CIVICUS

# TESTING THE RESILIENT ROOTS HYPOTHESIS
# CASE STUDY

**A human rights organisation gains confidence, visibility and new donors as it draws its primary constituents closer**



## BACKGROUND

A primary goal of the Resilient Roots initiative was to test the following hypothesis:

> **'Civil society organisations that are more accountable to their primary constituents are more resilient to civic space-related threats.'**

To do this, CIVICUS, with the support of Accountable Now, Keystone Accountability, and Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo, worked with 14 national partner civil society organisations (CSOs) of varying size, focus, location and approach, to help them design and implement year-long pilot projects aiming to increase accountability to their primary constituents (the individuals and communities that the organisation was created to serve and support).

In order to test the relationship between accountability and resilience, the Resilient Roots project team used surveys and interviews to collect data from the 14 national partner organisations involved in the initiative, and their primary constituents. This data, and additional sources of information, were then used to evaluate the relationship between accountability and resilience for the 14 national partners. A summary of the methodology and findings is available here.

This case study illustrates how the relationship between accountability and resilience plays out in the real world for one of the Resilient Roots national partners. It is accompanied by another case study looking at another Resilient Roots partner organisation of a different size, operating in a different civic space context, and that had different outcomes from the project, in terms of increased perceptions of accountability.

# ORGANISATION PROFILE

An activist and watchdog organisation exposing human rights violations and political repression. They operate in a civic space characterised by systematic restrictions on civil society and ranked as "repressed" by the CIVICUS Monitor. They run a media platform publishing information about human rights violations, but they also offer legal advice to individuals who have had their human rights violated. Their primary constituents are therefore their public readership and those who require their legal advice.

They do not rely on the state for resources or use any public funds, as their income comes exclusively from private individuals and foreign donors. While they try to maintain a politically neutral stance, they are often critical of repressive actions taken by public authorities and they are on the lookout for being repressed themselves.

The organisation grew rapidly during the project's lifetime - it almost doubled its staff, expanded its services, saw significant increases in the number of users and donors and underwent significant internal restructuring. Around halfway through the project, a large protest occurred that sparked human rights violations and media attention. As a result, the number of cases covered by the organisation spiked, as did its numbers of volunteers, readers and individual donors. Towards the end of the project a staff member was arrested for speaking at a public rally, causing a general feeling of increased insecurity for the staff.

# ACCOUNTABILITY PRACTICE

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| **They started with a limited understanding of accountability** | Before the project, their accountability practices were one-directional and largely meant publishing information about the organisation in reports on their website. The initial focus of their new accountability mechanisms was to learn about their audience's preferences in order to improve the content delivered and increase the number of readers and donors. |
| **They tried out several new accountability mechanisms, distinctly targeting four categories of primary constituents** | From the beginning, they mapped their primary constituents into four groups and designed feedback mechanisms for each group. They created an online instrument to collect extensive information about how their different audiences interacted with their online content. They also designed crowdsourcing bots to automatically generate information from the online engagement of two types of constituents, and ran surveys with donors, journalists, activists and readers. |
| **Although they didn't initially plan to, they ended up placing a significant focus on closing the feedback loop** | During the project's implementation, they started to make changes based on the feedback they collected from primary constituents and observed how those changes had positive effects. They began to pay more attention to closing the feedback loop and telling their constituents how feedback was being used. They did this by reporting both feedback and changes on the website, social media and email, and measuring the efficiency of their communications. |

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| **The new accountability mechanisms are becoming an institutionalised practice** | Their main feedback collecting instruments - the data dashboard and the crowdsourcing bots were, from the beginning, designed to stay, and the surveys were meant to be replicable when needed. As the Resilient Roots project was ending, the organisation was analysing which mechanisms were working well for which primary constituent groups and how to make others more efficient for other primary constituent groups. |
| **They consistently used the feedback obtained from primary constituents to inform changes** | They made changes regarding communication (frequency, motto and words), but they also adjusted the types of services delivered. For instance, they increased the amount of legal aid offered based on the constituents' preferences. At least some decisions and changes were made for each type of primary constituent, mostly regarding what content to deliver to each audience. |
| **Staff were involved and targeted by the new accountability practices, but only in a limited manner and without closing the feedback loop** | They discussed the findings of an initial staff accountability survey with the members of staff and identified transparency as a key issue to improve on. Staff were then asked to vote in a poll on the top three ways to improve transparency. This raised expectations about necessary changes, but then it backfired because those changes were not implemented in a timely fashion by senior management. On the contrary, the organisation's leadership chose to make some important decisions behind closed doors – for tactical reasons - but did not properly communicate this to the entire staff. At the same time, major staff changes (many new people, some senior people leaving) were not well communicated. This resulted in feelings of mistrust, visible in the lower scores obtained in the second staff accountability survey conducted at the end of the project, particularly on transparency but also on the general accountability of the organisation towards its staff and volunteers. |

## EFFECTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY OBSERVED

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| **Primary constituents increased their trust in the organisation** | The organisation had some of the highest accountability ratings among the Resilient Roots national partners in both the baseline and the endline primary constituent surveys, even with a significant increase in the number of primary constituents surveyed for the endline. |
| | In its own feedback surveys and interactions with constituents, the organisation observed this increased trust first-hand. Moreover, they found that the feedback provided by their most engaged group of primary constituents (individual donors), prompted the organisation to make changes that also helped it increase how much it is trusted by wider activists and users of their platform. |

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| **Improved communication to primary constituents and wider audiences** | Because of the feedback received, they changed the style and frequency of their communication to primary constituents and started using less technical jargon and more words that their audience can relate to. They also tested different mottos with their audiences and ended up changing the organisation's motto based on the feedback received. As a result, their score on primary constituents' understanding of what the organisation does increased by 38%. |
| **Services and content delivered are more relevant to primary constituents' needs** | After their recurring individual donors highlighted legal assistance as the most important of the organisation's services, more than half of donations received were then spent on legal aid and more staff were allocated to that area, which also coincided with a high increase in the demand for these services. |
| **New skills** | Among the new skills attributed to the use of new accountability practices, the organisation has mentioned: data collection and analysis for management purposes; running and analysing surveys; incorporating primary constituents' needs and opinions into the product design process; in-person interviewing; and closing the feedback loop. |
| **Changes in the team's mindset and attitudes** | The project has raised the team's awareness that primary constituents are not passive recipients of the organisation's programmes, but instead they started to see all groups of primary constituents – and the organisation's staff as well - as part of a community. They also found that the accountability practices had influenced the team's mindset and were being replicated in other projects, with their Resilient Roots project focal point stating: "more and more project groups are including the collection of feedback in the planning and drafting stages of product development". |
| **Manifest and structured public support** | Being able to maintain and build upon the trust of an increasing number of constituents (driven largely by the external context) has resulted in increased donations from individuals through their crowdfunding mechanism. Another manifestation of support from the wider community was that local businesses (e.g. a small bar, a sports media outlet, etc.) have independently launched campaigns to support the organisation or have donated a percentage of their incomes to the organisation. The growth in donations was coupled with a growth in audience satisfaction with their information and services (98 per cent of respondents in the endline survey were satisfied with what the organisation was doing and 89% were satisfied with the transparency of its reports). |

# TOWARDS MORE RESILIENCE

Within the one year between the baseline and endline resilience interviews, the organisation was responding to a larger number of civic space-related threats and, as a result, had a higher incidence of "resisting" (pushing back) in response to experienced or perceived threats. In the endline accountability survey, staff and volunteers reported lower scores compared to the baseline, when asked whether their organisation was becoming more resilient. This lower staff perception of resilience can be explained both by the external context in which staff were feeling unsafe because of increased harassment (including someone being arrested), and by the staff being disappointed in the level of transparency within the organisation, fuelled by higher expectations created as a result of the baseline survey.

**However, despite this perception of staff and volunteers, several changes were observed, partly as a result of the new accountability practices, that constitute factors pointing towards more resilience.**

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| **Capacity to communicate with clarity and creativity** | Their capacity to communicate through using more appealing language increased because they tested this directly with their primary constituents. This has increased their readership as a platform and their visibility as an organisation. |
| **Connectedness to primary constituents and the wider community** | They feel that their newly gained visibility and larger and more supportive audience also have a protective effect, making it more difficult for the state to place restrictions on them or shut them down. As their size has grown, so has their confidence to push back and resist. This also draws more negative attention - they were described in state media as the 'main media partner of public disorder' - but in their eyes, the increasing public support makes this sort of risk less severe and allows them to continue their work without making major changes to their tactics. |

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| **Capacity to deliver the right services to the right people** | The insight provided by primary constituents that more legal assistance was useful proved to be correct, as more people started to access that service. They observed that "changing priorities in accordance with primary constituents' needs and communicating these changes was followed by an increase in supporter donations." |
| **Funding diversification** | Increasing the amount of funding they receive from individuals and other community actors means they are less dependent on foreign sources of funding, which can be harder to secure and are currently being accessed through intermediaries because of state restrictions. |
| **Adaptive capacity** | In order to avoid unnecessary risks, they only publish fact-based content and avoid publishing opinions. They do not make statements about political actors and rather focus attention on human rights, in particular the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. This approach is not in itself a result of their accountability work, as they were already doing the same at the start of the project. However, the new emphasis on this approach being important to mitigate risks to their primary constituents indicates that it has become central to the organisation's thinking and decisions in response to threats related to criticising the government. |
| **Legal and bureaucratic capacity** | While they try to maintain a neutral and non-partisan tone in their communications, they are adopting a higher risk strategy with regards to strategic litigation on human rights issues. In some cases, they have also spoken directly to the authorities – police in particular – to try and change their approach to human rights-related practices. One regional law has been changed due to their work. |

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

While the increase in donors, volunteers, readers and community support was largely attributable to external factors (the major protests), the new ways in which the organisation engaged its primary constituents helped it to retain a large proportion of its new audience. Moreover, it was able to generate not just interest but also trust, which has been manifest in increased donations as well as financial and promotional support from several wider community entities.