively high-stakes battles for the contending actors, and in which the mechanisms through which narrower civic space will affect development outcomes are comparatively direct or traceable. There may be multiple other such mechanisms and impacts that are beyond the scope of the present study.

# 4.
## MECHANISMS OF IMPACT

### Framework for analysis

The literature review and conceptual framework parts of the study concluded with methodological reflections about the most rigorous and appropriate strategy for assessing the development impacts of closing civic space. We then developed these into a typology, borrowing methods used by the Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) research programme, along the lines laid out below. To help make sense of the mechanisms through which shrinking civic space may have an impact on development under different political settlements, each country is situated at different points in a typology of power relations within different political systems (or political settlements). Figure 1 depicts the typology. The horizontal axis distinguishes between **competitive** types of political systems and ones in which a **dominant** party control political power. In several countries, the balance of power is notably shifting in one or another direction (denoted by the arrows). On the vertical axis, the typology distinguishes between more **'developmental'** types of settlements, in which there is a general emphasis on broad-based growth, distribution and public services and more **predatory** systems, in which the domination of power yields enrichment mainly for elites. The present arrangement of countries in the typology reflects the analysis undertaken in the 12 desk-based country narratives.

**Figure 1:** A typology of political settlements



**Source:** Various sources published by ESID and listed in the references; www.effective-states.org
**Note:** Arrows denote that the political settlement is visibly moving towards a more competitive (left arrow) or a more dominant (right arrow) balance of power

From the overview of the conceptual literature and recent discussions of shrinking civic space around the world, a series of broad propositions about the mechanisms through which changes in the civic space may impact

development in a variety of different countries was derived. These included:

I.  In political systems in which power is controlled by a small elite coalition or group, with broadly 'developmental' agendas (blue quadrant, upper right), the state may have both the capacity and the elite commitment necessary to foster inclusive development outcomes. Economic growth and human development statistics may give the appearance of development progress, but in such political systems, taking power from civil society is likely to have negative impacts on:

    ● the rights and needs of marginalized and excluded groups, for whom channels and spaces for mobilizing or being heard will be further squeezed;

    ● scrutiny and checks by the media and civil society on macroeconomic management, which will be weakened or disabled. This is likely to mean a worsening business environment and a decline in political trust;

    ● environmental sustainability, across a wide range of potential areas and sectors, as 'developmental' elites are able to push through potentially high-growth land or natural resource projects without resistance from civil society.

II. In more competitive political systems, where power is shared through elections and other democratic and inclusive political institutions (grey quadrant, upper left):

    ● civic space helps to enhance the quality, depth and reach of democratic dialogue, creating more accountable and responsive policies and programmes as governments reap the benefits of legitimacy from development performance; however,

    ● less powerful groups - women, workers, small farmers, displaced persons, minority groups - may not be properly incorporated within the political settlement through strong party ties because they are not sufficiently powerful as a group; their political expressions may then take the form of more direct action - wage, subsidy or price protests, or resistance to extractive industries or development. These tend to be comparatively open and globalized economies, where citizens enjoy limited social protection for their vulnerabilities at different stages of the life-cycle, against economic volatility, or for the environment;

    ● civil society may come to be organized along ethnic or partisan lines, becoming too close to the state for civic space to provide both the engagement and the distance needed for successfully advancing development in fair and lasting ways.

III. Under conditions where a dominant party lacks the capacity and elite commitment to deliver inclusive outcomes, but is more plainly predatory (red quadrant, lower right):

    ● excluded and marginalized groups are likely to suffer most through a lack of voice and political pressure on political elites;

    ● all struggles against elite interests (land-grabbing, extractives, monopolies) are likely to fail, as elites are willing and able to repress protest or dissent;

    ● there are likely to be fewer major and sustained protest movements, because they would not expect a positive response. We would expect people in such countries to attempt migration where the local economy was not affording a sustainable living, and/or to be more likely to engage in extremist politics, including the use of violence.

IV. In all four types of political systems:

    ● freedom of speech and association may be seen as direct threats to state power, particularly with the growth of cyberspace; efforts to constrict or control this new digital public space are likely to overshadow efforts to harness new technologies for improved governance and more inclusive development;

    ● contestation over 'foreign' norms promoted by human rights defenders and civic actors is likely to become a political issue, and be used to justify restrictions on civic space that are actually motivated by struggles over political power and major economic resources (land, minerals, etc);

    ● wage, natural resource and commodity price-related struggles are also likely in each kind of political system, reflecting the volatilities and inequalities of the global economy. We would expect more wage and subsistence protests in more competitive political settings where populations expect a positive response, even if they also have reason to fear violence.

As none of the countries selected for the four case studies were of the 'dominant developmental' type, the case studies were designed to explore the remaining three of these four mechanisms of impact, where relevant, in each country.

## Civic space where political power is dominated by 'developmental' elites

The research design proposed that if civic space closures reflected the efforts of 'developmental' elites to consolidate state power by driving through fast but potentially harmful or contentious forms of development, the risks would chiefly be that marginalized groups would be silenced or excluded from the public sphere. None of the four cases explored in-country featured this kind of political settlement, in part because of the ethical and security risks and practical challenges faced in conducting research on these issues under such conditions.[3] However, Rwanda, Ethiopia and China were among the countries included in desk research undertaken for the study, and some preliminary analysis of the mechanisms through which further or new restrictions on civic space may impact on development is provided from those desk studies.

In China, a key concern is whether rapid poverty reduction rates can be sustained without the active participation of CSOs, particularly those based in remote and historically poor, rural and/or minority regions. The challenges of addressing economic inequality also indicate the need for more, not less, space for civil society to organize in China. And the problem of pollution has turned into a public health crisis, calling for civil society groups, activists and researchers to engage with public policy for the government to meet its own goals for a 'Healthy China'. China plays a special wider role in the global context of closing civic space. As an increasingly important development actor in many low- and middle-income countries, the norms and practices of Chinese aid and investment now set the normative environment within which development policies are made in several countries. As the Cambodia and Nepal country case studies indicate, this also shapes elite political views of civil society, and appears to provide a model for governments which wish to develop quickly but without respect for civil and political rights. Chinese perspectives and plans with respect to civil society are therefore not only of interest for China, they are also likely to influence civic space in other developing countries.

Ethiopia has combined high economic growth rates with progress on poverty, food security and other human development indicators since the 2000s, despite having clamped down on NGOs over a decade ago. Civil society operates under fairly restrictive conditions, and open opposition to government policies has been rare and muted. However, groups capable of mobilizing cannot be marginalized or excluded indefinitely. Revolts by aggrieved but politically important actors have undermined the dominance of the ruling group in the past few years. This was signalled by the declaration of State of Emergency, and in 2018, the uprising forced the lead party in the ruling coalition into sharing power with a wider (if still select) group. This broader coalition is believed likely to lead to significant overall changes in governance, and specifically to addressing issues of equity and distribution regarding land, agriculture and food security. As of late 2018, there are signs that official attitudes towards civil society are relaxing and that civic space may be reopening. If so, the situation deserves to be monitored closely to learn whether this more competitive political settlement in Ethiopia yields wider civic space, and has any impacts on development progress.

In Rwanda, another country with a purportedly 'developmental' elite, development performance is a key part of the legitimacy of the ruling elite and the international community. Under such conditions, strong elite commitment and capacity to deliver development progress can mean policies shift towards a pro-poor pathway even without openness or popular civic engagement in the policy process, and without respect for civil and political rights. Indicators showing rapid development progress have been vital in ensuring generous aid flows, and helping insulate ruling elites against demands for human rights or democracy. However, the credibility of its performance evidence is questioned; in the absence of transparent and verifiable information, scholarly and business trust in official development performance can be low. The need for credible official development performance data is of such importance for the ruling elite that there is a strong case to be made in Rwanda for civic space to ensure independent scrutiny in such critical matters of national development strategy.

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3. As part of a DFID-funded study, a country case study was undertaken for Ethiopia. This will soon be published as an IDS working paper.

## Closing civic space under more competitive political systems

In more competitive political systems, we proposed that civic space mattered because it enhanced the quality, depth and reach of democratic dialogue, creating more accountable and responsive policies and programmes as governments reap the benefits of legitimacy from development performance. There were several important examples of how comparatively open civic space had enabled civil society to participate in the development and delivery of policies and programmes that contributed to rapid poverty reduction and human development in Bangladesh; to peace-building in Colombia; to inclusive constitutional provisions in Nepal; and to tackling Brazil's historically high levels of economic inequality through broad and deep engagement by social movements in key policy spaces.

Brazil's experience with hunger and food security illustrates these mechanisms particularly clearly: civil society coalitions worked with the Workers' Party (PT) Government to sharply reduce poverty and virtually eradicate hunger in less than a generation, also moderating Brazil's acute economic inequality, building social protection systems and agriculture and natural resources policies that advanced the rights of the traditional peoples and communities' (PCTs) who comprise the majority of the rural poor. PCTs are communities, often of indigenous and/or African descent (the *quilombola* population), whose livelihood systems depend on collective management of diverse landscapes. These groups won significant government recognition and some strengthening of their rights over land during the Workers' Party government. Since the economic and political crisis surrounding the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, there have been signs of rapid reversal. Backed by the increasingly powerful rural caucus (the *bancada ruralista*) which represents groups with interests in land and natural resources in Congress, there has been a rise in attacks on and criminalization of agrarian movements, organizations, and their leaders. Hundreds of activists and rights defenders have been killed in the past three years. The crackdown on Brazil's civil society disproportionately affects 4 million poor rural PCTs, who comprise a significant proportion of all Brazilians living in poverty.

In Brazil, the interests of these groups came to be represented by a progressive and human rights-based civil society which enjoyed a close relationship with PT Government policymakers. A sub-set of civil society had become so close to political elites that, in some views, they lacked the detachment or distance to critique or hold them to account. One reading of the urban 'FIFA riots' and other protests in the period after 2013 was that parts of civil society had lost touch with popular opinion, becoming too close to politicians to articulate some of the diverse and varied range of popular grievances or dissent. Although civil society was never closely associated with politicians linked to corruption, there was a sense in which the channels for articulating mass concerns were affected by this relationship. Without effective formal civil society channels through which their discontent could be voiced to the political elite, many people took to the street. While under threat, most notably in crucial economic domains such as natural resource rights and protections, the tradition of civic activism in Brazil means that civil society remains prominent and vibrant. This reflects Brazil's political development as a country with a long history of authoritarian and repressive elite rule, and a more recent extended period of strong popularly-elected rule, in which state responsiveness became a principle and civic engagement an institutionalized norm. That there is such violence and impunity against civil society actors struggling on behalf of the most marginalized here testifies to the value of the economic assets at stake. It also signals a major, and certainly unequalizing, trend in Brazil's development.

A similar pattern was seen in Nepal, another of the countries where political power is comparatively competitive and pluralist. Inclusion has been institutionalized as part of the country's new constitution, building on a wide and growing demand for more inclusive development through the decade long 'People's War', and again in the wake of the 2015 earthquake. Compared to other countries, pressures on civic space have been in general more moderate in Nepal, and chiefly aim to restrict activities of specific sectors and actors. In this competitive political system, civic space is highly contentious, and civil society is itself divided according to which party is in power. Civic space is also shaped by the fact that Western donors have relatively less power than in the past, as China and India gain prominence in the region. This shift in the wider normative environment is creating new challenges for INGOs and NGOs. Groups advocating for rights and recognition of the Madhesi population have suffered most from efforts to control civil society, as activities that can be framed as 'pro-Indian' are deemed against national security. Most civil society actors affected by new

regulations and closures appear to have coped with and found ways around them, even though INGOs and human rights activists are under particular pressure to toe the official line. Civil society actors did not expect the new regulations to have immediate effects on development, and civic space is likely to continue to be wide enough to enable CSOs and other actors to make important contributions through identifying need, enabling outreach, monitoring and evaluating, and co-producing services, etc. Nevertheless, a key concern now is that discourses of inclusion increasingly compete with ideas about the need for policies to generate 'Big Development' through major infrastructural investments. The increased Indian and Chinese presence as development partners or investors allows the state to counter the frameworks and development agendas that come with dependence on official development assistance. A focus on reaching the SDGs has been displaced by this new infrastructure-heavy focus on 'Big Development', and has left NGOs and CSOs vulnerable to the appearance of being 'pro-India', among other charges.

In the other countries where power is exercised 'competitively' that were included in the desk study, Bang-ladesh and Colombia, civic space remains viable for some organizations and activists, and the media continues to report on rights violations and abuses. However, others have faced the use of judicial means to silence or stop them, or violence and violent threats. Targeted threats against specific actors can have a 'chilling' effect, encouraging others to remain silent for fear of reprisal.

In both Nepal and Brazil, the process through which well-articulated social demands emerge from a well-organized civil society, has the potential to turn into political platforms and state policy. An effective civil society, in the broad sense of the term, always faces the risk or opportunity of entering into a closer relationship with powerful elites. One of the lessons from Nepal and Brazil appears to be that an effective or strong civil society depends on a state with the capacity and resilience to give it sufficient space and to make constructive use of the independent scrutiny and critique of civil society to perform better.

## Civic space where power is dominated for predatory or mixed purposes

Power has been highly concentrated for predatory or mixed purposes in both Cambodia and Zimbabwe, among our case studies, and among the desk-based studies, in Mozambique, Myanmar and Russia. These are very different countries, where power is concentrated to different degrees and in different ways. In each one, power is used for a range of purposes, not always or only predatory.

Mozambique's experience in the past few years has shown what happens when civic space is squeezed by a ruling group that struggles to hold together a fragile coalition while facing multiple challenges to its power. Civil society there has been dependent on aid and focused on Maputo. While independent actors do exist, many organizations and movements have been co-opted by the state to deliver welfare without scrutiny or demands for accountability. But attacks on civil society have become more aggressive and violent in recent years, particularly where the balance of political power is seen to be at stake. In 2015, a prominent constitutional law professor was killed, apparently because his analysis had bolstered the opposition's demands for provincial autonomy, threatening the ruling FRELIMO party's hold on power. Mozambique's recent economic and debt crisis was triggered by a corruption scandal, presaged and followed by a series of attacks on journalists, academics and opposition politicians. These recent events in Mozambique highlight, among other factors, the connections between weak public financial management and the watchdog role of civil society.

Groups for whom civic space had narrowed varied widely across different types of authoritarian and dominant political systems. In Myanmar, for example, civic space had changed in a number of respects, and with highly varied impacts on the population. On the whole, civic space had widened with the democratizing process and more latitude for NGOs and the media to operate; however, many authoritarian-era rules remained on the books and in practice. Groups advocating for the rights of regional interests and minorities remained suppressed. In a context where the media had been unfree, and rights of association or assembly violated for decades,

the arrival of social media has been a potent, if not always a positive, contribution to public space. In Russia, while democratic space has been tightly restricted across the board in recent years, some civic groups have nonetheless faced particular campaigns of attack or harassment. LGBTQI and women's rights groups have faced particularly virulent efforts at stigmatization, in addition to the criminalization and intimidation of political opposition leaders and civil society activists more generally.

While recent strategies to constrict civic space have taken similar forms in both Cambodia and Zimbabwe, the political settlements and developmental outcomes diverge widely. Cambodia has presided over some impressive advances on headcount indicators of poverty, hunger and human development in recent decades. This progress has largely been attributed to a high economic growth strategy reliant on natural resource exploitation and export manufacturing, a sector that employs hundreds of thousands of low-paid industrial workers, mostly women. Rural growth has been partly driven by higher agricultural prices since 2007, and is credited with causing rapid reductions in the proportions of the population living below the national poverty line. However, concerns about corruption, environmental degradation, exploitation of workers, and the suppression of labour rights have persisted throughout the period. Indigenous and other rural populations have been dispossessed or impoverished through the high-growth strategy. Reflecting the limited space for civic engagement on public policy, the pace of Cambodia's human development gains slowed in recent years, and contention around wages, environmental protection, and land rights rose. When the power of the ruling elite was threatened by the unexpected electoral success of an opposition supported by young tech-using urbanites, civil society came to be associated with the opposition.

A critical conclusion from the Cambodia case study is that the constricting of civic and political space in the period surrounding the 2018 elections is unlikely to affect its model of economic growth-driven development. However, the emphasis on growth reflects a distinct lack of urgency or priority around the SDGs at the official level, seen also in the limited evidence of baseline data or other monitoring mechanisms in place. In this context, the shrinking space of civil society is likely to enable a development policy direction premised on dispossession and tolerance for inequality and rights violations.

This will include land-grabbing and inequitable and corrupt resource deals with greater impunity, continued suppression of labour rights, inadequate attention to the problems of poor, and exclusionary public services.

While development performance, at least in the form of high economic growth and aggregate poverty reduction indicators is important to the legitimacy of Cambodia's ruling elite, Zimbabwe's ruling group has maintained its power over a long period without such concerns. Under Mugabe, the government presided over a dramatic decline in human development. This reflects the collapse of public services in a context of widespread and sustained drought and food insecurity and episodes of hyperinflation and other major macroeconomic shocks. These crises have further depleted the coping strategies of people already living in poverty. These crises in turn stem directly from how the corruption, secrecy, and impunity of authoritarian rule breeds economic mismanagement.

Zimbabwe confirms our proposition that in conditions where a dominant party lacks the capacity and elite commitment to deliver inclusive outcomes, but is more plainly predatory, major and sustained protest movements would be rare, because people would expect no positive response. Civic space in Zimbabwe has been shaped closely by the authoritarian regime and its tight embrace of allies and ferocious treatment of adversaries. Civil society activism has been legalistic and formal in this context, and while not without its successes, has struggled to assert its independence or build grassroots links. New types of 'hashtag movements' emerged in the past few years, as civil society groups occupied new digital public space to mobilize opposition to the economic policies of the regime. At times, these new movements were able to align with other civil society actors, including some that had customarily been close to the centre of political power. Such different groups came together to support a change of ruler in late 2017. Political power remains in the hands of a narrow Zimbabwean elite, but that control is increasingly contested and challenged by civil society and political opposition, including informal groups and actors.

While it is too soon to assess future directions for civic space and development in Zimbabwe, it is possible to draw some conclusions about its recent past. It is clear that a repressive unrestrained regime can divert economic resources without interest in developing sound

economic policy. The power-sharing period with the Government of National Unity (GNU) (2009-13) saw some improvement, as relative open civic space and political stability led to the re-engagement of investors and donors, and the introduction of a stable currency in the form of the US dollar. Authoritarian rule has meant civil society has been prohibited from supporting hungry or poor Zimbabweans in particular 'disloyal' regions, and certain groups have been systematically excluded from access to service delivery by CSOs, or to food aid. Notably, humanitarian outreach was improved during the GNU period, when civic space was somewhat more open. However, NGOs and CSOs overall lack the expertise or capacity to engage the state successfully on macro-economic policy, or to hold it accountable over public finances and the budget. The new digital civic movements around basic economic goods may have prompted the new Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) leadership to prioritize economic recovery to a certain extent. These new movements mobilize digitally and on the streets, and directly confront the Government over bad governance and corruption in an unruly manner unseen after years of repressive rule.

## The normative environment for civil and political rights in development

Across all settings, we expected freedoms of speech, assembly, and association to be seen as direct threats to political or state power, particularly with the growth of cyberspace, and efforts to silence critics and obstruct space for mobilization were noted in most of these countries. In addition, contestation over 'foreign' norms promoted by human rights defenders and civic actors has been politicized and deployed to rationalize restrictions on civic space motivated by political power struggles. In some cases, it is arguable that legitimating norms have shifted from an acceptance of Western liberal and human rights values, to so-called 'Asian' values, emphasizing economic progress and sovereignty as the goals of national development, or even towards global values of neo-liberalism, characterized by a high tolerance for rapacious economic investment in the pursuit of profit.

The present research focused chiefly on the implications for formal civil society actors and their influence, but it is clear that informal actors and struggles, including unruly wage, natural resource and commodity price-related contention were an important presence across these different systems. This rise in unruly civic space very likely reflects the volatilities of global economic integration and the weakness of state capacities to protect populations from them. Mass protests are greatly disliked by elite groups, who fear the disruption and volatility they can unleash. Other actors that are increasingly important in several of these countries' civic space are right wing extremists, supporters of authoritarian rule, and cultural and faith-based groups that may be opposed to individual human rights or equality. Development policy and thought pay insufficient attention to the roles these 'unruly' and 'uncivil' actors may play in their occupation and widening of a civic space which is, by contrast, closing to formal and foreign-funded groups.

## Impacts on development actors

**Impacts on / relationship to development cooperation**
The case studies did not focus specifically on the impacts on development cooperation, but in each of the four countries examined - Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal and Zimbabwe - aid donors, the UN system, and international CSOs and platforms expressed concerns about constricting civic space and its possible impacts on development cooperation and progress. In Nepal, the key concern was that the proposed NGO law would directly control and limit civil society access to foreign funding, particularly that of smaller organizations most likely to reach those at greatest risk of being left behind. Sweden stopped new aid to Cambodia after the political crackdown, costing the country an estimated USD100 million in lost aid over five years. International CSOs, particularly from the USA, were blocked or restricted from supporting local organizations deemed supportive of the opposition. In Brazil, the international media and human rights defenders have been monitoring the campaign of violence against defenders of the land rights of indigenous and other traditional peoples and communities, ongoing against a push for rapid land and resource extraction

development under the resurgent right wing 'Rural Caucus'-backed Government under President Temer. This has raised international awareness of the realities of this new regime, and what these powerful political drivers mean for Brazil's ongoing struggle with inequality. In Zimbabwe, international aid was unable to support civil society actors in challenging the disastrous economic and agrarian policies of the past two decades or engaging in key policy areas. The chronic failures of accountability in authoritarian regimes like Zimbabwe show up most directly in hunger and food insecurity, when even food aid is treated as a political resource.

As noted above, the increasing role of China as a development actor is having an impact on the normative environment within which struggles over civic space are taking place. In some instances, Chinese companies may have been involved in land or resource deals that civil society was contesting. In Cambodia, at least, Chinese garment companies have a strong interest in suppressing labour in order to keep wages low, and protests are frequent. But the most significant contribution of China's role in development may be indirect rather than direct, in that it has shifted the normative environment for aid, giving political leaders new, and politically convenient, ideas about delivering development without the destabilizing debates and struggles inevitably involved where civil society is free to mobilize and advocate. Chinese investments in development 'hardware' such as roads and energy plants come with few conditions of human rights or social protection, and civil society actors see this as an influence on Government agendas. In Nepal, India was also an important influence on perceptions of the need for 'Big Development', involving high growth-potential investments in infrastructure but pushing issues of inequality and exclusion down the policy agenda.

In Cambodia, Chinese investments in a range of development-related sectors such as garment factories, infrastructure, real estate, mining, hydroelectric power, and agricultural land are substantial and growing. Here, China has also started channelling funds to Cambodian NGOs to work with Chinese companies on their corporate social responsibility, among other matters, through Chinese Government-organized NGOs such as the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation. To make this possible, a new Forum on Civil Society has been established in the Cambodian Council of Ministers to enable dialogue between and among CSOs/NGOs and provide grants to

member NGOs. Because Chinese development support appears to play a role in licensing restrictions on civic space, Chinese support to civil society and NGOs merits closer attention in Cambodia and elsewhere.

### Impacts on the role and function of civil society actors

In response to research question B, about how changing civil society space is affecting the role and function of civil society actors in specified sectors/policy domains, the case studies explored how specific civil society activities that were likely contribute to inclusive development were affected by closing space.

### Producing and analysing data and monitoring implementation

The weakening ability of civil society and the media to generate and analyse data and monitor the implementation of the SDGs was widely noted in the literature review and desk-based studies. Specific efforts were being made to control the media and the electronic transmission of data online in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Rwanda and Russia. In China, information remained tightly controlled from the centre. The case studies explored in more detail how control of information and public debate was likely to impact the contributions of civil society to development. In Zimbabwe, the case study found that there were specific gaps of information about remote and oppressed populations; this made it difficult to assess conditions in areas such as Matabeleland, and to monitor food security and the delivery of food aid. NGOs and civil society have been prevented from accessing particular regions associated with opposition groups for long periods, and this absence of information can be linked to those region's continuing problems of acute and chronic food insecurity.

In Cambodia, attacks on the freedom of the independent media prevented investigative journalism on corruption and land-grabbing, and placed increasing pressure on social media activism. However, if enacted, a new Access to Information law (the draft of which civil society actors contributed to) is likely to strengthen the legal and administrative basis on which civil society and the media may demand, and use, public information. It remains to be seen whether the implementation of the new law can actually empower civil society and the media in a setting where violence is used against civil society activists who impede lucrative business deals.

In Nepal, despite a freedom of information law passed in 2007, the media can in principle be stopped from reporting stories deemed harmful to national unity or which may stoke ethnic tension. Although NGOs had played an important role generating and using evidence to monitor implementation and hold Government to account, there were concerns that a proposed NGO law was likely to curb such activities in favour of more service delivery. In Brazil, the new right-wing government was reshaping civil society involvement in ways that were likely to impact their capacity to monitor public policies with any independence or freedom.

**Reviewing and shaping development policies with technical expertise**

In all countries, the capacities for CSOs that were independent from the ruling party to engage in policy dialogue was constrained, as policy processes became more exclusionary. In both Cambodia and Zimbabwe, generalized restrictions on activities with advocacy and/or other 'political' features meant the space for public dialogue was narrowed, as civil society groups feared retaliation for open criticism or dissent. In both countries, civil society groups could point to clear moments in time when their influence on policies declined sharply, in line with wider shifts in the political settlement. In Zimbabwe, civil society activists noted that their relationships to the state had changed multiple times: after a deeply repressive period of economic crisis, the period of the GNU drew civil society into a more constructive engagement, after which several human development indicators improved; the return to rule by ZANU-PF in 2013 again saw space shrink, as activists feared the consequences of antagonising the regime. In Brazil, civil society groups and social movements had played important roles in shaping poverty, food security, agriculture and natural resource policies; in particular, the new right-wing regime was understood to be 'redesigning' the spaces for civic participation in public policy in ways that would limit their role. In Nepal, too, organizations and actors that had been central to establishing principles of social inclusion in the Constitutions found that in a more contentious civic space, their roles in promoting a rights-based approach for inclusive development were under threat from proposed restrictions on their activities.

**Ensuring that the voices of marginalized and vulnerable populations are taken into account**

The case studies highlighted the strong connection between efforts to close civic space and marginalized and vulnerable populations facing dispossession, violations of their rights, official and sanctioned violence, neglect, deprivation, or poor public services. There are examples in each of the country case studies in which closing civic space meant NGOs and CSOs would struggle to ensure the voices of the marginalized and vulnerable were heard. In Brazil, efforts were being made to exclude PCTs from policy spaces, pushing NGOs and social movements out of key debates and events in the formulation of public policy. In Cambodia, civil society actors protecting the rights of indigenous groups and the rural poor were struggling against powerful and well-connected land grabbers. In Nepal, groups representing indigenous and minority groups were under specific restrictions, and Madhesi groups representing people of Indian ethnic origin or from the Terai region were specifically being silenced, as part of wider political struggles. In Zimbabwe, while the population in general lacked voice, civil society actors were particularly concerned about their inability to reach remote regions or regions where the government prohibited free movement, such as Matabeleland. In each of these countries, these marginalized groups include indigenous and/or minority groups, often in remote parts of the country who are settled on or have customary rights to resource-rich areas. These are areas which land developers, extractive industries, agri-food industry investors, and governments wish to exploit. These groups may be associated with opposition groups, and they may also be represented by local social movements, often with links to transnational human rights defenders and civil society networks. Efforts to close civic space, both in the countries studied here and in many others around the world, are best explained in light of struggles over land and other valuable assets, and in the desire of politically well-connected business actors to remove civil society obstacles in the way of their exploitation.

**Accessing 'hard-to-reach' groups**

In both Zimbabwe and Cambodia, restrictions on NGOs were having direct impacts on the services they could provide to groups in particularly remote regions. In Nepal, a proposed new law regulating NGO activities and funding sources would require NGOs to be more professionalized in ways believed likely to harm smaller, grassroots, and community-based organizations in remote areas. Organizations connected to contentious struggles, for instance around Janjati (indigenous), Madhesi (people from the Terai region, or of Indian origin), or Dalit (so-called 'untouchable') group rights, were believed to be most affected by these new regulations, whereas rights-

based organizations run by well-connected higher caste groups were likely to be largely unaffected. Examples are provided throughout the following section on the SDGs of ways in which civil society has or has not been unable to reach such populations.

**Shedding light on ignored or underserved SDGs and pushing for action**

In Cambodia and Zimbabwe, civil society actors were concerned that their shrinking capacity to gather credible evidence, particularly in remote or conflict-affected areas, would affect their ability to identify a) areas or groups being left behind by development, or b) policy domains where reversals or stagnation were occurring. In Brazil and Nepal, by contrast, concerns emerged over the possibilities for civil society to engage with Government policy in contexts where issues of exclusion and deprivation have become increasingly politicized and polarizing. It may be difficult for civil society actors to raise awareness of emerging concerns, for instance, around food insecurity or environmental degradation, where these go against the interests of powerful state and market actors. The general 'chill' in the relationships between civil societies and their governments makes it harder for them to put contentious issues on the development agenda in a peaceful or just way.

**Raising awareness and bringing more stakeholders on board to tackle the Agenda**

Across the literature review and country case studies, it was clear that closing civic space was likely to affect civil society's ability to amplify the voices of the marginalized or disempowered. This key function was disabled or muted under conditions where NGOs and CSOs faced threats to their safe and continued existence. This was true even where those new regulations may help to institutionalize the accountability of civil society actors by improving their transparency and governance. In several countries, the media faces specific restrictions on reporting from particular areas or on particularly contentious issues; struggles for land rights and local autonomy, anti-corruption efforts, and human rights and environmental protections in key global value chains tend to be particularly sensitive political matters. A principle purpose of raising awareness is to build constituencies for change, and an important channel for bringing more stakeholders on board to tackle the SDGs' Agenda is obstructed through the silencing of debate about politically-sensitive development issues.

**Impacts on business actors and the wider business environment**

Resource and time constraints meant that case study researchers were only able to interview a small number of business and related actors, and then only in relation to those policy domains in which key SDGs were likely to be affected by closing space, and in which business actors also played a direct role (and could be identified and contacted for interviewing). It would be risky to generalize on the basis of a handful of interviews across four countries, and so comments here must be treated as preliminary, intended to invite further debate and sharing of evidence or analysis. However, the present case studies found no good reasons to believe that restrictions on civic space were likely to have any direct or immediate adverse impacts on business actors or the wider business environment in any of these countries.

There were a number of reasons why business actors appeared to be unaffected or even positively affected by restrictions on civic space. Closed civic space benefits business interests in large-scale agroindustrial, energy, resource extraction, and property development projects, as well as in labour-intensive global value chains. For both types of business, human rights and environmental protections are an obstacle to profit, and protest and organized civil society resistance to environmental or labour exploitation is common. In contexts where people have mobilized to resist the loss of land or resource rights or to advance more sustainable policies, as in Brazil and Cambodia, it has often been against alliances of business and state actors. In such instances, business actors may tacitly condone or support restrictions and even illicit violent attacks on civil society actors. In Brazil, for instance, civil society activists have uncovered the criminal activities of business groups connected with land-grabbing, and have, in response, been criminalized themselves for their activities.

Business actors and investors may also be unaccustomed to operating in a context of open civic space, and may have adapted accordingly – or left for more favourable investment climates, as in Zimbabwe. In Cambodia, weak governance and regulatory systems make it harder to start and operate businesses in a legal and transparent way, free from bribery and corruption. Companies with international transparency codes of conduct adhering to high international standards and principles cannot bribe and so find regulatory processes take longer. Many multinationals cannot operate in Cambodia as a result.

This then creates space for actors for whom corruption is not a concern, including some Chinese businesses. From what we know of the role of the media and other civil society actors in relation to demanding transparency and accountability and combating corruption, restrictions on media freedom and rights-based activism are likely to weaken efforts to tackle corruption in business regulation. This means that over time, the space in which law-abiding business actors can invest profitably in Cambodia is unlikely to increase, and may shrink further, as they are forced to compete on an uneven playing field with businesses that are less constrained by anti-corruption rules and procedures.

Recent developments with respect to civic space in Cambodia do not impact directly on business, unless specific companies criticize the Government, or otherwise engage in political discussions. Some 'socially oriented' agri-food businesses have set up partnerships with farmer groups to enable access to markets and inputs, and have found that their capacity to organize meetings has been somewhat affected by rules restricting group meetings and activities. Closing civic space thus may prevent the opening of new investment flows, as well as entrench the interests of businesses that are comfortable with weak governance. These findings raise more questions than they offer conclusions, but they point to some of the difficult questions that need to be asked about which business interests benefit in order to establish whether or not there is a private (for-profit) sector case for protecting civic space.

# 5.
# IMPACTS ON THE SDGs

This section discusses the impacts of changing civic space on key indicators of development, drawing chiefly on the findings from the case studies of Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal and Zimbabwe, but illustrating broader points drawn from the desk-based studies and other examples from the literature. This section provides a narrative discussion of the impacts on the targets of selected development outcomes to do with: poverty (SDG 1), hunger and food security (SDG 2), gender equality (SDG 5), economic growth and decent work (SDG 8), inequalities (SDG 10), life on the land (SDG 11), and sustainable cities (SDGs 15). It follows this with an analysis of the impacts on 'intermediate' outcomes such as: peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16), development partnerships (SDG 17), and the SDG principles of inclusion and 'leaving no one behind'. Under each issue, the analysis highlights areas in which impacts are likely, or have already been felt, and can be traced to how restrictions shape the contributions of civil society to each.

The points discussed below are not exhaustive but provide a selection of some of the more illustrative evidence. It should be noted that with the exception of the provision of services, the role of civil society in development is in collaboration or contestation with other actors, and so this analysis attempts to assess civil society contributions to particular development outcomes, rather than attributing all outcomes to civil society or civic space alone. The analysis provides indications of the scale of likely impacts, but it does not claim that civic space is the only factor at work in changes in development outcomes, nor that these are robust or final estimations of the magnitude of these impacts across any individual SDG target.

## NO POVERTY: SDG 1
### End poverty in all its forms everywhere

**1.1** By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than USD1.25 a day

**1.2** By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions

**1.3** Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable

**1.4** By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance

**1.5** By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters

The overall finding with respect to SDG 1, end poverty in all its forms everywhere, is that closing or closed civic space is likely to block progress on several targets, but how poverty is affected overall depends on how much and what kind of progress on poverty matters to the ruling elite. The country case studies identified several targets as particularly vulnerable to the impacts of closing civic space.

### Impacts on the prevalence of poverty

National and international poverty headcount ratios (Targets 1.1 and 1.2) are generally treated as the headline outcome indicators of inclusive development. However, similar rates of poverty reduction may conceal very different processes of development, and these will in turn affect how sustainable, equitable, and inclusive the model of poverty reduction is likely to be. Major reductions in the proportions living in poverty result principally from relatively equitable rapid economic growth and significant pro-poor public service expansion, both underpinned by a political economy geared to delivering comparatively inclusive development outcomes. But the motivations and the means through which ruling elites establish such policies vary, as do their relationships with civil society.

One prominent concern is that restrictions on civil society will mean programmes and services directly serving the poor and most marginalized groups are likely to be cut or curtailed. In countries like Bangladesh and Nepal, where NGOs and CSOs have been closely involved in poverty reduction programmes among the most marginalized populations, efforts to regulate how NGOs receive and use aid money have raised alarms about those countries' capacities to identify and access 'hard-to-reach' groups, including transient and stigmatized groups. In Ethiopia, laws in the 2000s restricting NGO activities saw services for some of the poorest people, including rural women, sharply cut or reduced. In many countries, the numbers of people losing services when NGO regulations are

tightened could be roughly quantified, depending on which sectors and regions of the country were affected.

While NGO services may affect rates of poverty among the most marginalized groups, the overall prevalence of poverty, usually measured through headcount measures of the numbers living below national poverty line, is most likely to be affected by national government policies, and on the choices made regarding how to pursue economic growth and poverty reduction. This point is illustrated by a comparison of findings from Brazil and Cambodia. Both countries reduced the proportions of their populations living below international or national poverty lines rapidly in the 2000s, but they did so under contrasting conditions. The vibrant democracy of the Brazil of the early 2000s saw a close and constructive civil society-state relationship and wide, institutionalized forms of civic participation shape pro-poor policies and programmes such as the Minimum Wage and Bolsa Familia (impacting on areas of Target 1.3). Through civil society policy influence, monitoring and holding officials to account at multiple levels of the system, a decade of rapid progress focussed on the historically poor, non-European, marginalized North and Northeastern region, contributing directly to a sharp reduction in Brazil's historically high inequality. The minimum wage rose 250 per cent from 2004 to 2014, and the national headcount poverty rate dropped from 25 per cent in 2003 to 7 per cent in 2014.

In Cambodia, poverty headcount ratios reduced even faster, by national estimates from 50 per cent in 2003 to 18 per cent in 2012. But as noted above, the underlying political economy was different. Prime Minister Hun Sen was a dominant figure then, and has become more so since 2013, stifling political opposition, civil society and the media. Cambodia's remarkable poverty reduction owes much to rapid economic growth, particularly in often poorly-paid export manufacturing sectors where labour organization is suppressed; in natural resource exploitation, including through illegal logging and land-grabbing; and as a result of rapid agricultural price rises, which saw incomes and consumption rise particularly fast for the rural majority in line with global prices. In both Brazil and Cambodia, poorer people improved their consumption more than the rich over the first decade of the 2000s. Brazil's historically marginalized and poor 'traditional peoples and communities' gained new forms of representation and space to engage with politics and policy, as well as a working social protection system. By contrast, Cambodia's growth was accompanied by a rise in labour force participation but also increased dispossession, as peasants and indigenous people were moved off their lands to make way for development or natural resource extraction, clampdowns on labour organization, and weak and uneven public services (relevant to Target 1.4). There is limited public space to advocate for pro-poor policies or spending, and development financing from China has reduced the need for western aid. Unlike in Brazil, civil society has played a limited direct role in public policymaking in Cambodia. There, the pattern of growth has strengthened the hold of the powerful over state institutions and resources and deepened the marginalization and exclusion of minority and vulnerable groups. Groups at particular risk of 'being left behind by development' are those facing dispossession and loss of livelihood because of illegal or unsustainable land development, energy, or other extractive projects. Figure 2 depicts the pace of poverty reduction in Brazil and Cambodia in the 2000s. (For reference, the figure also includes a snapshot of the prevalence of poverty according to national poverty lines in the other two country case studies, Nepal and Zimbabwe, for both of which only a single data point is available.)

**Figure 2:** The proportion of the population living below the national poverty line since 2000 in Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal and Zimbabwe

✖ Brazil    ▲ Cambodia    ● Nepal    ■ Zimbabwe
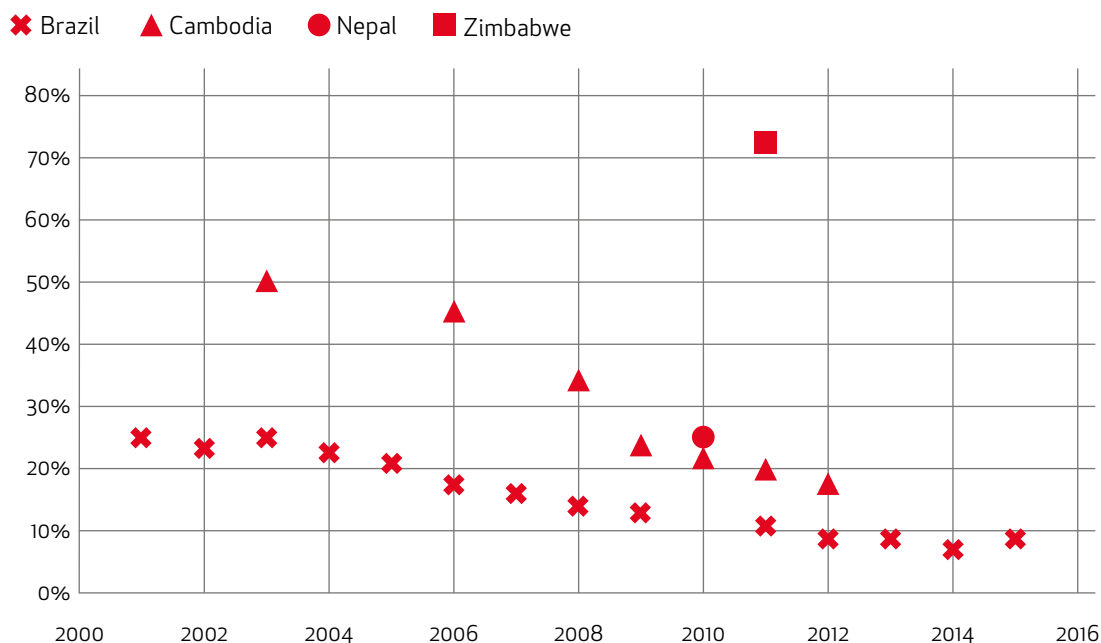
### Impacts on livelihoods and social protection

Continuing the comparison of Brazil and Cambodia, the last few years has seen a particularly severe clampdown on land, peasant and indigenous peoples' rights defenders and their associated social movements and civil society activists, including the media and social media (in Cambodia) that report on them. The resurgence of the right in Brazilian politics has meant some of the key pro-poor achievements of the Workers' Party period are now under threat, and the capacity of civil society to advocate for pro-poor policies and spending has been weakened (Target 1.3 and 1.4). In 2016, the Bolsa Familia programme cut 10 per cent of beneficiaries, a cut which has been directly linked to the rise in the number of people living in extreme poverty, from 13.3 million to 14.8 in 2017, although the economic crisis facing the country is likely to have played a significant role.

In Cambodia, the case study identified no good reasons to believe the headcount poverty figures would be adversely affected by closing civic space. The pace of poverty reduction has to date depended mainly on high economic growth rates in some labour-intensive and rural sectors, and the fulfilment of basic needs remains a priority for the legitimacy of this increasingly authoritarian regime (Kelsall and Heng 2016). With Chinese investment, rapid economic growth is projected for Cambodia, which should

yield further rapid reductions in national headcount poverty ratios. However, other poverty indicators in Cambodia are likely to be directly affected by closing civic space. Some 700,000 Cambodians were estimated to have lost land and livelihoods through land-grabbing and resettlement projects by 2012 (Target 1.4). Before the clampdown on civil society, many were contesting these deals and evictions through protests involving local social movements and transnational actors and had helped slow or improve the terms of some of these land deals. Activists have been under additional pressure in the past few years, but the Government has also proceeded with more caution on its land deals.

It should be noted that contention over civic space was closely linked to conflicts over land in each of the four case study countries. Civil society and social movements saw their space for activism and policy engagement around land shrinking in Brazil, as key participation spaces and policies affecting land titling were re-designed to exclude activists. Violent attacks on land rights defenders have been particularly common in Brazil, and are likely to affect both poverty reduction and hunger (SDG 1) and food security (SDG 2) there. In Zimbabwe, conflict over land rights had been linked to rising poverty levels after the land reforms of the 2000s, when impoverished agricultural workers were displaced by redistribution

policies. After the end of GNU rule, when ZANU-PF returned to power, activists noted that land-grabbing had become increasingly 'contagious'. This was occurring in a setting where civil society lacked the space to challenge powerful elites or the capacity or permission to reach remote or conflict-affected regions of the country.

In other countries included in the desk-studies, closing space was similarly associated with efforts to grab land or exploit natural resources illegally or without public scrutiny, often with potentially adverse impacts on livelihoods. In Myanmar and Bangladesh, major energy projects were facing pushback from civic groups concerned about impacts on local livelihoods and ecology. In Colombia, conflicts over land and water rights remained a prominent concern in peace talks, with indigenous people's rights defenders facing great risks in their efforts to claim or defend these rights, highlighting the connections between peace, poverty and livelihoods.

**Impacts on resilience and vulnerability**
The Zimbabwe case illustrates most clearly the impact of closed civic space on the resilience or vulnerability of people as they are exposed to both economic and climatic shocks (Target 1.5). The direct impacts on hunger will be discussed below, but Zimbabwe's successive droughts and macroeconomic crises are likely to have pushed millions of people deeper into poverty. As poverty figures for Zimbabwe are unreliable, these issues will be discussed further below under SDG 2. While droughts cannot be blamed on closed civic space, failure to prepare for such shocks, and the absence of social protection measures against them, reflects the generally unaccountable and predatory nature of the regime. The period of the Government of National Unity demonstrated clearly how a more open civic space could produce more pro-poor results, even though civil society had been weakened

and disabled by the preceding years of suppression. With respect to macroeconomic shocks, both the absence of any effective civic check on political power, as well as the lack of experience or expertise within civil society to contest macroeconomic policies, helped pave the way for such crises. In other contexts, civil society plays a 'watchdog' role, informing the public and creating pressure on governments to address problematic macroeconomic policies.

In other countries involved in the study, the importance of civic space for the effective management of disasters and humanitarian crises has also been underlined. The 2015 earthquake in Nepal highlighted the need for broad society-state alliances in disaster relief and rehabilitation. Bangladesh, now handling the refugee crisis triggered by genocide against the Rohingya of Myanmar (a crisis that is itself linked to changes in civic space), has relied heavily on its wealth of NGOs and CSOs to mount a humanitarian response on a vast scale. Mozambique struggles to cope with the disasters such as cyclones and floods to which it is chronically exposed.

As governments have sought to restrict NGO and CSO operations, often by proscribing activities deemed 'political' or a security risk and by regulating their access to finance, organizations have had to close or cut operations in countries all around the world, including in our case study countries. This is likely to mean cuts in spending on and services for particular groups, often women and the most marginalized and excluded in society. Chinese and (in Nepal) Indian development financing may compensate in public finances overall, but the orientation of such development spending may be less directly focused on reaching the poorest or most marginalized (Target 1.4).

## ZERO HUNGER: SDG 2
End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

**2.1** By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round

**2.2** By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons

**2.3** By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment

**2.4** By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality

Closing civic space is highly likely to impact adversely on indicators of hunger, food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture through a reduction of the influence of civic actors on food and agriculture policymaking; more latitude for land- and resource-grabbing, impacting in particular on the livelihoods of small and subsistence farmers and indigenous people; and by insulating ruling elites from the political effects of food crises. The impacts of restrictions on civil society on hunger and food security are highlighted most clearly in Zimbabwe, which, alone among our four country case studies, saw significant increases in the proportion of the population undernourished in the past decade (see Figure 3).

### Impacts on civil society participation in food and agricultural policy

As with poverty policies, civil society has played a key role in agriculture, food security, and nutrition policy proposal-making, formulation, implementation and monitoring. Brazil created a council with civil society participation to address national food security and nutrition and specific mechanisms for addressing the nutrition crisis in indigenous and impoverished communities. Programmes such as the Bolsa Familia

improved household food security among those on the lowest incomes, reducing the prevalence of under-nourishment from 12 per cent in 2000, to 2.5 per cent in 2009, where it has stayed (Targets 2.1 and 2.2). Since the resumption of political power by the right in Brazil, there have been cuts to Bolsa Familia, the Food Purchase Programme that supports poor household in growing and buying their own food, and the Bolsa Verde scheme for social inclusion combined with conservation (Targets 2.3 and 2.4). Recent actions to reduce civic participation in policy formulation in key agriculture and food ministries and policy spaces, and a reversal of limited protections against land-grabbing and resettlement, are strong indicators that hunger, food security and nutrition are likely to worsen in the near future. Impacts are also likely to be felt on the sustainability of land use, and on biodiversity, as indigenous people face a tougher struggle to protect customary lands, traditional knowledge and the local ecology (Targets 2.3 and 2.4).

In Cambodia, the proportion of the population that was undernourished halved from almost 30 per cent to 15 per cent between 2000 and 2015 (Target 2.1 and 2.2). And yet, as noted above, this progress has been accompanied by a process of rapid growth of large scale agri-food producers

that has dispossessed or squeezed smallholder farmers. Some one-fifth of Cambodian rural households now lacks cultivable land. This has occurred in a context in which civil society groups have been unable to campaign openly on land rights issues, despite their urgency, and have shifted into 'safer' service-delivery mode in an effort to stay engaged. Wider restrictions, for instance on group gatherings, prevent farmers from coming together to cooperate, organize, or receive training, limiting their gains in productivity. Civil society actors believe these restrictions are having adverse and unequalizing impacts on nutrition and food security, particularly among the rural poor, indigenous and displaced people, and small farmers. These restrictions have also started to impact the agri-food industry, in a modest way, as partnerships with social enterprises or NGOs to increase agricultural outputs and market access also come under pressure. However, agri-food business interviewees did not identify any additional adverse impacts on themselves from closing civic space in Cambodia.

**Figure 3:** Prevalence of undernourishment since 2000 in Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal and Zimbabwe
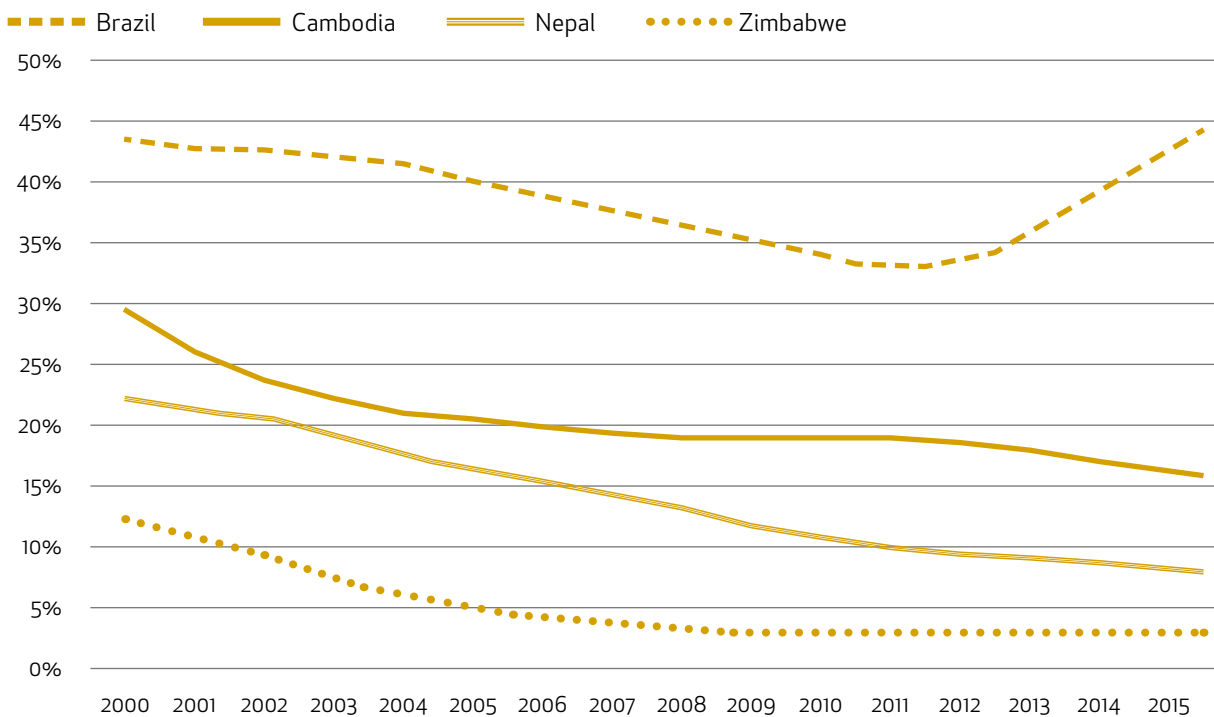


**Source:** World Development Indicators [accessed December 12 2018]

### Impacts on land- and resource-grabbing and rural livelihoods

As noted above, efforts to control civil society have paved the way for elite-backed land or resource grabs in documented instances. Indigenous people, forest communities, and small and subsistence farmers tend to lose livelihoods and suffer from dispossession and displacement and are likely to face a greatly elevated risk of food insecurity as a result. These are groups among whom hunger and malnutrition levels tend to be high. Closures may make it difficult for such groups to resist land-grabbing or to document, monitor, or protest its effects. In Ethiopia and Rwanda, government-backed large-scale agri-food investments are believed to have had particularly adverse effects on the food security of small and subsistence farmers. Examples from Brazil demonstrate a clear connection between murders, threats and other attacks on land- and indigenous rights defenders, and the economic interests of the landed and political elites. Brazil is now one of the deadliest countries for environmental activists worldwide: the Pastoral Land Commission, a Brazilian advocacy group, reported that 61 land rights defenders were killed in 2016, the highest number since 2003. Indigenous and rural populations find their livelihoods threatened by the creation of infrastructure such as dams, resource extraction, and the auctioning of hard-fought indigenous lands to foreign companies,

with likely immediate and longer-term impacts on their food security and nutrition.

In Cambodia, local resistance has combined with trans-local and transnational activists in some of the many ongoing natural resource-related struggles in the country. In some instances, this civic action has succeeded in slowing or amending the terms of state-sponsored land deals. There are also signs that the response to resistance to land deals has shifted away from outright repression towards the use of legal and institutional means to regulate civic action and protest. In Colombia, conflicts surrounding the peace agreement are often related to issues of land rights (displacement, restitution, etc.) and water issues. The deep inequalities of race, class, and location in Colombia's society mean that there is a realistic chance that indigenous and low-income populations will be left behind by development. The end of the civil war has not brought freedom and openness to civic life in Colombia but new and aggressive attacks against land and indigenous rights defenders, among other things.

### Impacts on food crises

Open civic space and free flow of information about food supplies is widely understood to be an important prevention against food crisis and famine. In Bangladesh, the freedom of the media and thinktanks to monitor food supplies and prices has been an important contribution to its management of episodic food insecurity. Civil society and the media have been able to alert the public and the government to unfolding food crises and prompt them to take action. In Ethiopia, despite restrictions on civil society and the media, the government was generally judged successful in averting major El Nino drought-linked famine in the past few years. Nevertheless, there are concerns that food insecurity remains acute in parts

of the country with weak connections to political power. Civil society appears to have struggled to influence the government to adopt more sustainable and equitable agrarian policies in ways that would respond to the livelihood needs of people at greatest risk of hunger and food insecurity.

The Zimbabwe case demonstrated most clearly how restrictions on civil society can contribute directly to worsening hunger and malnutrition, particularly among the most vulnerable, through the medium of emergency food aid (Targets 2.1 and 2.2). Undernourishment levels remain high and, after some modest declines, started to rise again in 2012. As already noted, through its long period of predatory authoritarian rule, Zimbabwe has developed limited national capacity to prepare for or protect against economic or environmental crises. Successive droughts have seen it become dependent on food aid, delivered by humanitarian actors and others in civil society to up to 7 million Zimbabweans a year at the peak of the crisis in 2009. Yet while food crises mean that Zimbabwe needs civil society help with food aid, the government has retained much control over its delivery. Food aid is understood to be an effective means of building or rewarding political support, and interviews indicated that civil society has struggled to play any role in monitoring its fair distribution. Civil society struggles to gain access to, and is unable to report on, some of the most marginalized and subjugated people in regions such as Matabeleland. Here the indications are that poverty and hunger rates are most acute and support for the opposition is strongest. This also applies to ex-farm workers or the urban poor. With a more open civic space, the Government of National Unity (2009-13) introduced new social protection with food security schemes and nutrition figures, including child wasting and stunting figures, improving for a brief period.

## 5 GENDER EQUALITY

# GENDER EQUALITY: SDG 5
Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

**5.1** End all forms of discrimination
against all women and girls everywhere

**5.2** Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls
in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual
and other types of exploitation

**5.4** Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services,
infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the
household and the family as nationally appropriate

**5.5** Ensure women's full and effective participation and
equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making
in political, economic and public life

**5.a** Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to
ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and
natural resources, in accordance with national laws

**5.c** Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation
for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment
of all women and girls at all levels

The impacts of closing civic space on poverty and hunger are likely to be most severe for the poor and disadvantaged women and marginalized groups who benefit most directly from civil society advocacy for and attention to pro-poor services. Across the four country case studies and the additional 8 desk-based studies, it was evident that progress on women's rights and gender equality was under threat from efforts to close civic space. These threats come through regulatory and administrative channels that make it harder for women's groups to push for gender-equitable policies and programmes; to defend women's rights as peasants, workers, and citizens; to empower women; or to deliver services women need. The threats also come through vilification and stigmatization of women's rights activists, designed to silence and

intimidate, as well as through violence and even murder with impunity.

**Impacts on advocacy for gender equality**
By limiting women's organizations' capacities to advocate for gender equality, shrinking civic space is likely to stall, halt, or even reverse progress on ending gender discrimination (Targets 5.1, 5.a and 5.c). There are a number of routes through which women's organizations appear to be particularly hard hit by closures. First, local and national women's groups are frequently part of the international women's movement and are supported directly or indirectly by foreign funding. Efforts to cut, restrict, or control foreign funding to women's rights organizations was a key concern for women's rights

activists in Nepal, for instance, where a proposed new law aimed to tighten rules on foreign funding. Elsewhere, feminist organizations have been similarly hard-hit by new controls on foreign funding. A second reason gender equality efforts are particularly likely to be hard hit is that strong women's movements tend to network and connect multiple small groups to larger national and international partner organizations and actors. Again, from Nepal, the research encountered concerns that the increase of regulations on NGOs under the proposed Social Welfare Development Act was likely to 'crowd out' smaller more grassroots-based groups that were unable to meet onerous paperwork and reporting requirements. This would then break or weaken the crucial link to grassroots concerns and issues. Third, women's organizations are more likely to be focused on contentious matters such as mobilizing women around their rights or for power, rather than the delivery of welfare or poverty reduction services that tend to remain acceptable even when restrictions on civil society tighten.

It should be noted that new administrative and financial regulations are part of a wider patriarchal backlash against gains made in domains such as violence and interpersonal relations, sexual and reproductive health rights, and labour and citizenship rights. In all the countries examined for the study, there were instances of backlash against gender equality campaigners. The space for advocating gender equality has not only shrunk in terms of funding and regulations, but also in terms of ideologies or values, with a rising number of increasingly vocal right-wing actors espousing anti-feminist ideas and stigmatizing women's rights activists. This has been highly visible in Russia, where the backlash has also been against LGBTQI rights activists. But women's rights activists have been denounced, threatened, arrested and murdered in a range of countries around the world. In Bangladesh, the space for women's rights activism to engage with state policies has been squeezed by the rise of Islamist groups protesting against the National Women's Development Law. In Cambodia, progress on MDGs was curtailed by that country's inability to address gender inequality and patriarchal norms in policies and practice. On key indicators, such as maternal mortality, Cambodia performs worse than other countries in the region, a fact which has frequently been attributed to the lack of space for women's rights organizations to push for gender equality in policy spaces. Similarly in Ethiopia, strong performance on development indicators, such as the prevalence of poverty, stood in stark contrast to its weak performance on maternal mortality and gender equality,

both of which are policy domains in which women's rights organizing is acknowledged to be vital to raising issues, monitoring performance and implementing services.

## Impacts on women's rights and resources

Women's equal rights to economic resources, including land and other assets, to appropriate social protection and other public services, and to decent labour conditions, are particularly affected by efforts to restrict civil society (Targets 5.5 and 5.a). Women's leadership as human rights and environmental defenders, particularly with respect to land and indigenous people's rights and gender equality, has also been under direct threat from efforts to discredit, stigmatize, and violently silence key activists (Target 5.5). Among the countries included in this study, leading women activists in Brazil have been killed in a resurgence of attacks on human rights defenders since 2015. In Colombia, while civil society actors are understood to be vital to peace-building processes, women's organizations have been affected by the 'chilling' effect of violence against civic actors and have struggled to represent women's concerns and interests effectively in the post-conflict development process. In Cambodia, women's labour rights are particularly at risk: activists have struggled to represent the interests of the 700,000-strong garments sector workforce, almost 90 per cent of whom are women. Wages in the sector remain extremely low, and working conditions poor. The situation for the predominantly female garments sector workers in Bangladesh is similarly repressive, and industrial relations are characterized by wildcat strikes with violent and disruptive consequences. In Bangladesh, too, the government has attempted to appease increasingly vocal and visible right-wing Islamist groups with policies that retreat on earlier commitments to gender equality, for instance by reducing the legal age of marriage for women to 16.

In Nepal, civil society actors noted that women's organizations had played an important role in getting policies on gender-based violence, as well as inclusive health, education and livelihoods in place in the run-up to the MDGs. They had made a strong case for rights-based approaches to address the pervasive social and economic inequalities of Nepal, arguing for the provision of public services, particularly for women (Targets 5.4 and 5.6). However, civil society groups that had worked closely with the state to bring about such changes were seen as having become politicized in this competitive political setting, triggering efforts to tighten official control on NGO and CSO funding and scope of work. The current

Government has signalled that non-state efforts should focus on the provision of 'hardware', or tangible or material benefits rather than rights-based organizing.

Women's organizations are particularly likely to suffer from any new rules on what civil society groups may or may not do.
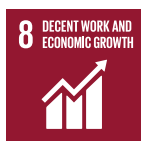
## DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH: SDG 8
Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

**8.1** Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries

**8.3** Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services

**8.5** By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value

**8.6** By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training

**8.8** Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment

As already noted, closing civic space may not always have a visible adverse impact on economic growth rates or GDP per capita. This is chiefly because some governments that clamp down on civil society do so in order to pursue high-growth projects that civil society groups oppose. But while high economic growth rates may be compatible with restricted civic space, at least in the short-term, closing civic space has been associated with acute economic crises in some of the most closed and repressive states. These economic shocks demonstrate that the medium- to long-term effects of silencing civil society are likely to undermine the basis for growth, including whether the population accepts the models of growth being pursued, or the patterns of income distribution and resource use they entail. Closing civic space is also linked to the suppression of labour rights, in particular the freedom of association, and to the exploitation of workers across a variety of contexts.

**Impacts on economic shocks**

The role of civil society in scrutinising and monitoring

public policy and politics can be disabled when civic space is tightly restricted. The absence of civil society in scrutinising and monitoring government and political activity shows up particularly clearly in relation to political and economic crises that lead to downturns in economic growth (Target 8.1, per capita economic growth). Zimbabwe and Brazil show in different ways how these mechanisms linking civic space to economic crisis play out. While all of the four countries for which we undertook case studies had experienced some volatilities in their economic growth rates, only Zimbabwe saw repeated episodes of crisis over the past quarter century (see Figure 4). These shocks typically affect the employment and working conditions of the poorest and most vulnerable the worst (Target 8.5). In Zimbabwe, evidence was found that youth were particularly hard hit by economic crises (Target 8.6). In Brazil, civil society had become increasingly aligned with the PT alliance, which made it easier for their opponents to target CSOs as part of the anti-PT mobilizations that followed the scandal

over corruption in the national oil company, Petrobrás. The fallout from this scandal led to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, although she herself was not accused of corruption and the impeachment was technically for misrepresenting the national accounts. However, this political crisis paved the way for the assumption of power by a right-wing regime with strong stakes in silencing defenders of land, indigenous peoples', peasants' and workers' rights. Since 2016 it has cut provision of some landmark PT's programmes and is proceeding with large agroindustrial developments and other investments likely to exclude some of the poorest and most marginalized groups from the benefits of growth, dispossessing many of land or resources which their communities have historically managed and benefited from. Several of the PT's programmes on sustainable development, including conservation, water, and sustainable agriculture schemes, have seen swingeing funding cuts, and entities to address the development concerns of people of indigenous and African descent have also lost power or resources, as well as political backing.

**Figure 4:** GDP growth (%) in Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal and Zimbabwe (1993-2017)
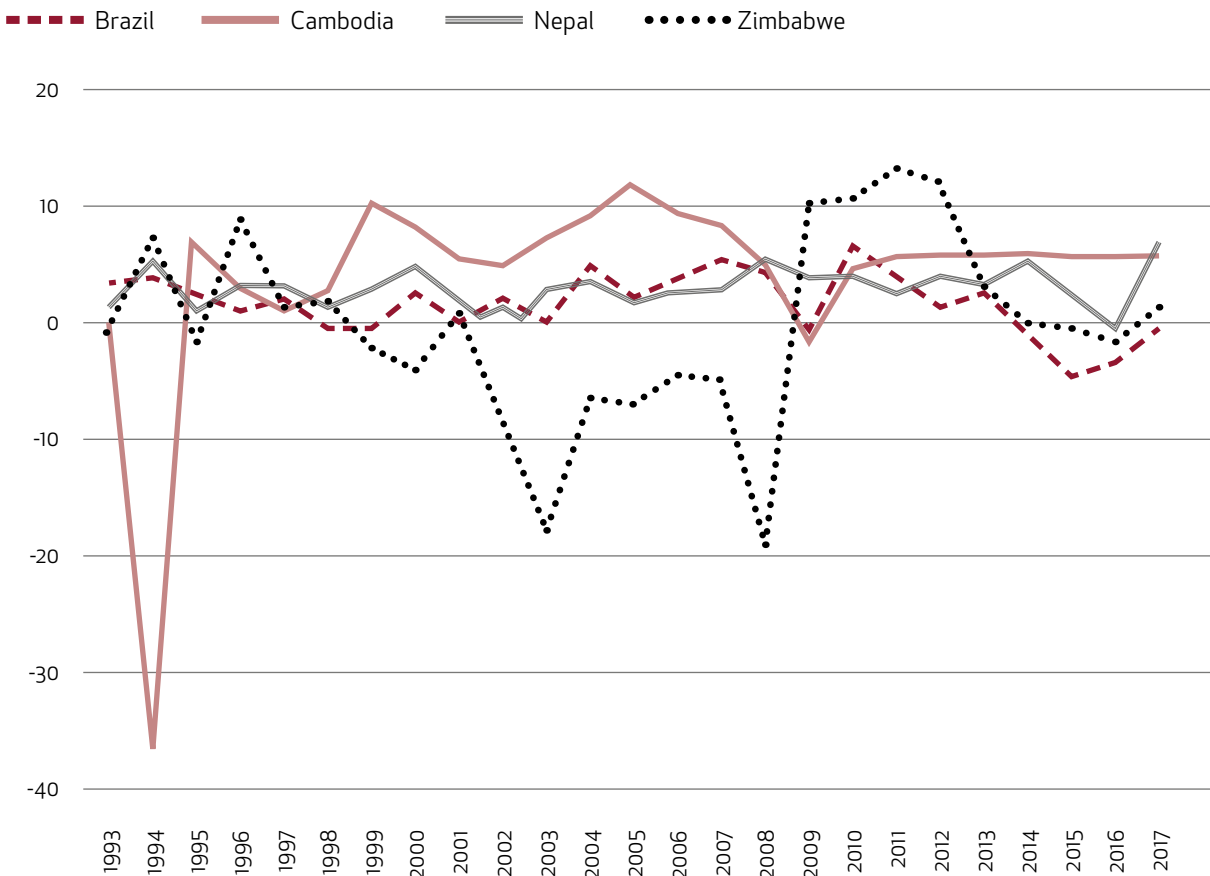


**Source:** World Development Indicators [accessed December 12 2018]

In Zimbabwe, civil society had been under tight restrictions in the periods surrounding the droughts and food and economic crises of the 2000s, and has faced intimidation throughout the period. Civil society had limited capacity to monitor conditions in the most vulnerable regions of the country because of restrictions on travel to or support for 'opposition' areas. But interviewees for the case study also noted that civil society lacked the experience and the capacity to effectively scrutinize macroeconomic policy, weakening its capacity to act as a watchdog over macroeconomic management and fiscal policy, or to advocate for development-oriented policies (Target 8.3). Labour rights (Target 8.8) are clearly under (continued) threat in Cambodia, where efforts to organize labour in

the export sectors have faced restrictions, intimidation, and violence. Cambodian garments workers earn well below a minimum living wage, and some among the lowest wages in Asia. The violent repression of workers' organizations is unlikely to ease off in a context where political power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small, business-oriented political elite. This means that increases in the proportion of the workforce in decent forms of work are unlikely as civic space tightens further (Target 8.5).

In Nepal, restrictions have been proposed on a civil society increasingly seen as partisan and competitive, but to date these have not been implemented. Some politicization of the space has taken place, so while in-terviewees saw no immediate threat to the nature of growth and development, there were concerns that constitutional provisions for inclusion could be weakened by new restrictions on civil society groups. The political elite increasingly emphasizes 'developmental' policies designed to promote rapid growth through investment in much-needed infrastructure, often with Chinese or Indian support (Target 8.3 – promote development-oriented policies). Tighter civic space is also likely to mean that those adversely affected through land resettlement or loss of livelihoods or resources may be in a weakened position to protect or claim their rights; the crackdown on Madhesi groups (organizations representing people chiefly from the Terai or of Indian ethnic origin in Nepal) appears to be evidence of this.

## REDUCED INEQUALITIES: SDG 10
Reduce inequality within and among countries

**10.1** By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average

**10.2** By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status

**10.3** Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard

**10.4** Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality

From the analysis so far it should be clear that it is possible to reach high levels of economic growth and rapid reduction in national poverty figures even with closing civic space. But these indicators may mask deterioration on a range of dimensions and indicators of economic, social and political inequality. As civil society tends to promote the interests of some of the most marginalized and impoverished groups in society, efforts to restrict civic space are, in general, likely to lead to worsening conditions for these groups. In instances where civil society restrictions have paved the way for land- and natural-resource grabs, or to suppression of labour organization, economic elites are likely to have been further enriched. When civil society actors are silenced, it is often the most disempowered groups who lose voice, and the powerful whose voices are amplified as a result. These twin processes mean that closing civic space is highly likely to lead to growing material inequalities and inequalities of power. Income inequality data are unevenly available, and of uneven quality, so we do not attempt to compare changes in income inequality across countries. However, within countries, it is possible to trace the effects of closures of civic space through to impacts on SDG 10 across a number of indicators.

**Impacts on economic disparities**

Previous sections have highlighted the impacts of closing civic space on the assets, common property land, and other natural resources of some of the most marginalized and impoverished groups, in a range of different countries where civic space has narrowed. Land grabs in countries as diverse as Brazil, Cambodia, and Ethiopia have all meant indigenous, minority, and other rural populations have lost control over vital economic assets. These losses will mean a loss of future income, and thereby affect Target 10.1. Where open civic space has been associated with checks on macroeconomic mismanagement and effective disaster response, as discussed above, other impacts can be identified in relation to Target 10.1 (income growth of the bottom 40 per cent). In Brazil and Zimbabwe, evidence suggests that recent economic crises saw the incomes of some of the poorest groups decline, as they struggled to cope with job losses, a drop in producer prices, or a rise in consumer prices. Experiences in Mozambique illustrate how closed civic space and a weak civil society lead to a worsening of income inequality, despite high economic growth. In Mozambique, economic inequality increased despite rapid economic growth of around 8 per cent per annum in the 2000s. The absolute number of people living below the poverty line actually rose during this

period, as the poor gained comparatively little from this growth. Regional inequalities worsened. This reflected in part the fact that civil society was limited in its capacity to reach the rural poor or to engage with the urban poor, and in its ability to push public policy in more pro-poor and equitable directions. As civil society groups and the media have been increasingly co-opted or silenced in recent years, there has been even less capacity to scrutinize public policy or hold policymakers to account. This lack of scrutiny paved the way for the loans scandal of 2016-17 that saw USD250 million in aid and the IMF programme frozen in response to the USD2 billion loans taken out in secret by the Government.

In political settings where civic space is tightly controlled by the state, information about inequalities and how they are affected by development policies also tends to be tightly controlled. This makes it difficult for governments to recognize and address policies and programmes that deepen inequality, even if tackling inequality is a policy priority. In Rwanda, for example, the inability of civil society and the research community to scrutinize official statistics is believed to have resulted in biased views of Rwanda's success in tackling poverty, which may have worsened inequalities. National household statistics systematically exclude groups such as the homeless, people in institutions, slums, conflict-affected areas, or those who are nomadic; their conditions tend to go unnoticed and unaddressed by public policy (Ansoms et al. 2017). As public debate and scrutiny of official statistics by researchers and civil society groups is limited, these problems rarely surface and go unaddressed. Worse, local officials are under pressure to overestimate achievements because of the government's use of imihigo performance contracts to improve public sector performance. These closed conditions mean that there is limited accountability for addressing worsening inequalities with respect to access to land, other assets, or income growth and poverty reduction.

### Impacts on social and political inclusion

Restrictions on civic space also affect the social, political and economic inclusion of some of the most marginalized and impoverished groups (Target 10.2), whose organizations or networks are directly impacted by restrictions on human rights defenders or progressive social movements. These restrictions increase the likelihood that discriminatory laws and policies will be implemented (Target 10.3). Some of these effects are particularly clear in the case of Brazil, where an earlier opening of civic space and flourishing of civil society is now

being reversed, and where spaces for the representation of the interests of excluded and marginalized populations have been closed or re-designed so that they have less influence.

Examples of how closing or closed space impacts on social and political inclusion are found across the 12 countries included in the desk studies. Myanmar shows how uneven openings for civil society in a context in which political space remains tightly controlled under powerful authoritarian rule can actually worsen the conditions for inclusion for some groups. In Myanmar, the opening of space, in effect for formal civil society groups and those representing the Bamar majority, has done little to alleviate the sub-national conflicts in the Kachin and Karen areas. While the genocide against the Rohingya population in Rakhine state has a great many causes and triggers, it too must be situated within this context of highly uneven openings of civic space, under conditions of enduring authoritarian power. In Nepal, after a period of policy and constitutional reform designed to promote social inclusion, new efforts to restrict (some) civil society actors were linked to a loss of emphasis on inclusion in public policy and a new emphasis on economic growth and 'big development'.

In none of the countries studied did closures of civic space bring about fiscal, wage or social protection policies geared towards greater equality (Target 10.4). On the contrary, wherever civic actors were being silenced, this was often linked to discrediting or undermining demands for equality policies that were seen to go against elite interests in keeping wages low and workers unorganized and voiceless. The four country cases provide an instructive set of contrasts with respect to the impacts of civic space on inequality policies and politics. Neither Cambodia nor Zimbabwe has had a strong tradition of open civic space or flourishing civil society in the past two decades. Nonetheless, both have made space for service-delivering actors that reach (some of) the poorest and most marginalized. Zimbabwe has had very little growth in the past two decades, other than during the period of the GNU. Cambodia's growth has been broadly pro-poor, yet it 'trickled-down' from rapid growth of global export sectors and the rural economy, and did not depend specifically on pro-poor programmes by the government to promote the interests of people on low incomes. In both instances, civil society has played at best a limited and infrequent role in economic and development policy spaces. Without civic space in which labour organizations or civil society groups can advocate for higher wages or

social protection, 'pro-poor' gains are likely to be fragile and to depend on the unreliable prospect of high rates of economic growth.

As noted above, Nepal and Brazil are (still comparatively young) democracies in which civil society has had the space and credibility to contribute to constitutional, policy and programmatic reforms that have placed historically deep and pervasive social and economic inequalities on the political agenda. Early indications from Brazil are that some reversals of these gains are likely. In Brazil, the closure of civic space for progressive actors has helped make it politically possible to cut benefits to hundreds of thousands of Brazil's poorest citizens and to curb programmes of environmental sustainability and local food security. These impacts will disproportionately fall on groups already marginalized due to race, gender, occupation or geography, and are extremely likely to undo some of the earlier progress Brazil had made to reduce its world-highest levels of economic inequality, and to deepen inequalities across their intersecting social and economic dimensions. In Nepal, the research uncovered no evidence that the recent restrictions on civil society groups were likely to have immediate effects on overall development outcomes. However, there were concerns that there was potential for some marginalized and indigenous groups to be adversely affected. Specific 'unruly' groups such as the Madhesi (mainly people of Indian origin or from the Terai region) and the Janjati (indigenous groups) are said to be particularly likely to find that their funding is blocked and that their space for advocating for their rights is restricted or delegitimated. The effects on such groups warrant further tracking because of the likelihood that these will in time entrench the enduring inequalities Nepal's constitutional commitment to inclusion is intended to eradicate.

## SUSTAINABLE CITIES & COMMUNITIES: SDG 11
Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

**11.1** By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums

**11.2** By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons

**11.3** By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries

Closing civic space is having adverse impacts on the extent to which urban residents are able to participate in urban development and governance processes. Governments have a particular fear of urban protests, which they see as politically important. Where civil society is too restricted, too weak, or too elite-focused to engage with the concerns of the urban poor, their concerns infrequently filter up to policymakers. It is often only when street protests arise, often around basics of life such as food or fuel, that politicians feel it is necessary to respond to the concerns of the urban poor; these are not ideal conditions under which to develop policies with any chance of being inclusive, sustainable and participatory (Targets 11.1, 11.2, and 11.3).

In Ethiopia, the desk study identified urban policy as an area of growing concern. Rapid urbanization is seeing young people moving to urban centres in search of employment, education and better opportunities. Under the Constitution of Ethiopia, financial schemes have been provided to support the urban population in building livelihoods. However, in this closed setting, funds have been directed towards groups associated with the ruling party; and those refusing to take part in the scheme's mandatory 'indoctrination training' are unable to access these funds. In Brazil, in a more open civic space, housing rights movements like the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto* (MTST) had played a key role in securing government commitments to combat homelessness and promote slum upgrading. Under proposed legislation classifying

some urban as well as rural social movements as terrorist groups, Brazil is unlikely to achieve SDG 11.1 on access to adequate, safe and affordable housing.

In Zimbabwe, closed civic space on urban issues has led to significant urban protest, particularly during episodic eviction drives on informal settlement dwellers, traders and vendors. Rather than tackling the problems of informal urban settlements, some evictions created new settlements through forced relocation, and the destruction of informal infrastructure. Approximately 700,000 urban residents had lost homes and/or livelihoods in the early 2000s in an effort to undermine the urban support base of the opposition. During the GNU period civil society had more scope to collaborate with government, there was more donor funding available and it was easier to reach informal settlements than previously. Representatives from NGOs working on housing and poverty in urban informal settlements noted that the GNU offered much better avenues for them to engage different government actors, mainly the city councils and the Ministry of Local Government. This was in part due to the more open political environment, and partly due to the new government department having an interest in tackling urban poverty. A slum upgrading strategy and National Housing Policy were adopted with strong inputs from NGOs. Following the GNU, NGOs working on urban informal settlements saw funding fall, a loss of interest in the returning ZANU-PF Government in the issue, and the politicization of land ownership. And so closed

civic space had an adverse impact on the prospects for inclusive and participatory urban development.

In Cambodia, inequality within cities is also being exacerbated by rapid real estate development. The World Bank estimates that by 2050, 36 per cent Cambodia's population will live in urban areas, up from about 21 per cent today. The World Bank also highlights the need for ensuring inclusive urbanization in Cambodian cities as urban inequality threatens sustainability and can lead to social divisions and conflict (World Bank 2017b). This is particularly relevant in the context of SDG Target 11.1. Over half the urban population lives in slums, and more inclusive urban development strategies are required.

Yet some urban development projects and government-funded projects have had a negative impact on communities. For instance, in 2014, about 4000 people in the Boeung Kak community were coerced into accepting compensation at a fraction of the market value for their homes and land. NGOs played an important role in supporting families and the community to get land right titles in this case. One Phnom Penh NGO that focuses on sustainable and inclusive urbanization and works against forced evictions resulting from infrastructure and real estate development noted that recent restrictions on civil society and freedom of association along with tightened media control meant this type of advocacy work was no longer possible.

## LIFE ON LAND: SDG 15
Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss

**15.1** By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements

**15.2** By 2020, promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally

**15.9** By 2020, integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts

The present study confirms what other studies on closing civic space have previously noted: that civil society actors working to protect the environment, forests and biodiversity, among other aspects of life on the land, are under particularly direct attack and face hostility that prevents them from acting in a growing number of countries around the world. These restrictions are directly affecting CSOs and NGOs, human rights defenders, social movements and activists, as well as the media and academics reporting on and supporting their activism. Examples from the present study illustrate how political elites were using legal and administrative means but also criminalization, stigmatization, and extra-legal violence and threats to prevent civil society scrutiny, civic activism, and public awareness of the risks of major land and natural resource deals.

### Impacts on policy space for environmental rights defenders
The Brazil and Cambodian case studies explored some of the likely impacts of closing space on life on the land. In both countries, restrictions and attacks on environmental groups, indigenous rights defenders, and agrarian social movements are already having adverse impacts on Targets 15.1, 15.2 and 15.3. In Brazil, the early years of the PT government saw advances (albeit hesitant) in demarcation and titling or official recognition of traditional territories. This slowed over time as the government became more dependent on a Congress increasingly dominated by the powerful 'rural caucus' that

brings together big landowning interests in Brazil. The effects of these changes are already being seen, including through a 14 per cent increase in Amazon deforestation in 2018. After the progress made in the early years of the Lula Government, the drastic reduction in the number of traditional territories benefiting from official recognition (demarcation and titling) has implications that go beyond the risk of failing to reduce poverty, hunger, and inequality and denying PCTs their constitutional rights to land. Given the strategic importance of these territories for biodiversity conservation (as well as carbon storage in natural vegetation), this also represents a high risk that Brazil will fail to meet the SDGs in an area where it was previously able to demonstrate a strong track record of halting deforestation.

### Impacts on deforestation
The ability of traditional territories to act as a barrier against deforestation is well documented. Research in Brazil indicates that indigenous lands have historically suffered much lower rates of forest cover loss even than national parks, although changes in this pattern have been observed in recent years (Jusys 2018). These changes have occurred as pressures on indigenous lands and other traditional territories have intensified, with efforts by agribusiness interests represented by the rural caucus (bancada ruralista) in Congress to remove legal protections for indigenous and quilombola (Brazilians of African descent) lands. Preliminary data for 2018 indicate that there has been a year-on-year increase of almost 14

per cent in the rate of deforestation in Brazilian Amazonia, taking it to its highest level since 2008 (Lima 2018). The threat from the bancada ruralista extends beyond the risk of rolling back demarcation of traditional territories, as this group is also seeking to change environmental legislation to reduce conservation requirements and shrink protected areas. Tackling this threat will require environmental NGOs to make common cause with PCT social movements in a context where such alliances increasingly face criminalization and violence.

The particular issues in Cambodia relating to SDG 15 are the destructive impacts on forest and land resources through land-grabbing, large-scale agricultural concessions, and hydroelectric power dam construction. The SDG 15 Life on Land links to Goal 7 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and efforts to achieve the SDG Target 15.2 can be seen as a continuation of MDG 7 related activities. Under the MDGs, Cambodia had a specific target of maintaining forest cover of at least 60 per cent by 2015, but this target was not met. According to data from a number of sources, by 2014 the total forest cover had fallen to 8.7 million hectares, from 13.1 million hectares of total forest in 1973. For the first time in the 41-year period, the percentage of non-forest ground cover (48.4 per cent) was slightly larger than that of forest cover (47.7 per cent) (ODC 2015, Hansen et al. 2013). Now in the SDG implementation period, the deforestation trend continues. In October 2017, new data showed that Cambodian forests were cleared in 2016 at a rate 30 percent higher than in 2015 (Seangly and Baliga 2017). However, over the 16 years that deforestation has been measured in Cambodia, 2016's loss of around 200,000 hectares was only the fourth-worst year, underlying the seriousness of the problem (ODC, 2016). Given this trend, achieving SDG Target 15.2 on halting deforestation will be a major challenge for Cambodia.

There is evidence that forest loss is a direct outcome of large-scale economic land concessions and large-scale agricultural investment, both of which were officially included in the 2001 Land Law of Cambodia. Since then, a large portion of Cambodia's territory (about 2.6 million hectares) was granted to domestic and foreign investors for the purposes of agricultural development, hydropower development, and economic forest concessions. The results of the interviews conducted confirm other research findings from the academic literature which show that land-grabbing in Cambodia, particularly through economic land concessions, is linked to conflict and has serious adverse implications for sustainable land and forest management. In addition, there are numerous related issues including ambiguous property rights and overlapping claims on land titles, lack of coordination among government agencies, and lack of consultation and impact assessment prior to the decision-making process, which contribute to underlying causes of conflict around deforestation.

International and local NGOs have played important roles for sustainable forest management in Cambodia as watchdogs to document and report on illegal logging activities and by coordinating national level advocacy on forestry issues. They have helped shed light on concessions that were creating problems for local communities. Many NGOs working with local forest-based communities used rights-based approaches and organized protests against large-scale development projects in their efforts to protect forests and forest-based livelihoods. NGOs also acted as mediators in conflicts between villagers and logging companies, thereby reducing conflicts and confrontation between different stakeholder groups. NGOs have also played a vital role in setting up community forests as an approach to forest management, in recognising local communities' rights to forest resources, and in supporting national and local authorities in implementing national forest protection plans. The future of the role of NGOs in forest protection remains uncertain in the current political settlement. If civil society space becomes further restricted and international aid decreases in the future, local NGOs would be greatly affected, and so would forest protection, with negative effects for SDG 15. Some evidence suggests that if local NGOs are not present on the ground and actively engaged in community forest protection and management, logging activities of rosewood and other luxury hardwoods takes place, often involving indebted local villagers. Other recent limitations on civic freedoms including restrictions on freedom of assembly and on independent media also have negative impacts on sustainable forest management, and therefore prevent progress towards SDG 15.

## PEACE, JUSTICE, AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS: SDG 16
Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

**16.1** Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere

**16.3** Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all

**16.5** Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms

**16.6** Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels

**16.7** Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels

**16.10** Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements

Closing civic space impacts adversely in the first instance on SDG 16 and in particular targets 16.1, 16.3, 16.5, 16.6, 16.7, and 16.10. By fostering violence, violating the rule of law, failing to tackle corruption or strengthen accountability, and through its effects on social and political inclusion, access to information and fundamental freedoms, closing civic space impacts on the capacities of civil society actors to contribute to development. SDG 16 targets thus play a double role in the development impacts of closing civic space. First, they mean worsening development outcomes as measured by SDG 16, with respect to violence, human rights violations, abuses of the rule of law, social and political exclusion, and the wider prospects for peaceful, stable, and just institutions. Second, because of how SDG 16 outcomes shape the capacities of civil society actors, it also impacts on other 'frontline' SDGs relating to poverty and hunger, work, livelihoods and the environment, among other things. Because the civil society actors facing restrictions are often those committed to inclusive, rights-based approaches to reducing inequality and protecting the most vulnerable, closing space is likely to mean taking the development process on to a more unequal, unjust or unsustainable pathway.

In the previous sections we have described mechanisms through which those impacts are likely to be felt, and where possible, estimated the magnitudes of some effects. SDG 16 is particularly vital because it draws attention to the processes and preconditions through which equitable

and inclusive forms of sustainable development are brought about, with the aim to '[p]romote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'. SDG 16 can also be described as an 'intermediate' goal, in that it provides the institutional foundations for human development outcomes such as ending poverty, gender equality, or healthy lives, through the roles of civil society (see Section 4 on the Mechanisms of Impact). Table 1 below summarizes trends in civil liberties and political rights as measured by Freedom House for the 12 countries included in the desk-based and country case studies discussed in this synthesis report.

In the cases compared here, six of the SDG 16 targets showed clear and measurable signs of deterioration as a result of specific restrictions on civic space. In the past couple of years alone, many countries have seen a sharp rise in state and state-sanctioned violence against civil society activists, protesters and groups judged a security threat (Targets 16.1 and 16.3). Brazil and Cambodia are among the countries in which political and civil society activists have been recently unlawfully detained, imprisoned or even killed with impunity. As discussed in the country case study, Brazil has seen the highest number of human rights defenders, particularly land rights defenders, killed in the last two years. In Cambodia, political opposition leaders, civil society leaders and labour leaders have been killed, injured, or violently threatened.

The countries included within the desk review also featured a significant number of unlawful deaths, in an ap-parent rising trend. In Colombia, 100 activists were killed between January 1 and August 18 of 2017 alone, while some 194 activists received death threats during this period. Civil society activists reported that this violence was committed with almost total impunity. In Rwanda, political opponents of the ruling party have faced violent threats and death, and in Ethiopia, possibly hundreds of protestors in the Oromiya region were killed when the state violently repressed their demonstrations. In Bangladesh, the state responded to a major terrorist attack by clamping down on presumed Islamist extremists, killing possibly dozens, and arresting over 15,000 people in a wide sweep. Also in Bangladesh, political opposition leaders and their supporters, as well as civil society actors and academics have been subject to 'disappearances' or abductions by state or state-sanctioned actors, intended to intimidate and silence critics and opponents of the increasingly dominant ruling party. Labour leaders continue to face violence, and some have been detained, tortured or killed in recent years. In Mozambique, a prominent law professor whose legal interpretation had bolstered the opposition party's demands for provincial autonomy was killed in 2015. The violence in Mozambique continued into 2016, when another prominent academic was shot and an opposition leader shot and killed. In Myanmar, sub-national conflicts between the military and ethnic groups such as the Kachin and Karen people have left unknown numbers of people killed and at least 100,000 people displaced. Also in Myanmar, a genocidal effort to expel the Rohingya people has seen a further 750,000 flee to neighbouring Bangladesh; unknown numbers, probably in the thousands or tens of thousands, have been raped or killed by the army or actors backed by the army.

**Table 1:** Freedom House indicators for countries mentioned in the study

| | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | 2015 | 2016 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Dominant - 'developmental'** | | | | | | | |
| China | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF |
| Rwanda | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF |
| Ethiopia | NF | PF | PF | PF | NF | NF | NF |
| **Competitive** | | | | | | | |
| Brazil | F | PF | PF | PF | F | F | F |
| Colombia | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF |
| Bangladesh | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF |
| Nepal | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF |
| **Dominant-predatory** | | | | | | | |
| Russia | - | PF | PF | NF | NF | NF | NF |
| Cambodia | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF |
| Myanmar | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF | NF | PF |
| Mozambique | NF | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF | PF |
| Zimbabwe | PF | PF | PF | NF | NF | PF | PF |

NF - Not Free
PF - Partly Free
F - Free

**Source:** Freedom House Indicators.

In each of the four country case studies, restrictions on civic space reduced the scope for civil society and the media to investigate or report on corruption and bribery (Target 16.5). In Brazil, civil society was unable to hold government to account for the Petrobrás corruption scandal and CSOs who had worked closely with government on policies favouring the rural poor were targeted by the anti-PT mobilizations that followed the scandal. In Zimbabwe, repression over a long period meant that CSOs had limited experience of or capacity for scrutinizing public finances to hold corrupt officials to account, or to challenge macroeconomic mismanagement (Target 16.6). In both China and Russia, problems of corruption are known to be endemic. In both, in addition, widespread petty and grand corruption have been connected to restrictions on political oppositions and civic space, as powerful actors seek to prevent scrutiny and/or silence critics. In the past few years, major corruption scandals triggered political or economic crises, and sometimes both, in a number of countries,

including Brazil, Bangladesh and Mozambique. The multiple connections between corruption, restrictions on civil society, and outcomes relating to peace, justice, and strong institutions, highlight again the ways in which SDG 16 targets provide preconditions for attaining the other SDGs.

Compared to the other countries, Nepal's civic space remained inclusive and participatory at multiple levels (16.7), but even there new restrictions increasingly block particular groups from getting their issues on the agenda. Policy and political spaces that had been open to civil society groups were closing or being reconfigured across several countries. In Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Russia, Rwanda and Zimbabwe, the space for public debate through the media or academic discussion has shrunk significantly in the past decade through laws and regulations, including a wave of new restrictions and targeted attacks on specific actors in cyberspace and on social media. Even where new laws and regulations were not introduced, violence and threats have been effective means of silencing or intimidating journalists, writers, and champions of free speech across the countries examined. Apart from in Brazil, restrictions on particular sections of the media were affecting public access to information to some degree in all of the countries examined (Target 16.10). In Cambodia, restrictions on the media were accompanied by the development of a new freedom of information law; the passage of which deserves to be tracked for its implications for civic space and freedoms. In all four case study countries, attacks on specific civil society groups and social movements were undermining fundamental freedoms of association, speech and expression (Target 16.10).

### The connections to other SDG targets

As the analysis throughout this report has attempted to show, impacts on SDG 16 targets are causally connected to impacts on other frontline development targets such as poverty, hunger, life on the land, etc. This occurs through the mechanisms discussed in Section 4: given the space, civil society can help build economic trust, establish partnerships and alliances for development, hold authorities to account, empower the marginalized and excluded, protect vulnerable groups and human rights for all, and provide credible independent sources of information and analysis of public affairs. As the sections above have documented in detail, closures of civic space frequently cut off some of the channels through which societies may resolve their differences in ways that are peaceful, just, and accountable, and/or distort other

channels. These restrictions and closures can make it difficult or impossible for marginalized groups to voice their problems and concerns, to mobilize to demand accountability for public action, or to do so without the risk of violent or repressive responses from governments or other actors. The outcomes, as illustrated in the previous sections, translate restrictions on political and civic rights into adverse impacts on economic, human and social development, in terms of the pace of development, its distribution across different populations and groups, and its sustainability, with respect to both the environment and its social acceptability. In other words, adverse impacts on SDG 16 leads to development outcomes that are more inequitable and exclusionary and less sustainable than if civil society had been permitted to play a fuller role.

### 'Leaving no one behind': the SDG principles

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledges to 'leave no one behind', and to 'reach the furthest behind first'. This report has highlighted some of the main mechanisms through which closures of civic space are likely to impact adversely on some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in the world. It has cited important instances in which closures of civic space have made it considerably less likely that the poorest and most marginalized people will be reached first and considerably more likely that such people may not be reached at all. In Zimbabwe, civil society has been prevented from reaching some of the poorest locations where people are at greatest risk of famine, in a bid to cut off support to or information about supposed regime opponents. The consequences of closing civic space there have been catastrophic and irreversible, particularly for the large number of Zimbabweans facing malnutrition in their crucial infant years. Long overdue efforts to address Brazil's historically intersecting inequalities of race, class and geography have been stalled or even cut back in a political space distinctly hostile to defenders of indigenous land and resource rights in order to support the large-scale agro-industrial development. Similar processes are underway in Cambodia. Even in Nepal, where a new but robust democracy has retained space for an increasingly contentious civil society to argue out that society's many differences, efforts to discredit agitation by groups such as the Madhesi and Janjati aim to delegitimate their claims to equal rights and services, thereby excluding them from Nepal's development progress. There is evidence from across several of the desk studies that groups such as indigenous people, poor and marginalized ethnic or religious minorities, women

and girls from particular communities and in particular countries, and people living in remote or geographically hard-to-reach areas are facing new or renewed challenges in benefiting from or participating in development progress. Sources of information about such groups are also increasingly endangered, as civil society groups, the media, academics, activists and social movements often face considerable risk or difficulty in producing or sharing such information. Greater investments will be needed to ensure a flow of such data in the near future.

# 6.
## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has attempted to analyse the implications for development outcomes, and specifically for the achievement of the SDGs, of the recent wave of closures of civic space. These closures have taken the form of new laws, regulations and administrative procedures by governments, efforts to co-opt civil society groups and actors, stigmatization, intimidation, and the threat or use of violence with impunity. Restrictions on civil society have mostly affected organizations and groups rooted in a human rights and liberal or social democratic tradition, including NGOs, CSOs and the media. They affect local, national, and transnational, actors, groups, organizations and movements. Although it is common to speak of 'shrinking civic space', the nature of civic space has changed, in terms of who participates and how they participate. New 'uncivil' (right-wing or extremist) and 'unruly' actors (protest movements, groups that use disruption or violence) have grown in significance in the past decade. Digital public space has profoundly expanded and altered the civic landscape. However, civil society groups and actors across the world have had to face many new attempts to restrict their space and curb their activities in the past few years. This has happened across all regions, irrespective of geography, level of development, or type of political system. Civil society has had mixed success in pushing back. For many civil society actors and groups, these restrictions are continuations or revivals of earlier efforts by previous governments. The relationship between political and civic actors is as often combative and antagonistic as it is collaborative and cooperative, and similar moves have been tried by governments in the past.

Governments have many reasons for seeking to restrict NGOs, CSOs, social movements, activists, artists, scholars, and the media. A notable conclusion from this study is that efforts to restrict civil and political rights are often barely-concealed struggles over valuable resources such as land, minerals, or public property. Political elites frame restrictions on NGOs and CSOs as a matter of sovereignty, social values, or national security. However, efforts to silence or stop civil society could also serve the interests of powerful political and economic elites, by clearing a path for highly lucrative but potentially unsustainable or illegal or unjust economic activities to proceed.

## Civic space and the SDGs

What does it mean for development when that contention results in power moves to shut down, block, or silence critics? To analyse the implications of closing civic space for development, the analysis synthesized here drew on a conceptual framework derived from a literature review and 12 desk-based country reviews, and focused chiefly on four country case studies in which the issues were explored in further detail.

We can expect the processes of development to be more exclusionary and unequalizing and less sustainable under closing civic space, but the outcomes will take different forms in different settings. What matters is how governments use the power they gain by squeezing civil society. The study concluded that it is possible to make some broad generalizations about the mechanisms through which these impacts were likely to be felt, and

that these are likely to differ depending on how and why power was being wrested away from civil society. This synthesis report concludes that despite variations in the mechanisms and severity of impacts on development, restrictions on civic space have already affected and are likely to further impact adversely on indicator areas relevant to the achievement of SDGs 1 (end poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 5 (gender equality), 8 (decent work and economic growth), 10 (reduce inequalities), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), 15 (life on land), and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

With respect to **SDG 1**, *end poverty in all its forms every-where*, the report concluded that how poverty is affected overall depends on how much and what kind of progress on poverty matters to the ruling elite. Closing or closed civic space may not show up in aggregate national poverty

statistics, in particular in contexts where governments restrict civil society in order to pursue high growth strategies. However, poverty reduction is likely to be uneven, and without civil society activism to highlight growing inequalities, patterns of economic growth are likely to entrench and deepen economic divisions. Second, in countries where political power has been dominated by elites for purposes of personal enrichment, they can be insulated against the needs of the people. Economic, political and food crises appear to be common shocks in such systems, and these typically hurt the poor and marginalized most. Under such conditions, sudden rises in the prevalence of poverty are associated with the same factors that keep civic space closed. Third, across different types of political systems, restrictions on civil society actors prevent them from warning against or holding governments to account over corrupt or incompetent management of the macroeconomy, public services, or disaster and emergency relief. The quality and distribution of services that support livelihoods and social protection, strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability are thus highly likely to be adversely affected by tight controls on civil society.

With respect to **SDG 2**, *end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture*, the report concluded that closing civic space impacts adversely on indicators of hunger, food security, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture through a) a reduction in the influence of civic actors on food and agriculture policymaking, as spaces for civil society participation in policy spaces, policy implementation, and in scrutiny or critique of public policies is reduced; b) through more latitude for land- and resource-grabbing, impacting in particular on the livelihoods of small and subsistence farmers and indigenous people; and c) by insulating ruling elites from the political effects of food crises, as civil society and the media are unable to access or report on hunger, particularly in remote or conflict-affected regions, or to mobilize around hunger or food insecurity.

The report concluded that adverse impacts on the achievement of **SDG 5**, *achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*, were likely to be most severe for the poor and disadvantaged women and marginalized groups who benefit most directly from civil society advocacy for and attention to pro-poor services. Across the four country case studies, and the additional 8 desk-based studies, it was evident that women's rights and gender

equality progress was under threat from efforts to close civic space. This occurred chiefly through regulatory and administrative channels that make it harder for women's organizations to push for gender-equitable policies and programmes, to empower women, and to deliver services themselves. Women's organizations and activists also face stigmatization and backlash from right-wing groups that threaten their personal security and restrict their activities.

On **SDG 8**, *promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*, the study found that closing civic space may not always have a visible adverse impact on economic growth rates or GDP per capita. But while high economic growth rates may be compatible with restricted civic space, at least in the short-term, closing civic space has been associated with acute economic crises in some of the most closed and repressive states. These economic shocks demonstrate that the medium- to long-term effects of silencing civil society are likely to undermine the basis for growth, including whether the population accepts the models of growth being pursued, or the patterns of income distribution they entail. Closing civic space is also linked to the exploitation of workers across a variety of contexts, and the associated suppression of labour rights, including the freedom of association.

The study found that **SDG 10**, *reduce inequality within and among countries* was likely to be impacted through deterioration on a range of dimensions and indicators of economic, social and political inequality. As civil society tends to promote the interests of some of the most marginalized and impoverished groups in society, efforts to restrict civic space are, in general, likely to lead to worsening conditions for these groups. In instances where civil society restrictions have paved the way for land- and natural-resource grabs, or suppressing labour organization, economic elites are likely to have been further enriched. When civil society actors are silenced, it is often the most disempowered groups who lose voice, and the powerful whose voices are amplified as a result. These twin processes mean that closing civic space is highly likely to lead to growing material inequalities and inequalities of power. Income inequality data are unevenly available, and of uneven quality, so we do not attempt to compare changes in income inequality across countries. However, within countries, it is possible to trace the effects of closures of civic space through to impacts on SDG 10 across a number of indicators.

The achievement of **SDG 11**, *make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*, is likely to be affected by adverse impacts on the extent to which urban residents are able to participate in urban development and governance processes. Governments have a particular fear of urban protests, which they see as politically important. Where civil society is too restricted, too weak, or too elite-focused to engage with the concerns of the urban poor, their concerns infrequently filter up to policymakers. It is only when street protests arise, often around basics of life such as food or fuel, that politicians feel it is necessary to respond to the concerns of the urban poor; these are not ideal conditions under which to develop policies with any chance of being inclusive, sustainable and participatory for the urban poor.

The achievement of **SDG 15**, *protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity* loss was likely to be affected through adverse impacts on the capacities of countries to reach targets on land conservation, forest management, and the valuing of ecosystem and biodiversity in development planning processes. The present study confirmed what other studies on closing civic space have previously noted: that civil society actors working to protect the environment, forests and biodiversity, among other aspects of life on the land, are under direct attack and face hostility that prevents them from acting in a growing number of countries around the world. These restrictions are directly affecting CSOs and NGOs, human rights defenders, social movements, and activists, as well as the media and academics reporting on and supporting their activism. Examples from the present study illustrated how political elites were using legal and administrative means, but also criminalization, stigmatization, and extra-legal violence and threats, to prevent civil society scrutiny, civic activism, and public awareness of major land and natural resource deals.

Closing civic space impacts directly on key targets of **SDG 16**, *promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*, and in particular on violence, the rule of law, corruption and bribery, accountability and institutions, participation and representation, and access to information and fundamental freedoms. Through these impacts, closing civic space influences the achievement of other SDGs. It does so through preventing

- the building of economic trust
- the establishment of partnerships and alliances for development, by strengthening accountability for actions by public officials, politicians and business
- empowering and including the marginalized and excluded in ways that enable them to make their own demands on governments and other actors
- the protection of vulnerable groups and the defence of human rights for all, and
- providing sources of information that are independent of political and economic powerholders - space for dialogue across different sections of society - and channels for communication, including monitoring and evaluating development policies and educating the public about such policies.

Closures of civic space frequently cut off some of the channels through which societies may resolve their differences in ways that are peaceful, just and accountable. In some of the more extreme cases they cut off most of these channels, and/or distort others. These restrictions and closures can make it difficult or impossible for marginalized groups to voice their problems and concerns, or to organize and empower their members to demand accountability for public action. If they do so, they risk violent or repressive responses from governments or other actors. The outcomes, as illustrated in the previous sections, translate restrictions on political and civic rights into adverse impacts on economic, human and social development, in terms of the pace of development, its distribution across different populations and groups, and its sustainability, with respect to both the environment and its social acceptability. In other words, adverse impacts on SDG 16 lead to development outcomes that are more inequitable, less sustainable, and more exclusionary than if civil society had been permitted to play a fuller role.

The study also concluded that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledges to 'leave no one behind', and to 'reach the furthest behind first' were highly likely to be violated by restrictions on civil society. An overall conclusion is that while changing civic space plays out in different ways depending on political and civil society relations in each country, and needs to be analysed within its national context, restrictions on civic space create a significant risk of not only leaving the most vulnerable behind, but also of their dispossession and loss of fundamental rights and voice in relation to the development process.

## Implications and recommendations

The implications and recommendations derived from the analysis presented here are based on a broad review across a number of countries. The country case studies and desk-based analyses appended here provide some further analysis at the country level. We urge interested actors to invest in deeper and more sustained analysis of the roles of civil society in supporting the achievement of the SDGs in particular countries, to assess how restricting civic space will impact development depending on how political power is distributed, on traditions of civil society, and on the nature of the development challenges. The present recommendations are intended as a broad guideline for further action and analysis, not as final conclusions, in what remains an evolving landscape.

**Implications for national governments**

The implications of this study may not be of interest to every government. They will be of limited relevance to a small number of authoritarians who are insulated against the wellbeing of their subjects and exert tight control over civic space. But even in highly repressive states, such a situation is not permanent. Political settlements rest on the balance of power, and the space for civil society changes with shifts in political power. If the post-Mugabe Zimbabwean government were to commit to eradicating hunger (SDG 2), for instance, we recommend that it should learn the lessons of how the long-term repression of civil society has contributed to hunger and food insecurity, and create space for participation by civil society and social movements in policymaking, independent policy scrutiny, and popular mobilization around food and agriculture systems. The violent recent suppression of fuel price protests by the new government in 2019 indicates that those lessons have not yet been learned, or put into practice.

However, most governments, popularly elected or otherwise, have incentives to demonstrate that they are performing well on development, because their legitimacy can depend on that performance. Headline indicators of economic growth, poverty reduction, and human development tend to be key aspects of this 'performance legitimacy'. For this reason, and regardless of whether they value human rights or free speech in their own right, governments may see that there are numerous instrumental or pragmatic reasons for civic space. One reason is that independent analysis and external scrutiny are good ways of highlighting unequalizing economic and social trends, and of identifying groups at risk of being left behind or adversely affected by development. External participation in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of public policy is important. Without civil society activism, bad policies can go unchecked, and good alternatives untried; policies in more open civic space are potentially better policies. Governments need to evaluate whether their performance legitimacy is enhanced more by having better and more popular policies and programmes, or by silencing questions and critics of their existing policies and programmes.

A second practical reason for civic space is that users need to be able to hold the providers of basic public services – education, health, water and sanitation, housing, safety and justice – accountable to get the services they and the government wants them to have. Governments routinely struggle to improve the quality of public services. Closing off NGO activity, shutting down civic space, and stopping free expression will make essential frontline negotiations over public services all but impossible. In order to 'leave no one behind' by development, users must be able to hold service providers to account, and they need civic space in which to do that.

Third, trust in a country's development performance is likely to be weakened by efforts to clamp down on independent civil society, research, or the media. The production of official statistics is particularly important here. In the absence of any capacity for independent scrutiny or analysis of methodologies, sources, and assumptions, external observers have no reasons to trust official data. The recent passage of a law prohibiting discussion of Tanzania's official statistics was among the factors leading to the withdrawal of some aid donors. In an open international aid system, efforts to control the narrative on national development can be counter-productive for national governments. Free speech and the possibility of scrutiny are vital for the credibility of official information.

A key overall recommendation for national governments hoping to demonstrate their development performance against attainment of the SDGs is to accept that there are no realistic alternatives to building constructive partnerships with civil society. This will need to include international and independent civil society actors, NGOs, social movements and community groups, the media, thinktanks and researchers. They will need to value the complementary work done by NGOs and community

groups – providing services, volunteering, accessing the hard-to-reach, and supporting government policy. But they will also need to acknowledge the wider public benefits of being held to account on public finance, policy and programmes, through activism in the civic space. As a priority step, governments should review legal and administrative restrictions on civil society and uphold their civic and political rights, including prosecuting the rising number of crimes against civil society activists, journalists, and others - acts which are increasingly committed with impunity or state collusion.

### Implications for monitoring, evidence, and research
There are several implications for monitoring, evidence and research in the question of how changes in civic space are likely to impact development or the SDGs. We highlight a select number here, based on our conclusions about the importance of independent data generation and analysis in attaining the SDGs, by helping to hold governments, donors and market actors accountable for their roles in a development process that is equalizing, inclusive, sustainable, and which ensures no one is left behind.

A first implication is the need to analyse these as national political struggles: civic space is contentious precisely because it is bound up with larger struggles over state power, and international connections and aid funding exposes many civil society actors to charges of acting against the national interest. Our conclusions draw attention to the need to analyse these processes as struggles within national politics, tracing changes in civic space against development progress over time, within specific country contexts. The outcomes will not be the same everywhere but will depend on how politics and civic space are configured in each country's development process.

A second implication is that the data are not available with which to make robust cross-national measures of the relationship between changing civic space and the SDGs. This study has used case study methods to trace the impacts of civic space on specific policy domains and key SDGs. But it is not possible to make aggregate assessments of, for instance, the magnitudes or severity of impacts on poverty or hunger. These limitations may be overcome in part through more intensive data collection to assess and test the scale of impacts through the mechanisms uncovered here. Research can then focus on deepening the analysis at national and local

levels. To trace the impacts on the SDGs, researchers will also need to generate evidence and develop databases of NGO service delivery, CSO policy engagement, and the contributions of civil society to different dimensions of the SDGs such as inequality and exclusion; all of these remain issues for which meaningful metrics and data remain limited.

For researchers and independent analysts, the space for undertaking research, data collection, or disseminating research findings is also being squeezed, as research permissions become more restrictive, and respondents in government or civil society consider it risky or unwise to speak openly about the restrictions they face. Research funders, research funding bodies, and research ethics committees will need to pay attention to the risks involved in research on civil society, social movements, corruption, and even, increasingly, of statistical and legal analysis. These constraints and risks will also influence which topics can be explored in more detail, and the nature of the methods needed to do so.

### Implications and recommendations for donors
Donors have made a range of efforts to monitor and combat efforts to shrink civic space. These have included welcome efforts to make funding for civil society more flexible, as well as important new provisions for emergency or legal assistance to organizations facing pressure or threats. They have also included support to civil society networks and associations to strengthen their response. These are important responses, and they are helping many civil society actors respond to the situations they face.

Donor countries have generally had less success in taking collective action on the development implications of civic space. The SDG Progress Reports have not yet addressed the challenge of civic space as a key global policy concern for the attainment of the SDGs. Donor countries have had varied, and sometimes competing, interests in different countries, which has shaped their individual willingness to confront governments over the issue of civic space. One issue on which we would recommend international aid donors have a shared concern to act in recognizing and responding to the change in the normative environment for development, and in particular the growing importance of new donors from the BRICS countries. A recommendation is that the OECD/DAC group will need to recognize and respond constructively to this change in the normative environment for development. As more national governments rely on development partners such

as China for major investments, some behave as though this releases them from obligations to respect civic space and human rights. International aid donors have to date done little to generate the evidence necessary to build a robust, collective counter-narrative to these new visions of high economic growth in the Chinese model.

We recommend that donors use the platform provided by SDG 17 to analyse and build a case for civic space as a precondition for achieving the other SDGs. **SDG 17** *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development* draws attention to several targets that are of direct relevance to the discussion of civic space. These include:

- the volume of aid and its allocation (Targets 17.2 and 17.3)
- knowledge, technology and capacity building (Targets 17.6, 17.8, and 17.9)
- use of government-owned planning and results frameworks, as part of a wider effort to improve development effectiveness (Targets 17.5);

- partnerships across state, market and civil society (Target 17.6), and
- the production of statistics and other data in support of the SDGs (Target 17.7).

Our recommendation is that international donors use the space created by SDG 17 to push back against the closures of civic space that—as we have shown here—are highly likely to prevent the attainment of the SDGs, and in particular that no one is left behind by development. This will entail generating robust evidence about how civil society contributes to combating inequality, environmental destruction, and exclusion in particular countries and across different settings, to demonstrate convincingly that civic space is not optional for the attainment of the SDGs.

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