



2015

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**STATE  
OF CIVIL  
SOCIETY  
REPORT**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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*CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world. Founded in 1993, CIVICUS strives to promote marginalised voices, especially from the Global South, and has members in countries throughout the world.*



## MESSAGE FROM THE CIVICUS SECRETARY-GENERAL

Once again, this year's State of Civil Society Report makes for bittersweet reading. The following pages are full of glimpses into the amazing work being done by our colleagues in civil society to address some of the most urgent global issues. From humanitarian response to long-term peacebuilding, civil society is often at the frontline of the world's challenges. But the pages are also full of worries, especially when it comes to the political space in which civil society operates and vital resourcing for its activities.

When I talk to CIVICUS members about their concerns, civic space and resource base almost always feature, regardless of where they come from (we have members in 165 countries) or how big they are (from the biggest international NGOs to the smallest community organisation). This year's report is aimed not just at mapping the nature of the challenges in these two areas but also acts as a guide for our members – and others – to come up with their own responses. You will see that we have made actionable recommendations after each section.

### DEFENDING OUR SPACE

The scale of the threats to civic space should not be underestimated. CIVICUS' analysis suggests that, in 2014, there were serious threats to civic freedoms in at least 96 countries around the world. If you take these countries' populations into account, this means that 67 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guaranteed our freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association, 6 out of 7 humans live in countries where these freedoms were under

threat. And even the most mature democracies are not exempt. In the United States, there were heavy-handed responses to protest, environmental groups in Australia and Canada have come under attack from their governments, and, as I write, friends in Indian civil society are trying to resist a cynical raft of measures to shut them up and shut them down.

For me, these developments suggest a renewed period of contestation about the acceptable bounds of civil society, the latest manifestation of the battle to protect citizens against state power. It would be foolish to see this phenomenon as somehow about the 'West versus the rest' or indeed that civic space can be saved or funded from outside. Instead, every polity needs to arrive at its own settlement about the role of and acceptable limits on civil society. And all of us who believe in a healthy, independent civil society have a responsibility to make our case again and again, whether it is in stressing the universal principles around civic freedoms or rolling up our sleeves to win hearts and minds in the political debate. It is our space; we need to reclaim it.

As the global civil society alliance, CIVICUS is busy working on a series of measures to defend our space. On the research front, we are developing new tools – notably the Civic Space Monitor and Civic Pulse – that will generate new, real-time information on trends affecting civil society. We hope that these will be ready to go live when next year's State of Civil Society Report is published. On the international front, we are working within a number of mechanisms – from the Community of Democracies to the Global Partnership for Effective

Development Cooperation – to make sure that global commitments to protect the enabling environment for civil society are adhered to. CIVICUS is also involved in the design of a series of new regional hubs aimed at supporting civil society. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we are working with our own members to build solidarity across civil society. Only by standing together – regardless of whether we are service deliverers or change-seekers – can we be effective in the contestation for civic space.

## LESS MONEY, MORE PROBLEMS

This year's thematic essays make for required, albeit sometimes depressing reading, for anyone interested in the future of civil society. You will not find a fundraising toolkit with all the answers, rather, taken together, these essays paint a strategic and provocative picture of the challenges *and* opportunities around resources. If you're pressed for time, have a look at the CIVICUS essay and then dig deeper into the guest essays.

As for me, I drew one scary conclusion: those of us who work in change-seeking civil society organisations, especially in the Global South, are facing a triple whammy.

First, many of our donors are suffering from 'logframitis'. They want us to package the long-term and systemic change we are passionate about into neat little fundable projects that fit their programme and timelines. They work through complex chains of 'fundermediaries' who channel ever-smaller chunks of money with ever-larger relative reporting requirements. Many in civil society are good at playing this game but many of the most innovative, most ambitious initiatives rarely involve project proposals.

Secondly, in many countries civil society is caught between measures that make it more difficult to access foreign funding and the fact that domestic funders are not yet able or willing to support change-seeking activities. And the situation is most acute in countries that

have apparently 'graduated' into middle income status and have therefore fallen off donors' priority lists.

Thirdly, despite all the promises about 'funding the front line' and investing in the capacity of Southern civil society, very little resource actually reaches those who need it most and, arguably, could spend it best. Out of the \$166 billion spent on official development assistance (ODA or aid) by OECD-DAC countries in 2013, only 13%, or \$21 billion, went to civil society. Although current data is hard to obtain, the latest estimate from 2011 suggests that Southern-based NGOs get only around 1% of all aid directly. The rest of civil society's allocation goes to Northern organisations that pass on an unknown share of their funding to CSOs based in developing countries. The picture is even bleaker when it comes to humanitarian activities, where the proportion of funds that go to local civil society organisations has actually fallen from 0.4% in 2012 to 0.2% in 2014. Private funders are generally better but I would argue that they are nowhere near where they should be in terms of funding the frontline.

## GO BRAVE

What is also striking in this year's report are the links between civic space and resourcing trends. It is not surprising that domestic civil society does not have the capacity to defend itself against attacks on civic space if donors have systematically underinvested in local organisations. In my experience, the situation is particularly woeful when it comes to support for civil society platforms, the 'scaffolding' that helps strengthen civil society's collective voice when it is threatened.

At CIVICUS, we will work with donors where we can to encourage them to be braver; to curb the excesses of what one of our contributors calls the 'tyranny of donors'. One practical way we will do this is to add a new category for 'brave philanthropy' to our Nelson Mandela - Graça Machel Innovation Awards. From next year, our members will be able to nominate examples of donors who

have been prepared to take risks to support civil society, particularly in the Global South. We will then take the nominees to a vote and announce the winners at our next International Civil Society Week, to be held in Bogota, Colombia in April 2016.

The onus is also on civil society to change some of its behaviours, from weaning ourselves off grant/contract funding, to exploring new ways of raising resources, to designing activities that do not need financial support. We also need to be braver when it comes to speaking out when others in civil society are targeted. Many of us have been too busy filling out forms that we have failed to notice that the science of delivery is killing the art of social transformation. Ultimately, we also need to be brave enough to go beyond our log frames and work plans, to engage in the politics of social transformation and protecting our space.

Throughout this report you will see examples of civil society challenging political and economic elites, of people making their own politics. I hope you are inspired to think about how we in civil society can work together to protect our civic space and create a more sustainable resource base.



**Dr Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah**

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1 Baobab, *Civil Society Aid Trends 2015*, Baobab Briefing No. 3, January 2015, <http://bit.ly/1FtGLRF>  
2 OECD, *Aid for CSOs*, October 2013, <http://bit.ly/1MacM59>  
3 [http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/GHA-Report-2015\\_Online.pdf](http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/GHA-Report-2015_Online.pdf)

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

Each year CIVICUS: the world alliance for citizen participation publishes the State of Civil Society Report, offering a comprehensive picture of civil society and the conditions it works in around the world. Our report draws from a series of inputs contributed by members of the CIVICUS alliance, including 27 thematic inputs from civil society leaders and experts, a survey of national level civil society networks that are members of our Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA), and interviews with people close to the key civil society stories of the day. Each year our report, in addition to reviewing the civil society landscape as a whole, has a special theme. This year we focus on the resourcing of civil society.

## 1. THE YEAR IN REVIEW

In a year of hard effort and high achievement, civil society has continued to respond to pressing global challenges, of growing inequality, corrupt relationships between political and economic elites, the privatisation of the public sphere, violent conflicts, environmental destruction, and an enduring lack of opportunity for people to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. In several countries, people's frustration with persistent failures has seen them take to the streets to demand change. Meanwhile, because civil society poses difficult questions to elites, it faces pushback and restriction. But the demand for change will not go away, because structural failures, including the inadequacy of global governance institutions, as we discussed in our 2014 State of Civil Society Report, are not being addressed. Civil society offers the commitment and staying power to challenge the root causes of today's problems and offer solutions; this is why people and agencies that seek change need to support and invest in civil society, in all its diversity.



Photo: Zubair Sayed

## CIVIL SOCIETY AS A FRONTLINE RESPONDER

2014/2015 demonstrated that civil society is the first responder to humanitarian emergencies, including those caused by conflicts and disasters. In West Africa, civil society was an essential force in turning the tide of Ebola: civil society organisations (CSOs) served affected communities when national and intergovernmental powers failed to mobilise. In Gaza, citizen-led response helped people cope with bombardment. When high-level peace-making attempts failed people in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, community-level initiatives started to build peace from the ground up.

Response places a strain on civil society, exposes civil society workers to danger, and causes disagreement between CSOs and governments, and CSOs at different levels, over co-ordination and the use of resources. Political conflict also impacts on civil society, for example, in Ukraine, where civil society has to assert political neutrality in a highly polarised setting, and Syria, where the ability of civil society to operate depends on which warring party controls territory.

To support civil society response to emergencies, there is a need to promote more enabling conditions for civil society as a whole, nurture deep connections between CSOs and communities, and encourage international CSOs to develop stronger local partnerships. In polarised conditions, the right of civil society to undertake humanitarian work, and the autonomy that enables civil society to expose human rights violations, need strongly to be asserted.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND CITIZEN ACTION

Each year in the State of Civil Society Report we examine the hotspots of citizens' action. It is almost impossible to predict where protest will break out: in 2014/2015 people in Burkina Faso took to the streets to oust an entrenched president, Hong Kong's citizens shed their reputation for passivity to demand democracy, and in the US, historically disadvantaged black communities demanded a renegotiation of power with the police. While the locations of mass action are hard to predict, the trajectory of contemporary movements generally takes an identified pattern: protests grow from small, local issues to address more profound questions of power, inequality and lack of voice; protests are organised horizontally, with diffused, discursive leadership, heavy use of social and new media, and high involvement of young people; tactics and inspiration are taken from earlier protest waves, such as Occupy; and protests mushroom when initial actions bring heavy-handed security force response. It is also now an established norm, from Paris to Peshawar, that shocking acts of terrorism are met by mass enactments of commemoration and defiance, and that far-right mobilisations are challenged by counter protests.

The experience of Bahrain, Egypt and Syria demonstrate that large civic mobilisations do not necessarily lead to lasting, positive change, although in Greece and Spain, the momentum of past protests has changed conventional politics, while in Tunisia, democracy seems to be taking hold. Protests have other impacts, in developing new activism skills,



Photo: UNMEER-Simon Ruf



confidence and connections among participants, suggesting that they develop civic capacity, as has been observed in Hong Kong and Turkey, among other locations.

We believe we are seeing a rejection of conventional politics, because political competition masks elite agreement on the big issues. In response, people are forging their own politics. However, the experience of 2014/2015 shows that, when people are offered an opportunity to engage on issues that speak to them, as in Scotland's independence referendum, they mobilise in numbers.

Online activism has its limits, and its strength should not be overstated: the #BringBackOurGirls campaign achieved visibility without impact, causing the quiet efforts of Nigeria's civil society to advance gender rights to be overlooked. Viral fundraising campaigns, such as the ice bucket challenge, which enjoyed huge social media popularity, showed the disconnect there can be between campaigns that capture public imagination and those that advance real change.

The experience of 2014/2015 suggests that we need to improve our abilities to anticipate civic action tipping points and develop civil society capacities in advance of these. We also need to build bridges between new movements and existing CSOs, to help sustain civic action: CSOs need to reach out to newly active people to offer pathways for participation, and connect online with offline action. Civil society's peace-building role, in contexts of regressive identity politics, needs to be respected and supported.

## CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER ATTACK

The power of civil society is recognised through a back-handed compliment, when elites try to suppress civil society's essential role of speaking truth to power. In many contexts, civil society is attacked when it seeks to uphold human rights, advocate for policy change or exercise accountability over political and economic elites. In 2014, we documented significant attacks on the fundamental civil society rights of free association, free assembly and free expression in 96 countries. Attacks take a range of forms, including: restriction on CSOs' ability to receive funds; onerous regulation and reporting requirements; the misuse of laws and regulations, such as those on public order; judicial harassment and imprisonment of activists; the demonisation of civil society in political discourse; and verbal and physical attacks of an extreme nature.

An international culture of imitation sees repressive states borrowing laws and regulations from each other. New attempts are underway, even by democratic states, to roll back long-established human rights norms, which are described as obstacles to national development and security, while critical voices are conflated with terrorism. Weak global governance institutions do little to prevent this. Hostility to civil society is becoming normalised, and CSO energy is being forced into fighting existential threats.

Threats emanate from both state and non-state actors, which benefit from denying human rights and



Photo: Jesse Aston

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES

We extensively covered global governance failures in our 2014 report, concluding that global governance institutions cannot address today's major issues because they are out of date, dominated by narrow state interests, and more open to the private sector than civil society. Clearly, no progress has been made: a meaningful deal on climate change is no closer, and deadlock at the UN Security Council has seen people pay the price for sustained failures to resolve conflicts, including in Palestine, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.

As the world debates the post 2015 agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the next big test of the international system. The international community needs to show commitment to tackling inequality, and create space for civil society, as a co-owner of the goals, rather than a delivery mechanism for elite priorities. Decision-makers need to guarantee adequate financing for development, in locations where it is needed most, and on the issues that matter.

Civil society has demonstrated that sustained engagement can make a difference: the Arms Trade Treaty entered into force in December 2014. This sprang from civil society, and civil society groups mounted a sustained advocacy effort to see it adopted. Civil society has also organised to defend the International Criminal Court from attack, and is currently mobilising citizens against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Treaty, under

perpetuating current governance failures, including corrupt politicians and officials, unaccountable security forces, unscrupulous businesses and religious fundamentalists. Activists who assert land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights in the face of large-scale development schemes face particular threat. Wherever civil society activists are threatened, so are journalists: in many countries, the media faces attack merely for trying to report the truth. The internet in particular has become a critical arena of contestation, between states, civil society, internet companies and extremist voices.

Women who are active in the public sphere and demand rights face attack, including from extremist fundamentalist groups, which are sometimes connected to the state, as do people who claim LGBTI rights, but they are fighting back, and scoring notable victories. The battle for gender and sexual rights is now partly one of denying the notion that there can be two different worlds for rights: one in the global north and another in the global south. Activists in the global south need to be supported to show that demands for gender and sexual rights emanate from and are legitimate in their countries.

In response, international solidarity needs to be mobilised for embattled civil society, but in ways that do not reinforce claims that some categories of rights are global north impositions, or enable civil society's enemies to call them agents of foreign powers. New coalitions need to be formed, between CSOs of different kinds, human rights defenders, journalists, online activists and whistle-blowers, to enable solidarity, share successful tactics and uphold human rights norms. Funders need to support the rapid response capability of threatened civil society.



Photo: Flickr - Hugo

negotiation between the EU and the US, which prioritises the interests of elites over citizens.

Looking forward, a broader range of civil society needs to be brought into global decision-making, and alliances formed to enable CSOs to work constructively with governments and intergovernmental institutions that are more sympathetic towards civil society. CSOs should build better connections between ground-level issues and the global-level processes that impact on them, and nurture better south-south and north-south connections. At the same time, while constructively engaging, CSOs must assert the right to challenge the fundamentals of global governance arrangements that privilege elites' access and voice.

## 2. RESOURCING OF CIVIL SOCIETY

While our Year in Review section assesses the conditions for a wide range of civil society, in our thematic section we focus mostly on the resourcing of CSOs that engage in advocacy, seek policy change, undertake accountability over elites and seek to uphold human rights. For shorthand, we call these change-seeking CSOs. This is not to denigrate other civil society functions: millions benefit from civil society's crucial role in delivering services, and there are many diverse, less formalised civil society forms that enable community participation. Many CSOs have both change-seeking and service-oriented dimensions. However, we believe that the change-seeking work of CSOs faces particular, urgent resourcing challenges.



Photo: Zubair Sayed

## CHALLENGES TO MEANINGFUL RESOURCING

Change-seeking CSOs are finding it harder to receive funding, including funding from other countries, because of government restrictions. Often governments justify this with reference to international rules to prevent money laundering and terrorism financing, and international agreements that development should be nationally-owned, which is misinterpreted as state ownership. The reality is that many governments want to subdue CSOs that offer democratic dissent, and that they see as competing for resources. The lack of alternate, domestic resourcing bases for change-seeking CSOs in the global south makes the restriction of foreign funding an effective tactic. A divided civil society, where service-oriented CSOs face less restriction, including on receipt of funding, enables change-seeking CSOs to be targeted.

There is evidence that Official Development Assistance (ODA), a key source of support for global south CSOs, is changing. The global economic downturn, which began in 2008, caused a decline in the amount of funds given by some donors to CSOs. ODA to CSOs now seems to have plateaued, and remains far outweighed by ODA to governments. Further, almost all ODA for CSOs is aid through CSOs - resources channelled to donor-determined projects. Little ODA is classed as aid to CSOs - resources where CSOs define priorities, and which strengthens them. ODA through CSOs has increased while ODA to CSOs has fallen, suggesting that donors see civil society as a pipeline

for project delivery, rather than something important in its own right. More ODA still goes through CSOs based in donor countries than CSOs in the countries that aid is intended to benefit.

Many traditional donors are trimming their list of priority countries, and withdrawing particularly from countries assessed as having middle income status, despite their engrained social problems. The rise of new economic powers, such as the BRICS group, means that some global south states are now donors, but almost all their support is for government-led initiatives, including infrastructure projects, which benefit political elites, and can impact negatively on the rights of communities and CSOs. Aid from global south donors tends to make few provisions for the role of civil society in exercising accountability and safeguarding human rights.

Amidst this changing landscape, enduring criticisms suggest that suspicion and mistrust between donors and CSOs remain: much funding is short term and project focused, and does not last long enough to achieve impact. Donors have a natural tendency to support less controversial areas, rather than rights-based advocacy, where impact is sometimes less visible in the short term. But we believe we are seeing donors take a conservative, cautious turn, in part fuelled by defensiveness about foreign aid spending at a time when many donor governments have cut domestic spending. The new donor conservatism sees aid being more strongly connected with strategic foreign policy and trade agendas of donor governments, and the stronger pushing of free market policies on recipient countries to create opportunities for donor country businesses. Development



Photo: Flickr - Toban B



Photo: Elvert Barnes

effectiveness discourse meanwhile fuels a drive for harmonisation between donors, and attempts to assure ‘value for money’ and see measurable outcomes. This has bred a weaker tolerance of risk, counting against the more contested, harder to measure work of change-seeking CSOs.

These trends mean that CSOs’ service-delivery activity, which most fits project-oriented approaches, has a funding advantage, and that large, established CSOs, which are good at speaking donor jargon, have pre-existing relations with donors, and are able to navigate complex application and reporting procedures, do better than smaller, emerging CSOs. This reinforces power imbalances within civil society, and limits the potential for innovation.

Donor priorities help shape CSO behaviour, sometimes unintentionally. CSOs that have long-standing relationships with donors may be able to sustain themselves through repeat project funding, but are unlikely to develop lasting capacities, are vulnerable to accusations of mission creep, and can fail to develop strong relationships with their key constituencies, as their strongest reporting and accountability responsibilities are to their major funders, rather than those they exist to serve. Such CSOs find it harder to assert their autonomy, and are vulnerable to charges that they are donor-defined, which makes it easier to demonise them as foreign agents.

Similar challenges apply when CSOs receive support from their own state. Many international CSOs risk being seen as promoters of their home governments’ foreign policy agendas, and channels for government attempts to use ODA to project soft power. At the

domestic level, state funding often goes only to CSOs on favourable terms with ruling elites, and strongly favours service-oriented work. CSOs in these circumstances risk being seen as co-opted by the state; in politically polarised contexts, and where the state is a major human rights offender, state support is not an option for change-seeking civil society.

In part because of these challenges, and also because of growing elite wealth in the global south, there is renewed interest in non-state alternatives, such as giving from citizens, wealthy people and philanthropic institutions; community grant-making; diaspora and faith giving; corporate social responsibility; and non-financial resources, particularly volunteering.

CSOs need to develop skills in accessing these, but also must overcome a number of challenges. Many of the alternative sources, particularly wealthy givers and companies, make decisions through opaque processes, in which few people are involved, and decisions are based on personal identifications and connections. Civil society needs to try to open these up. There is also a need to question where resources come from, and to ensure that civil society is not being used to launder reputations by those who gain wealth corruptly or unfairly. A further challenge is the lack of consistent, comparable data on what is being given, by whom, and how it is being used.

For CSOs that are heavily dependent on unreliable ODA flows or work in contexts where the state makes it hard to receive foreign funding, no single alternative will be the answer. This is not necessarily a problem: CSOs gain in resilience - an ability to ride shocks and resist restriction - when they can call on

different types of resources from multiple sources. The challenge is that navigating and managing multiple sources of funding is complex, demanding skills that CSOs may need to develop, and be supported to develop. Professionalised CSOs can also be challenged more to realise the potential of the activist, voluntary values that underpinned their founding, and to model alternatives where achieving impact does not depend on financial resources.



Photo: Garry Knight

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER AND MORE SUSTAINABLE RESOURCING

We believe there has never been a greater need for civil society's capacity to offer responses and alternatives to the major problems of these contested and uncertain times. To enable civil society to perform its essential roles, including of advancing change as well as delivering services, there is a need to move towards a resourcing environment that sustains a diverse array of civil society forms to mount a range of responses.

On the basis of our report's analysis, we call on state donors to improve coordination, but not to harmonise their approaches. Official donors should offer, between them, a diversity of funding methods, which include long-term, strategic funding, and more responsive, rapid funding. Donors should also be challenged to devolve the machinery for making resourcing decisions as close to the ground as possible, including by supporting CSOs as funding intermediaries. Such measures would help resources to reach a diversity of CSOs, including in the global south, and improve the resilience of CSOs. Donors should acknowledge the intrinsic value of a strong civil society, including by asserting the right of CSOs to solicit and receive funds, and by upholding agreed international principles on development cooperation. The health and resilience of civil society as a whole should be measured as a key indicator for understanding the impact of resourcing, alongside other measures of impact. Donors should

support core infrastructural costs, the development of organisational abilities, and skills that help CSOs to diversify their resourcing.

Turning to the various forms of philanthropy, the overwhelming need is for philanthropic funders to be challenged to become braver, more willing to take risks, and more supportive of change-seeking actions. Civil society and philanthropic funders should work together to seek a more enabling environment for giving to civil society, including structured, long-term giving, and the devolution of funding decisions to the lowest possible levels. Better connections are needed between philanthropic funders to share good practice. While working with philanthropic givers, CSOs should also urge them to make their decision-making processes more open and inclusive, and challenge wealthy givers to be transparent about the sources of their wealth and their motivations.

For the corporate sector, similar needs emerge: corporate funders should open up their decision-making processes, and be clear about their motivations in resourcing civil society. CSOs should not let receipt of corporate funding prevent actions to encourage better corporate governance, while CSOs and businesses should work together to stimulate better learning from good practice, and seek a more enabling environment for corporate social responsibility and the development of social enterprises. Intermediary organisations should be established to detach corporate funding from corporate promotion, and support a greater variety of civil society actions.

CSOs need to develop new relationships with donors where they can engage to influence their priorities and strategic directions, and challenge existing accountability relationships and understandings of what constitutes impact. To help them do this, CSOs should exercise exemplary transparency, demonstrate accountability to citizens, and develop entrepreneurial capacity to reduce donor reliance. CSOs should prioritise the building of coalitions of support and solidarity between CSOs of different types and at different levels, to help assert the norm that CSOs have a right to seek and receive funding, and to develop voluntary capacity. CSOs also should establish and implement resourcing policies that make clear the grounds on which they do and do not accept resources.

Donors of all kinds, and CSOs, should acknowledge that resourcing decisions are often political, and be open and honest about the sources and purposes of resourcing. Donors to civil society should be challenged to set out what kind of civil society they want to see, and their resourcing decisions assessed accordingly. CSOs need to develop the confidence to not seek funding from sources that compromise or cause excessive deviation from their missions. Above all, donors need to be braver, in their relationships and resourcing decisions. Conventional thinking is failing; conventional funding will not achieve the change the world needs.

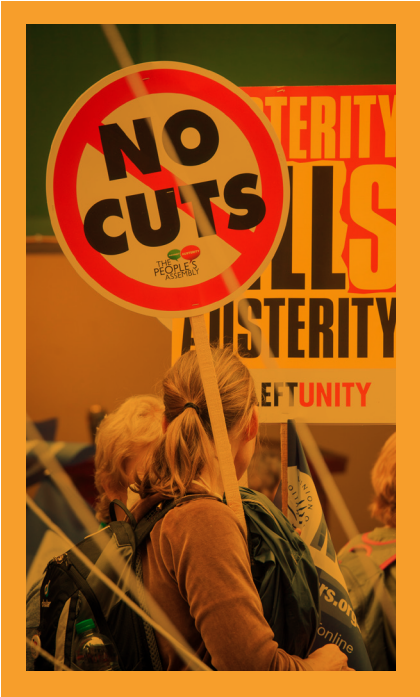


Photo: Ali Wade



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