

Civic Update

A Matter of Political Space

Citizen Participation Team | April 2016

Democratic and socio-economic development requires citizen participation to drive change and ensure accountable government. Without active citizen involvement in political life, public officials may be unresponsive to their constituents and the basic rights and freedoms of democracy can go unrealized. In order for citizens to play an active role, they must have open, accessible and inclusive political spaces.

Political space refers to the avenues, opportunities and entry points available for citizens to express their voice and influence political processes and outcomes. The relative degree of political space may be placed on a continuum from open and inclusive to closed and exclusive. Political space is considered open if citizens are able to communicate their preferences, organize, act individually and collectively and engage government without restrictions or harassment.



Beirut residents demonstrate at the gates of Horsh Beirut to call for the park's reopening. Some attendees wore wigs to call attention to the park's history of refusing entry to Lebanese and allowing only foreigners to enter.

Photo Credit: Rayya Haddad

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Citizens can occupy existing space, take steps to expand it, or create new spaces where rights of assembly, expression and association are freely exercised. Space must be occupied by citizens with political interests and expectations about government's appropriate role and responsibilities. Without this active vigilance, space will close - a growing trend that, in recent years, has impacted citizens and civil society worldwide.

The principle that space must be actively demanded, occupied and defended by citizens applies everywhere that NDI works. Even where space for civil society is fairly open and accessible, it will inevitably shrink and disappear in the absence of citizen participation.

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This issue of the Civic Update looks at approaches for opening, occupying and expanding political space that are relevant across political environments.

The Closing Space Challenge

All around the world, contracting political space is a growing concern - not just in countries that have struggled under repressive or autocratic governments, but also in countries with a tradition of democratic practices and norms. Governments have increasingly taken steps to limit citizens' ability to actively participate in political life and have suppressed, rather than responded to, citizens' expression of their priorities.¹ Increasing restrictions on political space continue to impact citizens' ability to have a say in the decisions that govern their daily lives, as well as NDI's ability to support local partners.

Restrictions on political space frequently occur in the form of legal and institutional barriers that hamper citizens' ability to actively participate in the political process. In attempts to silence critical or reform-minded voices, governments may restrict space for both international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and local civic actors. As Douglas Rutzen from the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law discusses in "Civil Society Under Assault", the legal and regulatory measures governments use to curtail citizens' political participation include limits on fundamental rights, such as freedom of assembly, association and speech.²

To monitor the activities of civil society, many countries require civic groups, associations, and networks to register with the government. These registration processes can be burdensome, requiring large amounts of paperwork and onerous bureaucratic steps. Ambiguity and lack of transparency can allow governments to withhold registration indefinitely or deny it without explanation. Moreover, local groups may run higher risks for losing their registration when they receive support from INGOs. In some cases, INGOs themselves may not be able to legally register, and without a legal presence, are more vulnerable to arbitrary removal.

As outlined in a recent research report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, more and more governments are increasing measures to limit or block foreign funds and operations for civil society. This includes laws and regulations that restrict or impede access to external funding for domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and steps to block international election monitoring.³ For example, Russia passed a law in May 2015 against so-called "undesirable" organizations (a designation that it subsequently gave to NDI in March 2016). This law enables the Prosecutor General's office to fine or jail Russian activists and civil society groups for maintaining any ties with INGOs deemed to be undermining "state security," "national defense," or "constitutional order".⁴ Such limitations placed on INGO operations can seriously curtail their ability to adequately support local groups.

As efforts to close space have proliferated, scholars, practitioners and donors are seeking ways to counter this trend. Funders, for example, have increased emergency and protective assistance funds for civic actors, while local groups and INGOs are developing innovative strategies to continue their work, despite growing pressures. The phenomenon has also increased global information-sharing and discussion. For example, the Human Rights Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and openDemocracy recently launched an [online debate examining the evidence and experience of closing space in different contexts and sectors](#).



CSIS and openDemocracy's online closing space debate.

Table of Definitions

Created Space	When citizens introduce new ways to engage with government that did not previously exist. Advocacy campaigns and political process monitoring initiatives may be examples of created space.
Accessible Space	Political space is considered accessible if citizens are able to express political preferences without interference or harassment by government.
Occupied Space	Space that is meaningfully filled by citizens with tangible political concerns requiring government responsiveness.
Claimed Space	Space in which participation is based on citizen terms and objectives.
Invited Space	Space in which citizens are invited to participate by authorities. By occupying invited space, citizens and CSOs may become a part of the political process, but only at the discretion of the ruling power and not on their own terms. Examples include most elections and government-initiated constituency dialogue.
Online Space	Virtual space for political engagement. Particularly in places where government restrictions make it difficult for citizens to assemble or organize in person, online space offers an alternative means for citizens to express their voice. However, activists may still face government surveillance and harassment, and opportunities may be limited where there is low internet penetration.

Opening and Occupying Space: Approaches & Lessons

Mapping Political Space

Assessing and mapping political space is a key element for political planning and action. Mapping seeks to identify how open and accessible is existing political space, who is occupying it, who is excluded from it and what barriers government may have erected to keep civil society out. This could entail research on existing legislation governing freedom of expression, assembly and association, as well as CSO registration and funding. It may also involve evaluating the current civil society sector to determine how independent CSOs are from the government, levels of public trust, their relationship to the private sector and current levels of political participation.

Through this mapping, NDI and local partners can gain an understanding of citizens' opportunities and limitations for engaging in the political process. This exercise requires citizens to develop a clear sense of existing power relations, and to reflect on how to use and enhance their power, especially collectively, to impact decision making. Assessing and mapping space is especially important for helping citizens find entry points for their political participation.

Finding Entry Points

Finding entry points means making strategic choices about the most viable avenues and opportunities in a given context and at a given point in time. This often means determining the right moment so space is meaningfully utilized, rather than absorbing the power and energy of groups and individuals like a black hole.

Viable entry points can exist on the local, national, and international level and may be different in every context. There are many types of entry points, including elections, existing or proposed legislation, the budgeting process, constitutional development, post-conflict transitional agreements, and service delivery. Elections, for example, are an easy entry point to identify and can be used as an opportunity to organize many different types of engagement, from voter edu-

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education to monitoring to candidate forums. Law-making and budgeting processes are also potential entry points for citizen-led advocacy and monitoring.

Kyrgyzstan: Strategic Entry Point

Providing opportunities for political engagement online can be an important way to target citizens, particularly young people. While youth political participation in Kyrgyzstan has historically been low, young people throughout the country are active on social media. To encourage Kyrgyzstan youth to vote in the October 2015 parliamentary elections, NDI led a massive



Youth refusing vote buying in Kyrgyzstan.

Get-Out-the-Vote social media campaign with online competitions designed by youth activists. The contest submissions included videos, photos and texts where youth showcased their commitment to voting and aimed to motivate their peers. One of the competitions, launched together with youth activists, was a “Selfie Registration Challenge.” The contest reminded young citizens to submit their biometric data and register at polling stations by the September 19 deadline. NDI also partnered with Azattyk Media, the Kyrgyz service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, to launch a video contest called “I am voting” which targeted young voters on Facebook and Instagram. In one month, more than half a million residents of Kyrgyzstan viewed, commented on, shared and “liked” the posts, further disseminating the Get-Out-the-Vote messages. In addition to utilizing online space to target youth, NDI supported local youth activists to increase awareness in their schools and communities about the importance of voting and understanding electoral procedures.

Meaningful Interactions

In order for citizen participation to deepen democracy, interactions between citizens, civil society, and government must offer real opportunities for deliberation and influencing decisions. When there are no clear channels for citizens to interact with decision makers and no evidence that citizen voices are being recognized, citizens can become disillusioned with the political process. This may deter future political engagement, as they see little impact from their efforts. By interacting and building relationships with public officials, citizens can foster meaningful spaces to discuss their priorities, derive tangible results, and create opportunities for future engagement.

Uganda: Demanding Space

In Uganda, the NGO bill, proposed in 2015, extended the government’s ability to control and restrict space for international and local civic actors. To help local groups address the bill’s more repressive clauses in order to expand the civic operating environment, NDI provided technical support to one of Uganda’s largest civil society networks, the Uganda National NGO Forum (NGO Forum). With NDI’s assistance, the NGO Forum held retreats with CSO partners to discuss the bill, build consensus for CSOs to engage parliament and create a report with clause-by-clause analysis of the bill that they shared with the Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Internal Affairs. Parliament officially endorsed the report, and the NGO Forum reported that the next draft of the NGO bill presented by the Parliamentary Committee included 47 percent of the CSOs’ recommendations. The bill was subsequently passed by parliament and signed by President Museveni in January 2016. By engaging in direct interaction and building relationships between CSOs and public officials, the NGO Forum leveraged available opportunities to influence the legislative process and promote a version of the bill that better represented civil society’s views. Both the revised content of the bill itself and the political space citizens utilized to communicate with government made inroads towards a more enabling environment for civil society in Uganda.

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A youth councilor discussing his opinion on the commercialization of politics in Uganda.

the opening of political space more broadly. In particular, NDI has found that partnering with government, especially at the local level, for improving, monitoring and evaluating service delivery has been an effective strategy for increasing opportunities for citizen engagement. NDI frequently works with citizens at the local level to organize around government delivery of services such as education, healthcare, public transportation and water.

While the national government may be less responsive to civil society collaboration, local governments more often recognize the important role that CSOs play in service delivery and have sometimes been more willing to work in a cooperative manner. Initiatives with a local focus often have more achievable solutions than national-level issues, and thus can readily demonstrate to citizens the dividends of their democratic engagement. This can improve citizens' relationship with government and lay the groundwork for continued engagement with local officials on larger issues. For example, to help municipal governments meet service delivery expectations in Thailand, NDI is supporting dialogue between citizens and local officials.

Focusing on Local Level Issues

Finding areas of mutual interest for government and civil society to work collaboratively can lead to

Lebanon: Claiming Space

In 2013, NDI began to support the advocacy efforts of the local civic organization NAHNOO ('We' in English) to re-open Horsh Beirut, Beirut's largest park. NDI supported NAHNOO's efforts under the auspices of its Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI)-funded "Partnering Project," which trains civic groups on advocacy skills, including community surveys to gather evidence on issues and using that evidence to inform public engagement tactics, like town halls. NAHNOO used skills acquired through the Partnering Project to target both the legal and administrative aspects of the re-opening of Horsh Beirut.

Through a series of consultations with human rights and land use experts NAHNOO prepared a study detailing the legal arguments for re-opening the park, and presented it to members of the municipality in a council meeting. When the council members' initial reaction was not positive, NAHNOO worked to raise the public profile for their cause. Throughout their campaign, NAHNOO not only critiqued the closure, but also presented solutions to help local government re-open the park. This public pressure eventually convinced officials to take part in NAHNOO-sponsored town halls and eventually led to the re-opening of Horsh Beirut, now staffed by more than 100 civil society volunteers.



A flyer inviting the public to a discussion with the governor of Beirut about re-opening Horsh Beirut.

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Through this program, citizen groups are working together to prioritize issues, engage public officials, and monitor service delivery progress. This process contributes to democratic learning and helps ensure that the community's quality of life concerns are addressed. *Read more about how NDI integrates socio-economic development priorities into its approach in the [Integration issue of the Civic Update](#).*



NDI meeting with community leaders and residents from Chatuchak District in Bangkok to outline the program. The meeting also discussed the proposed floodway construction which will directly impact local communities.

Considering Diverse Experiences

Civil society actors are affected in different ways by contracting political space. Depending on the political context, a group's respective issue, prevailing social norms, and other dynamics, the opportunities and limitations for different segments of civil society to play an active role in the political process vary. For example, groups who work on overtly political issues may face disproportionate government restrictions compared to those who focus on service delivery.

Traditional norms and power structures often informally silence marginalized populations, such as women, youth, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTI communities and people with disabilities.

At the same time, however, marginalized communities are often already organized through different types of support groups and networks. In addition, due to the nature of their marginalization, these communities may be presented with unique opportunities and entry points for political engagement, even in closed or closing political spaces. NDI has found that moving these existing groups and networks to action is not only possible, but also serves the twofold purpose of helping marginalized communities advance issues related to equal opportunity, while creating important precedents for citizen engagement more broadly. This can help lead to more inclusive and open space for all citizens' political participation.

Libya: Occupying Space

People with disabilities in Libya are often excluded from participation in many aspects of public life, including electoral and legislative processes. Since 2013, NDI has trained disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) on advocacy in electoral and policy-making processes, worked with political parties to better address the needs of people with disabilities, and facilitated DPO engagement with election administrators to develop more inclusive electoral procedures. In 2015, DPO representatives attended strategic planning roundtable discussions held by NDI's local election observation partner, the Libyan Network to Promote Democracy (LNPD). During the roundtables, NDI and LNPD facilitated discussions among the DPO representatives and other network members about strategies to help the LNPD incorporate disability access into its observer training and deployment plans, and develop recommendations for the High National Elections Commission (HNEC). In a country ruled by two parallel governments, and despite there being no election on the horizon, HNEC is seen by many citizens as one of Libya's few remaining neutral institutions. By forming a working relationship with HNEC, people with disabilities have helped set a precedent for citizen engagement that could serve as a template for future CSO action. At the same time, HNEC's collaboration with DPOs helps establish itself as a legitimate institution capable of preparing for an inclusive future election in Libya.

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Networks

Communication and mobilization can be exceptionally difficult and dangerous in closing or closed spaces. One way to build solidarity across challenging operating environments, share best practices and innovate new strategies is the development of formal and informal networks. Networks can serve to strengthen citizens' and CSOs' organizing and unite under a common message. Networks may exist to mobilize regional collaboration: the [Asia Democracy Network](#), for example, is a platform created by civil society activists in 2013 for joint action to advance democracy and human rights in Asia. On the international level, [The World Movement for Democracy](#) has for almost two decades has brought together activists, practitioners, scholars, policymakers and funders from around the world who work to advance democracy, including NDI and its local partners. NDI has itself fostered networks, such as the [Global Network of Domestic Election Observers](#) (GNDEM), which unites its more than 190 members across 75 countries to meet shared challenges for achieving genuinely democratic elections. GNDEM's membership, which includes several regional networks, illustrates how smaller or more local networks can subsequently join larger networks and amplify their reach.



Panel discussion at the Eighth Assembly of the World Movement for Democracy in Seoul, Korea, November 2015.

Role of Infomediaries

Informed citizens are better equipped to advocate for reforms and express how they wish to be gov-

erned. To be effective in these efforts, citizens need timely, accurate, and comprehensible information about political issues. NDI's programs increasingly involve infomediaries - a myriad group of organizations and actors who play a role in expanding citizen access to information. Infomediaries may include media, corporations, market research companies, or CSOs themselves. Infomediaries gather, analyze, produce and distribute information so that citizens and CSOs have the information they need to more effectively take part in the political process. *Read more about the infomediary role of NDI's local partners in the [Infomediary issue of the Civic Update](#).*

Zimbabwe: Defending Space

To help facilitate political space for democratic dialogue in Zimbabwe, NDI supported local CSO partners Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) and Mass Public Opinion Institute, to facilitate exchanges between citizens and parliamentarians and conduct focus group research to highlight citizen attitudes toward legislative reform priorities. The focus group research findings and recommendations were presented and disseminated at workshops and meetings with CSOs in three of Zimbabwe's largest cities. In addition, ZLHR presented the findings and recommendations to Zimbabwe's parliament, which, as a result, took action on several citizen concerns. Parliament even addressed the transparency of its own work: for example, following the release of the focus group research, parliament convened Public Hearings, which gave citizens the opportunity to provide input on proposed bill amendments. Members of parliament also allowed access to some of their official activities and increased the circulation of parliamentary publications.



Participants at the Focus Group Discussion Workshop in Harare, Zimbabwe.

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