

ATTACKS ON CIVIC AND DEMOCRATIC SPACE:

Strategies and Lessons from
ActionAid's Response



List of abbreviations

- CCM** Chama cha Mapinduzi
- CBO** Community-Based Organisation
- CSO** Civil Society Organisation
- DRC** Democratic Republic of Congo
- DNMC** District Non-Governmental Monitoring Committee (Uganda)
- GS** Global Secretariat
- HRBA** Human Rights-Based approach
- INGO** International Non-Governmental Organisation
- MoU** Memorandum of Understanding
- NGO** Non-Governmental Organisation

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COVER PHOTO: Some of ActionAid Denmark’s Activista members visit Zambia to learn about the issues surrounding the #taxpower campaign. CREDIT: Jennifer Harrison/ActionAid

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The Zambia alternative mining indaba.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

Background

Across the world, in both democratic and non-democratic states, we are witnessing flagrant and relentless efforts to undermine democratic values. Individual human rights defenders and collective activism are facing pushback from states, corporations and extremist and fundamentalist groups. The trend of closing civic space, through laws and practices that restrict civil society’s ability to operate, is undermining the ability of citizens to effectively advance human rights, hold their governments accountable, and serve vulnerable communities. Strikingly, this phenomenon of closing civic space is not limited to autocratic states but has spread to so-called democracies.

According to the *Civicus Monitor*, which aims to track and share reliable up-to-date data on the state of civil society freedoms around the world, there are only 22 countries remaining where the state both enables and safeguards the enjoyment of civil society space for all people. Of these, 19 are in Europe, two are in Oceania and one is in the Americas. Currently, there are no open countries in Africa or Asia.¹

The key drivers of shrinking civic and political space ultimately relate to power, where those that have and benefit from power are afraid of losing it. Since 2009, austerity measures have become an increasingly dominant state response to the global financial and economic crises. All too often, austerity is a factor behind the increasing restrictions on civil society space in many countries, making it more difficult to mobilise for fairer alternatives and to access justice for those deprived of their rights. States have been captured by various interests – elite, corporate and fundamentalist groups – pushing a market fundamentalist/neoliberal approach while benefitting from tax breaks or exploiting policy loopholes to dodge paying taxes.

1. *People Power Under Attack*; Findings from the *Civicus Monitor*. Civicus. 2017. Available at: http://www.civicus.org/images/CM_Findings_7Oct_v1.pdf

ActionAid has not been spared attacks. This survey was conducted in February/March 2018. Eleven (11) ActionAid countries participated in the survey: ActionAid Anonymous-Africa1; ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2; ActionAid Anonymous-Asia; ActionAid Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); ActionAid The Gambia; ActionAid Guatemala; ActionAid Pakistan; ActionAid Tanzania; ActionAid Uganda; ActionAid Zambia and ActionAid Zimbabwe.

The aims of the survey were to:

- document the nature of the shrinking civic space and the modalities of attacks on ActionAid countries.
- support ActionAid and its allies and partners to understand and learn from how ActionAid countries have responded to the attacks.
- strengthen organisational learning and resilience among ActionAid countries and other stakeholders in the face of shrinking civic and democratic space, through analysing their operating contexts and preparations to push back as well as take advantage of opportunities that emerge in such situations.
- inform the development of a coordinated response by ActionAid countries, partners and allies to counter attempts being made to shrink civic and political space.

► Methodology

Key informant interviews were conducted to generate reflections and insights from country directors and relevant staff in ActionAid countries. Some countries responded to the questionnaire in writing while others opted for oral interviews. Information gathered was complemented by secondary data gathered by other civil society organisations and the media on the operating environment in each country as well as ActionAid’s internal reflection pieces and updates. ActionAid countries only responded to questions in the questionnaire that were relevant to their context and the nature of their response. For some countries, the language (English) may have been a limiting factor and it would be a good idea to ensure that future surveys are available in other languages.



The five million signature campaign against MPs tax exemptions in Uganda.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID



1. Civil and political rights context and the nature of attacks on ActionAid countries

a. Freedom of association

Six out of 11 ActionAid countries (54%) – ActionAid Anonymous-Africa1, ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2, ActionAid Anonymous-Asia, Pakistan, Uganda and Zimbabwe – have seen their governments enact legislation to govern and limit the operations of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The restrictions include: re-registration of international organisations; punitive supplementary tax rules; restrictions on recruitment of foreigners; restrictions on receiving foreign funding; requirements for Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) from local authorities prior to an NGO working in certain geographical areas; and in some extreme cases, for example in ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2, banning NGOs from working on human rights, rule of law and governance. The legislation has also granted broad powers to NGO regulatory bodies or security agencies to revoke the licences or permits of organisations deemed to have violated the laws and regulations or to stop NGO meetings without any justification.

For the remaining five countries, freedom of association is guaranteed on paper but is violated through: bureaucratic registration procedures; surveillance, harassment, arbitrary arrest or imprisonment of civil society leaders; defamation campaigns against civil society, labelling civil society as ‘agents of the West’, ‘political opposition’, ‘coup plotters’ or ‘unaccountable’; and in some cases, de-registration of civil society organisations (CSOs) based on spurious allegations. In Zambia, civil society successfully challenged the restrictive *NGO Act* enacted in 2009 in court and secured an out-of-court settlement suspending the law pending a review of its impact.

Below are examples of attacks made on ActionAid countries and partners:

i. Legislative and regulatory restrictions

In 2014, the government of **ActionAid Anonymous-Africa1** revoked the work permit of its country director without justification and enacted a *Recruitment Charter* requiring CSOs and government institutions to recruit staff based on set ethnic quotas and to involve the government in the recruitment process. This aimed to directly interfere with the independence and operations of civil society by ensuring that the government influences who is recruited. **ActionAid Pakistan's** application for re-registration was rejected without justification in 2017 and it was ordered to cease operations within 60 days. This followed the enactment of the Regulation of International Non-Governmental Organizations Act in 2015, which requires all international NGOs to re-register and limit their operations to specific areas.

ii. Restrictions on foreign funding

Since the passage of a law governing civil society in 2009, **ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2's** support to local organisations and communities has been restricted. The law bars organisations from receiving more than 10% of their funding from external sources and sets the allocation of programme/administrative funds to a ratio of 70:30 respectively. The law classifies some programmatic costs as administrative costs, including: monitoring and evaluation; research; financial support to national partners and networks; staff costs and benefits; staff capacity building; local government capacity building; investment in advocacy and policy work; and publications. This compromises ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2's work by limiting the support it can give to local organisations as well as its ability to benefit communities. **ActionAid Zimbabwe's** civic education work has been adversely affected by the requirement that voter education programmes must be locally funded.

iii. Arbitrary search of office premises and seizure of information and staff possessions

On 20 September 2017, a 'military-type' cordon and search operation was conducted by 'security forces' at the offices of **ActionAid Uganda**. On 6 October 2017 ActionAid Uganda bank accounts were frozen by the Central Bank and the Finance Intelligence Authority based on allegations of illicit financial transactions, money laundering, conspiracy to commit a felony, and supporting subversive activities to destabilise Uganda. These attacks are connected to the strong position that civil society, including ActionAid Uganda, had taken against plans to amend the constitution to remove the presidential age limit. Although the accounts have since been unfrozen, authorities continue to disperse meetings organised by ActionAid Uganda.

In November 2017, security agents visited **ActionAid Zimbabwe's** offices on claims that it had overstepped its registration's terms of reference. They further claimed that ActionAid Zimbabwe's work with young people was aimed at the formation of a political organisation.



20 September 2017, a military-type cordon and search operation conducted by security forces at the offices of ActionAid Uganda
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

b. Freedom of expression and right to information

Seven out of 11 ActionAid countries (63%) – The Gambia, Guatemala, Pakistan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe – governments have enacted legislation on: access to information; criminal defamation; media/newspapers; information and communications technology; prevention of electronic crimes; cybercrimes; access to information and privacy; blasphemy; and statistics. The legislation is aimed at: providing grounds for restricting access to public information; providing grounds for the judicial harassment and imprisonment of human rights defenders, including journalists, on allegations of defamation of public officials or corporations; and the closing down of organisations and media deemed to be in violation of the legislation. For example, in Uganda, the government restricts the right to free expression, using methods such as intimidation and attacks against independent journalists. During the 2016 election cycle, police violently dispersed protestors and blocked social media platforms on election day.

Even in the four countries where freedom of expression and right to information is guaranteed by law, in practice, harassment of journalists and the use of public media to perpetuate negative narratives of CSOs by state and non-state actors is rampant. In Zambia, the 2016 election period saw police raids and the forced closure of independent TV and radio stations. In all 11 countries, even those with Right to Information Laws, it is difficult for civil society and human rights defenders to access the public information they need to hold governments to account. In Tanzania, a new Statistics Act imposes harsh penalties on those found guilty of publishing misleading or inaccurate statistics. In Zambia, secrecy laws are used to attack journalists for publishing classified information.

Below are examples of threats to, and intimidation of, ActionAid countries and partners:

- i. Following the release of the Paradise Papers in 2017, **ActionAid Zambia** called on the government to probe corporates and individuals mentioned in the Papers, and to put in place a fair taxation system. This was misconstrued as an attack on the opposition. As a result, suspected opposition party cadres threatened to ‘sort out’ ActionAid Zambia’s country director and head of communications for allegedly inciting the government to arrest its party leader over alleged tax avoidance. The party also used media outlets that it owns to accuse ActionAid Zambia of having been funded by the president to speak against the opposition leader.

- ii. **ActionAid Tanzania staff** and partners were threatened by the government for highlighting a land grab case in Bagamoyo, where a community faced eviction following the decision by the government to allocate 20, 000 acres of community land to a transnational corporation for a sugarcane plantation. A film crew contracted to collect information from the affected community was banned by the local authority from operating in Bagamoyo.

- iii. In December 2016, three documentary film makers contracted by **ActionAid Anonymous-Asia** and a partner to interview community members affected by forced evictions were prevented from leaving the village by environment police without any justification – although they were released later.

c. Freedom of assembly and right to participate in public affairs

In all 11 countries, freedom of assembly is under attack or completely denied. Protestors have been killed, arrested, detained or tortured when peaceful demonstrations are dispersed using excessive force. In three countries – Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe – governments have enacted legislation on *Public Order and Management, Preservation of Public Security and Criminal Law Codification and Reform*. These restrict freedom of assembly

and include requirements for civil society to notify and seek approval from authorities for any meeting. They also grant broad powers to security agencies to restrict assemblies, to use force to disperse protestors, and to detain protesters. In ActionAid Anonymous-Africa1, ActionAid Anonymous-Asia, DRC, Uganda and Zambia restrictions on freedom of assembly have intensified prior to elections, during elections or when citizens are protesting election-related legislation such as removal of term limits or age limits for presidential candidates as incumbents seek to consolidate their hold on power.

Below are examples of attacks on ActionAid countries and partners:

i. Suspension of meetings

Security agencies prevent ActionAid countries and partners from holding planned meetings, even in cases where prior approval has been granted by state authorities. Obstruction of ActionAid and partners from working with communities and arbitrary cancellation of planned peaceful demonstrations on spurious grounds such as security or threat of infiltration by other interests are common.

- In November 2013, police stopped **ActionAid Anonymous-Africa1** from hosting an authorised meeting to demand a fair taxation system. Police officers surrounded ActionAid Anonymous-Africa1 offices and claimed that they stopped the meeting because some ‘bad elements’ were planning to take advantage of it to publicise their own message. In June 2017, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs circulated a letter to all provincial governors stating that all meetings should be facilitated in the local language and use of French or English would not be accepted. The letter further stipulated that for expatriates to carry out a field visit, they must seek official authorisation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This letter was not shared with international NGOs (INGOs). The members of the INGOs Forum collectively agreed not to comply with the order until the ministry concerned communicated the same order to INGOs; to date this has not happened.
- In 2016, **ActionAid Anonymous-Asia** was threatened with legal action by the government for organising a press conference where communities that had experienced land grabbing highlighted how it had negatively affected their livelihoods. Consequently, ActionAid Anonymous-Asia’s activities have been suspended by the authorities or approval denied including for campaigns against gender-based violence.
- **ActionAid Gambia** was accused by the former regime of inciting trouble through rights awareness and ordered to close down operations within 72 hours. The country director at the time, a Sierra Leonean citizen, was ordered to leave the country. Following negotiations, the order to close down operations was revoked on the condition that ActionAid Gambia work with a government agency to conduct voter education instead of lawyers and to focus on meeting the basic needs of citizens rather than their rights. However, the country director had to leave the country as ordered.

ii. Legal and regulatory restrictions

- **ActionAid DRC** is restrained by a ban on organising events that will mobilise more than 100 people. Some conference facilities have also been blacklisted by the government and those who use such facilities are targeted for non-renewal of registration.
- Following the enactment of a law governing civil society in 2009, **ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2** is prohibited from working on human rights, governance or policy advocacy, and cannot use rights language in its work.
- The Uganda NGO Act prohibits NGOs from carrying out activities in any part of the country unless they have approval from both the District Non-Governmental Monitoring Committees (DNMCs) and the local government and have signed MoUs to that effect. In addition, the Act establishes a National Bureau for NGOs that is granted broad powers to revoke an NGO’s permit. **ActionAid Uganda** continues to face difficulties in securing MoUs with DNMCs in regions where it operates due to propaganda perpetuated by the state against it following the search operation at its premises in 2017.

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d. Protection of human rights defenders

In all 11 countries, human rights defenders, including ActionAid staff, have faced forced disappearance, threats, intimidation, physical assault, kidnapping, arbitrary arrest and detention, prosecution for libel and slander, imprisonment, defamation or death perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. This has affected human rights defenders working on good governance and rule of law, tax justice, anti-corruption, women's rights, indigenous peoples' rights, rights to land, environment and natural resources; trade union leaders and journalists have also been affected. In some cases, organisations linked to human rights defenders, as well as their families, have also been attacked. In Guatemala, DRC and ActionAid Anonymous-Africa¹, this is exacerbated by increased militarisation and conflict. For example, in Guatemala and Tanzania, attacks are carried out through collusion between the state and corporates to push communities off their land in order that corporates can grow cash crops, or to silence human rights defenders. In Pakistan, the Blasphemy Law is used to attack human rights defenders working on the rights of religious minorities.

Below are some examples of attacks on ActionAid countries and partners:

i. Threats to and intimidation of human rights defenders

- The **ActionAid Guatemala** country director and staff of partner organisations were threatened for supporting human rights defenders and social movements resisting investments by national and transnational corporations that grab and/or destroy natural resources for agribusiness and mining. Corporates sponsor defamation campaigns against human rights defenders in the public and privately-owned media in collusion with municipal and national governments. Human rights defenders and their families face threats, intimidation, physical assault from security agencies and hitmen, arbitrary arrests, detention, judicial harassment and imprisonment. For example, in June 2016, two unknown people attacked Abelino Chub Caal, a young land rights defender, stole his cell phone and tried to kill him. Abelino Chub Caal was detained in 2017.
- **ActionAid Tanzania** staff and partners were threatened and intimidated by the government for working on a land grab case in Bagamoyo, where a community faced eviction after a transnational corporation was awarded 20,000 acres of community land for a sugarcane plantation. ActionAid Tanzania and partners were accused of being foreign agents working to destabilise the country by mobilising people against the government. They were told they risked imprisonment and closure of their organisations if the ActionAid report was launched. One member of ActionAid Tanzania staff working on the case was physically attacked by unknown persons who also took his phone. The government released statements in the media denouncing the report after its launch. Finally, the government halted the proposed project, upholding the Bagamoyo community's right to their land, and the threats to ActionAid Tanzania and partners fizzled out.



ActionAid Zambia and other tax justice groups protest in Lusaka over claims that copper mining company Konkola Copper Mines (KCM) and its parent company Vedanta may have been avoiding tax in Zambia.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

2. ActionAid countries' response to shrinking civic and democratic space

ActionAid countries have used diverse strategies to respond to those attacks outlined above, which are aimed at shrinking or closing civic and democratic space.

Five out of the 11 ActionAid countries – Guatemala, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe – have stood their ground and defended their right to participate in public affairs. These countries continue to engage in activities aimed at defending civic and democratic space in their contexts despite opposition to their activities. They have used the strategies described below.

- *Direct engagement:* **ActionAid Tanzania** defended its right to launch its report on the Bagamoyo land grab case. **ActionAid Uganda** defended its work and its right to operate. Consequently, ActionAid Uganda engaged government agencies to unfreeze its accounts.
- *Indirect strategies:* **ActionAid Tanzania** met with a senior official of the ruling party Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) as well as with several ambassadors to help avert the risk of de-registration. **ActionAid Uganda** reached out to offices it would ordinarily not easily access working with allies within the donor community.
- *Litigation:* **ActionAid Uganda** hired a legal team to argue its case in court. The lawyers prepared a strong case, directly challenging the constitutionality of the actions of the Financial Intelligence Authority and Standard Chartered Bank to freeze its bank accounts. As a result, an out-of-court settlement was reached that led to the unfreezing of the bank accounts.
- *Media and communications:* **ActionAid Tanzania** engaged reputable and independent national and international media outlets to advance its campaign for the Bagamoyo community land rights as well as to

counter the threats of suspension of its operations. **ActionAid Uganda** actively engaged with mainstream and digital media to counter government propaganda and to showcase its work. **ActionAid Zambia** used the media to counter the narratives perpetuated by opposition cadres against its work.

- *Alliance and coalition building:* **ActionAid Tanzania** invited three local CSOs to present land grab cases during the launch of its Bagamoyo land grab report and made the launch of the report as high profile as possible to avert the risk of the government disrupting it. **ActionAid Uganda** mobilised over 17,000 people, including peers and the communities it works with, to sign a petition calling for its bank accounts to be unfrozen. **ActionAid Zimbabwe** informed other CSOs of the visit by security agencies to its premises and notified the monthly Heads of Agency and bi-monthly Development Platform meetings that bring together international organisations working on governance.
- *Legal, financial, security and psychosocial support for staff:* ActionAid Tanzania linked staff with lawyers for legal support, organised security training, developed contingency plans for staff benefits and evacuation, and advised key staff to frequently change their email/computer passwords. **ActionAid Uganda** found creative ways to finance basic programme activities, staff salaries and obligations to suppliers, and negotiated a waiver on remittance of taxes for the period in which its bank accounts were frozen. **ActionAid Zambia** hired private security for staff who were threatened.
- *Supporting advocacy to defend and expand civic and democratic space:* **ActionAid Uganda** continued to work on: strengthening the capacity of women and young people in non-violent activism; supporting civil society to challenge repressive laws; public interest litigation; supporting civil society to counter negative narratives perpetuated by the state; and strategic engagement with donors, media and influential people within the state machinery to defend civic space. **ActionAid Zimbabwe** commissioned a study on the 'manifestations of shrinking political space in Zimbabwe'. **ActionAid Guatemala** continued to prioritise the protection and defence of defenders of human rights.

The other **six ActionAid countries – ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa, ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2, ActionAid Anonymous-Asia, DRC, The Gambia, Pakistan** – have adopted various strategies to align their activities with state requirements or to avoid attacks from the state. They have used the strategies described below.

- *Seeking collaboration with the government in implementation of activities:* **ActionAid Anonymous-Asia** monitors the operating environment and keeps a low profile. It strategically highlights areas of work that are non-controversial and builds connections with relevant ministries. **ActionAid DRC** restricts its activities to emergencies response and community empowerment and collaborates with government to ensure that its good practices inform government policy. **ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2** has been increasing its national visibility and building its relationship with government offices. **ActionAid The Gambia** was involved in various national committees instituted by the government to influence policies and processes from within.
- *Compliance with legal and regulatory restrictions:* **ActionAid Anonymous-Asia** closely monitors its partners and supports them to meet requirements stipulated by law. **ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2** operates in compliance with the law governing civil society and avoids use of rights-based language. **ActionAid Pakistan** complied with the 2015 *Regulation of International Non-Governmental Organizations Act* and made an application for re-registration, then used the law to appeal the rejection of that application.
- *Supporting local civil society to carry out advocacy on sensitive issues:* **ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2** has been deepening its engagement with community organisations and empowering them to raise relevant issues. ActionAid Anonymous-Africa1 has been focusing on less controversial activities such as capacity building of civil society.
- *Indirect lobbying and advocacy for expansion of civic space:* **ActionAid-Anonymous-Africa2** has been engaging with donors and the government to open civic space, especially on women's and children's rights, while at the same time engaging in constructive dialogue on the impact on civil society of the law governing civil society and on the need for a review of that law.



Margarita Osorio represents the case of communities affected by contamination of La Pasion River by a Palm Oil company.
PHOTO: FOTO CORTESIA DE LA CIDH VÍA FLICKR, LICENCIADO BAJO CC BY 2.0

3. Key lessons learned from ActionAid's experience – dos and don'ts for others facing similar situations

- i. Understand how geopolitical and economic trends in each region are contributing to shrinking space for civil society.
- ii. Ensure relevance and connection to civil society and wider citizen struggles and strengthen communities' capacity for advocacy and campaigning in repressive situations.
- iii. Local NGO networks and platforms could be critical in resisting/pushing back on practices, laws and procedures that are shrinking civic and democratic space.
- iv. Conduct robust risk analysis and power mapping to understand the underlying reasons for attacks on human rights defenders and develop a comprehensive response plan based on different scenarios.
- v. While formal institutions remain relevant, real power lies elsewhere, sometimes with the same individuals carrying out attacks although they may be acting in informal and private capacities.
- vi. Support individuals, organisations and social movements pushing back efforts to close space despite repression from state and non-state actors.
- vii. Human rights-based work is best carried out by networks of CSOs to provide collective security and protection from attacks by governments in repressive contexts.
- viii. Know when to dialogue and when to be combative – the adoption of dual, even multiple, approaches is important.
- ix. Mobilise domestic and international solidarity and collective action among CSOs.
- x. Attacks offer an opportunity to showcase the work of the organisation to the public and that opportunity should be seized when the media is focusing its spotlight on the organisation under attack.

- x. Rapid legal response is critical to defend and expand civic and democratic space.
- xii. Conduct staff training to raise awareness and shared understanding on how to handle attacks on civic and democratic space. Carry out due diligence when recruiting staff, beware of potential government informers within, remain vigilant and transparent, and have the confidence to defend what you stand for.
- xiii. Develop a public relations and communication strategy to continuously and strategically counter propaganda perpetuated by the state and build relationships with the media.
- xiv. Have people on the board of directors who can offer much-needed support in case of attack.
- xv. Ensure security of internal and external communications.
- xvi. Beware of how nationalism and cultural and religious fundamentalisms connect and build on each other and how they are used by state and non-state actors to limit civic and democratic space.
- xvii. Always comply with the law governing civil society operations while resisting harmful provisions.
- xviii. Staff and board members must understand all processes in the organisation, as security agents ask the same questions in different ways to find contradictions.

4. Recommendations to enhance the Global Secretariat's support for ActionAid countries

- i. Provide more financial support to countries to help support human rights defenders.
- ii. Monitor each country closely in order and provide relevant and practical guidance.
- iii. Help to link ActionAid countries with regional or international networks for solidarity and collective action.
- iv. Support countries to build scenarios and contingency plans/protocols to guide their response to attacks from state and non-state actors.
- v. Support countries to adapt to their contexts and share experiences with countries in similar contexts.
- vi. Take the necessary precautions when externally sharing information obtained from ActionAid countries operating in challenging contexts.
- vii. Maintain a balance between embracing the ActionAid organisational theory of change and complying with national laws and/or rethinking the theory of change in challenging contexts.
- viii. Help mobilise an alliance of affected organisations at global level to make links with ActionAid Affiliates to lobby and engage the government.
- ix. Mobilise ActionAid countries to carry out solidarity activities in support of other ActionAid countries under attack in order to put pressure on governments to open civic space.

5. Conclusion

Despite significant advancements in international commitments and national legislation, human rights are under attack in many countries where ActionAid works. In some countries, as outlined above, dissenting voices are silenced, persecuted, jailed and even killed. Religious fundamentalism, racism, xenophobia and economic injustice are driving a backlash on women's rights and increasing restrictions on their freedom to organise.

ActionAid seeks to advance transformational and redistributive change by analysing and shifting power and by holding leaders to account. ActionAid has undertaken, in its *Strategy 2028: Action for Global Justice*, **to protect and expand political space for civil society** organising and participating in democratic decision making, **to support human rights defenders**, and to work with **rights holders** and human rights defenders to enlarge democratic space, so that all people have the freedom to organise. ActionAid has also committed to shift some of its ways of 'doing business' while building its organisational resilience to an ever-challenging and changing context. This requires the organisation to strengthen its risk analysis and to put in place stronger risk management systems at all levels, which will be resourced to better support partners, movements, human rights defenders and staff.

Those wielding power over people living in poverty and exclusion will resist every effort to promote rights, redistribute that power or build people's resilience – and thus the phenomenon of closing civic and democratic space. As Just Associates and the Fund for Global Human Rights aptly state, *'rather than a contest over civic space or even human rights, this is a struggle between competing narratives and values: those on one hand rooted in respect for human life, indigenous worldviews, and communities; protecting the environment; and deepening democracy, inclusivity, equity, and justice; versus those on the other hand that promote unfettered development, free market, authoritarianism, fundamentalisms and nationalism that privilege dominant discriminatory structures, norms, and groups at the expense of others. In the end, it is about power – of 'power over' being used to dominate and repress those less powerful, and those less powerful organizing with others for collective, positive social change – hence the importance of a power framework and analysis for effective and appropriate strategies to (re)claim or create space and reinforce rights'*.²

The survey findings indicate varied reactions on the part of different ActionAid countries in the face of restrictions. There is a need to build a shared understanding of how best/most appropriately to respond in contexts of shrinking civic and democratic space, and to strengthen our institutional capacity and resilience – as well as that of partners and human rights defenders. We cannot afford to resign to the status quo. We are not alone. Globally, many individuals, organisations and social movements are already pushing back obstacles set before them by the state, corporations and individuals seeking to maintain their power. We cannot let down those people and organisations as they struggle for civic freedoms. We have an obligation to support our allies to emphasise the important contribution of civil society and citizen participation at all levels to achieve social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication.

This review report offers us an opportunity to reflect on our strategies with a view to coming up with new systems and structures. We aim to both improve our resilience and respond to the attacks on civic and democratic space experienced by ActionAid and by the partners and human right defenders we work with, while remaining true to our commitments and values as outlined in *Strategy 2028*.

2. *An overview on civic space, enabling environment and human rights defenders*. Just Associates and the Fund for Global Human Rights. Available at: https://justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/an_overview_on_civic_space_enabling_environment_and_human_rights_defenders.pdf

ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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