



Background paper: CIVICUS 2019 thematic report: anti-rights groups and civil society

About the CIVICUS thematic report

Each year, CIVICUS publishes a special thematic report to provide cutting-edge critical thinking and make practical recommendations on a major area of contemporary civil society concern. Past themes have focused on the enabling environment for civil society, global governance and civil society, civil society resourcing, exclusion and civil society, and the private sector and civil society. The theme of the 2018 report was 'reimagining democracy'. The thematic report was previously published as part of the annual State of Civil Society Report, but since 2018, the year in review and thematic parts of the report have been published separately.

The report is written from a civil society perspective and aims to speak to an audience of civil society personnel, academics, students, donors and civil society supporters. The report draws upon, showcases and references the voices of civil society, including members and partners of the CIVICUS alliance, and draws from a wide range of relevant recent CIVICUS analytical, research and policy work.

The 2019 report will be published in September 2019, informed by a wide range of civil society inputs to be published from May 2019.

Proposed theme of report

Following consultations, and in order to pick up on an urgent and growing area of civil society concern that has emerged strongly in recent CIVICUS analysis and research, the 2019 report will focus on the growing role of non-state groups that attack fundamental human rights, and civil society responses to these.

Rationale

The theme has been chosen because it has clearly emerged as an area of increasing concern among the members and partners of the CIVICUS alliance. Recent CIVICUS research, including our State of Civil Society Reports, our 2018 thematic report, Democracy for All: Beyond a Crisis of Imagination, and the CIVICUS Monitor, our online platform that tracks the space for civil society in every country, indicates that groups that attack fundamental human rights are on the rise and increasingly having an impact on the civil society that stands for fundamental human rights.

There is no settled terminology to describe this trend, and part of the report's aim will be to develop a more accurate language and a relevant typology that can be used to define, classify and understand the phenomenon, and therefore to inform action on this issue. For the time being, the actors in question will be classified as 'anti-rights groups. Among the fundamental human rights, they attack are civil society's essential freedoms - of association, peaceful assembly and expression - the political and civil rights of excluded groups - such as women, LGBTQI people, migrants, refugees and ethnic and racial minorities – and the rights of those who promote social justice and progressive alternatives. Attacks are often made on the civil society that defends these rights, groups and causes.

Anti-rights groups often position themselves as part of civil society and claim civil society space at the domestic and international levels; to distinguish these groups from the civil society that is under attack, for the time being this research will characterise this latter category as 'progressive, rights-oriented civil society'. It will be necessary to further nuance this working terminology, and to look afresh at who is to be understood to be part of civil society, and who is not.

What does seem clear is that evidence points to a growing assault by anti-rights groups on fundamental human rights and progressive values, and to increasing attacks on progressive, rights-oriented civil society. While the civil society arena as a whole has always been host to a diversity of groups - including more socially conservative civil society groups, many of them faith-based, and groups that test the notions of what civil society is by being closely connected to, or at worst, fronts for ruling parties, states and political and economic elite figures - CIVICUS analysis points to a step change in the contestation of civil society's space, at both domestic and international levels. A growing stridency and confidence of anti-rights groups can be observed, evident international connections between them, links to right-wing populist political leaders and parties and fundamentalist conservative faith groups, and significant resourcing from state, political and religious forces.

Further, while civil society has always been an arena of opinion, discourse and contestation, the civil society landscape has generally been characterised by respectful dialogue and tolerance of diverse viewpoints. What is being seen now is an attack on the ways of working that help to broker consensus and bridge across disagreements, and indeed on our very ability as civil society to engage in debate, by anti-rights groups that seek to close down reasoned discussion through misinformation, hate speech and violence, any by clothing themselves in the language of rights - for example, by claiming to stand for the rights of the unborn to attack women's rights. While it has always been part of our role as progressive, rights-oriented civil society to reach out to those with whom we disagree, try to win hearts and minds and shape public opinion, we increasingly confront groups with no interest in dialogue or compromise.

Key questions

The consultations and final report will consider the following key questions:

- What are the essential characteristics of the current wave of anti-rights groups, and how are these distinct from other forms of conservative non-state groups and pseudo-civil society groups?
- How do such groups organise themselves and act?
- How do they appeal to and attract public support?
- How are such groups connecting internationally, who are they connecting with and how are they being resourced?
- What are the main ways in which they attack progressive, rights-oriented civil society? What are the key tactics?
- How is progressive, rights-oriented civil society impacted upon?
- What have been the successful response strategies from progressive, rights-oriented civil society? What are the key elements behind successful responses? What is potentially replicable? What is needed to support successful responses?
- What needs to change in our terminology and definitions of civil society, and our understanding of what civil society is and how it works? How can we redefine and redescribe our role as progressive, rights-oriented civil society as part of a broader new narrative that provides an alternative to right-wing populism and conservative nationalism?

Methods and timeline

The key consultative method for the report will be interviews with civil society personnel with experience of the issues under discussion. It is envisaged that a wide range of interviews will be conducted with civil society personnel in different civil society groups and movements working on a variety of issues and in as many countries contexts as possible. Interviews will be held in a range of languages and published as they are completed on a special section of the CIVICUS website. Interviews will be short and focused, typically centring on four questions:

1. What attacks have you encountered from anti-rights groups and how have they impacted on your work?
2. What are the main ways in which anti-rights groups are organising in your context, and what advances have they made?
3. What are the key methods by which you and your colleagues in progressive, rights-based civil society are responding to attacks from anti-rights groups?
4. What support do you need in order to be able to mount a more effective response?

Other consultation methods may include:

- An online survey of CIVICUS members.
- In-country small dialogues convened by CIVICUS board members and other partners.
- Commissioned guest articles on key aspects of civil society experience.

- Analysis of CIVICUS Monitor country reports for evidence of anti-rights groups activities and civil society responses.

The timeline is as follows:

April-July research and consultation, publication of interviews
July-August writing and editing of synthesis, further consultation and publication of interviews
August translation and design of synthesis
September publication of synthesis, communication, follow-up advocacy

Synthesis report outline

The final synthesis report will be published in September, drawing from the various consultation inputs as much as possible. The synthesis report will seek to isolate the distinguishing characteristics of anti-rights groups, including the similarities and differences between groups in different contexts and working on different issues, and particularly between extreme and less extreme groups, and to establish a typology of anti-rights groups. It will make recommendations on terminology for describing anti-rights groups and progressive, rights-oriented civil society. It will outline the focus and tactics of anti-rights groups' attacks in different contexts, their sources of support and their impacts on progressive, rights-based civil society.

The report will be careful not to paint progressive, rights-oriented civil society as the powerless victims of attack. Rather, it will particularly emphasise the sharing of case studies of creative and impactful responses and fightback from progressive, rights-based civil society, and draw out and present a series of potentially replicable response strategies for sharing among civil society, donors and other civil society supporters. The synthesis will make focused recommendations on how to support and enable civil society response to inform future advocacy strategies. The synthesis will be published in English, French and Spanish.

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