
DLL
Evidence Review

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Shrinking civic space: Drivers, consequences, and responses in sub-Saharan Africa

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Table of content

Abstract	3
Main points.....	3
1 Motivation and objectives	4
2 Methodology	4
3 Government's tools and justification	5
3.1 Formal legal tools.....	8
3.2 Informal/coercive tactics	8
3.3 Official justifications vs. observed effects	9
4 What triggers crackdowns: causes and diffusion	10
4.1 Domestic triggers: electoral risk, protest and contentious projects	10
4.2 Foreign aid inflows and political survival.....	10
4.3 Neighborhood effects: learning from examples	11
5 The impact of restrictions on international aid	12
5.1 Changes in total aid allocations.....	12
5.2 Changes in the nature of funded projects.....	12
5.3 Changes in aid channels: domestic vs foreign NGOs	13
6 The impact of restrictions on the socio-political context	13
7 How African CSOs respond to the crackdown.....	15
7.1 Pre-emptive mobilization (before laws pass)	15
7.2 Adaptation after laws (how CSOs operate within constraints)	17
7.3 What shapes success or failure (conditions and allies)	19
7.4 Risks and trade-offs (what can backfire)	20
8 What can we learn?	20
References	21

Abstract

This evidence review synthesizes global and sub-Saharan African research on the “closing” of civic space for advocacy oriented CSOs – including what tools governments use, why crackdowns spread, how restrictions reshape aid and politics, and how organizations resist or adapt. Governments deploy legal, financial, and administrative rules, plus informal coercion to narrow advocacy; these approaches diffuse across neighbors and often tighten when leaders feel politically vulnerable. Restrictions alter aid volumes, channels, and project portfolios and are linked to setbacks in participation and rights. Drawing on country cases (and one cross country comparative study), the review distills what has helped CSOs preempt restrictive bills (domestic coalitions; socioeconomic framing) and what has kept them operating once laws pass (reframing work, legal maneuvering and litigation, coalition building at home and abroad, and organizational resilience). Because effects and tactics are highly context dependent, the review emphasizes tailoring to the political legal setting and leveraging subnational and international entry points while managing trade-offs that can entrench the status quo.

Main points

- Legal, financial, and administrative barriers often target CSOs focused on advocacy, human rights, and political reform.
- Restrictions, especially barriers to advocacy, can reduce support for contentious programming and push aid toward less politically sensitive activities, although donor responses vary by type of restriction and donor.
- Limited funding reduces support for long-term democratic reforms and pressures CSOs to adopt less confrontational approaches.
- Broad alliances of CSOs, combining advocacy with service-focused groups, are essential for resisting restrictive laws.
- Socio-economic framing often resonates more with lawmakers than abstract rights-based arguments, especially when CSOs can show how restrictions will harm service delivery, employment, or local communities.
- International actors provide critical support through funding, advocacy, and mediation, though their role remains secondary to local campaigns.
- Cross-border collaborations enhance the resilience of domestic CSOs and strengthen advocacy through international networks.

1 Motivation and objectives

In recent decades, civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Global South have been key recipients of aid and support from Western donors, often viewed as vital agents of democratization and development. These organizations have been relied upon to promote democratic principles, human rights, and social justice. While CSOs have always operated within the boundaries of national laws, recent years have seen a wave of new legislation designed to reduce the space in which these organizations can function. These laws have imposed limits on the scope of their activities and restricted their ability to receive foreign funding. In addition to these formal restrictions, informal methods such as administrative obstacles and harassment have further diminished their ability to operate, particularly for those focused on advocacy and claims-making. These developments pose significant challenges for donors trying to maintain partnerships in countries with shrinking civic space.

This evidence review is prepared for national and international CSOs working in contexts where civic space is under threat, offering insights into how organizations have been navigating these constraints and suggesting ways to alleviate pressure on local partners. It is equally important for organizations that have not yet encountered significant restrictions but wish to act pre-emptively. Given the growing trend of shrinking civic spaces across regions, even CSOs currently operating without major constraints may face restrictions in the future. By understanding the challenges their peers are facing, these organizations can better prepare to support their local partners in anticipation of future crackdowns, enabling them to respond more swiftly and effectively when restrictions do arise.

In both cases, this review aims to inform organizations on how to navigate the complex dynamics of restricted civic spaces and to provide practical strategies that avoid exacerbating risks for their local partners, while helping them continue their important work under increasingly challenging conditions.

This evidence review focuses on sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The regional lens lets us: (1) synthesize a rich but fragmented set of country studies that are often read in isolation; (2) track how restrictions diffuse across borders so CSOs can anticipate the next moves; and (3) speak directly to contexts where many partner organizations operate. Bringing these threads together yields practical, region-specific guidance and highlights where CSOs' experiences remain under-documented.

We use civil society organization (CSO) as the umbrella term for organizations operating between state, market and family; non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are a subset within this sphere. In the evidence base and in practice, many "anti-NGO" laws disproportionately target advocacy-oriented organizations, while service-delivery NGOs are often less directly targeted. We use CSO unless a cited study explicitly analyzes NGOs or "anti-NGO" restrictions, in which case we retain the authors' term. We mention government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) only where sources do.

2 Methodology

This evidence review focuses on how domestic CSOs and local sections of international NGOs (INGOs) in sub-Saharan Africa have responded to shrinking civic space over roughly the past two decades, and what donors tend to do in such contexts. Because direct evidence on INGO responses in sub-Saharan Africa is limited, we also draw on cross-national longitudinal studies that track how aid patterns shift following restrictive NGO laws. These global studies do not cover every CSO response directly, but they provide useful signals about donor behavior in restrictive environments

We began with an extensive search in Web of Science using keywords related to CSOs and civic-space restrictions, then expanded the corpus through backward (reference lists) and forward (Google Scholar “cited by”) searches from the most relevant items. As the search progressed, we deliberately broadened beyond country case studies to include cross-national quantitative work on legal restrictions and aid flows to address gaps in SSA-specific evidence on INGOs

The final evidence base combines:

- Qualitative case studies from SSA on CSO strategies before and after laws (coalitions, reframing, litigation, sub-national engagement, operational adjustments).
- Large-N / cross-national analyses that examine how restrictive laws affect aid volumes, project types, and funding channels.

We prioritized studies that (a) analyze advocacy-oriented civic actors (recognizing service-delivery groups often face different incentives); (b) offer actionable insights on responses; and (c) are peer-reviewed or widely cited policy research.

This strategy surfaces robust patterns on aid responses and rich, context-specific lessons on CSO tactics, but cross-national work pays less attention to informal restrictions, and SSA case studies are uneven across countries. Evidence on INGO adaptations inside SSA remains thinner than evidence on domestic CSOs.

Note that the original search was not fully documented (no saved query strings or hit/selection counts), which limits replicability. We therefore: (i) state the databases and discovery steps used; (ii) explain why cross-national studies were added; and (iii) make the inclusion focus explicit.

3 Government’s tools and justification

Across sub-Saharan Africa, civic space is constrained through a mix of formal laws and informal practices. Monitoring by CIVICUS shows that only two countries in the region are rated *open* (Cabo Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe), while five are *narrowed*. Most others are *obstructed* (12) or *repressed* (26) and five are *closed* (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea and Eswatini) (CIVICUS Monitor 2024). This section summarizes how restrictions work in practice and why governments say they use them, with concrete examples from the region. The table below summarizes tools and tactics used by governments, what they look like in practice, how they affect CSOs, with examples from sub-Saharan Africa.

Tool/tactic	What officials claim (Rutzen 2015)	What it looks like in practice	Typical effect on CSOs (esp. advocacy)	Illustrative SSA examples
Barriers to entry and registration	"Transparency" "Order" "Coordination"	Mandatory registration; repeated re-registration; high founder thresholds; multi-agency approvals; broad discretion to deny	Keeps groups unregistered or "provisional"; drains time and resources	Angola (multi-body approval); Uganda/Zambia/Rwanda/Sierra Leone (frequent re-registration); Mozambique/Nigeria/Uganda/Zimbabwe (wide official discretion).
Restrictions on permissible activities	"Depoliticize NGOs" "Service over politics"	Bans/limits on advocacy, election observation, and rights work	Silences watchdog roles; pushes mission drift to service delivery	Equatorial Guinea/Angola/South Sudan (2016 NGO Act) limit advocacy; Ethiopia restricts who may do rights work.
Foreign-funding limits/vetting	"Sovereignty" "Anti-money laundering" "Counter-terrorism"	Caps on foreign income; prior approvals and vetting; labeling "foreign-influenced" actors	Cuts core funding for rights groups; chills international partnerships	Ethiopia (2009) : only "Ethiopian" charities ($\geq 90\%$ local funds) may work on rights/democracy
Heavy reporting & audits	"Accountability" "Aid effectiveness"	Frequent, detailed reports; intrusive data requests; ad-hoc audits	Administrative overload; sanction risks for minor lapses	Report-intensive regimes described across Ethiopia , Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Selective enforcement & legal ambiguity	"Rule of law"	Vague clauses used to suspend/raid critics; leniency for pro-government CSOs	Self-censorship; legal insecurity	Pattern noted broadly; case evidence from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, Uganda

Tool/tactic	What officials claim (Rutzen 2015)	What it looks like in practice	Typical effect on CSOs (esp. advocacy)	Illustrative SSA examples
Internet & information controls	"Public order" "Disinformation"	Internet shutdowns; content/trolling pressure; assembly restrictions enforced online/offline	Disrupts organizing, monitoring, and reporting	Sudan shutdowns post-2021 coup; Zimbabwe disruptions/raids of meetings under assembly laws
Harassment & intimidation (extra-legal)	"Security"	Threats, surveillance, arrests; break-ins targeting files/devices	Fear, staff turnover, data loss	DRC (Congo) and Mozambique office break-ins; arrests/raids in Zimbabwe
Co-optation (GONGOs)	"Partnership" "Local ownership"	Steering resources to government-organized NGOs; installing loyalists in CSO leadership	Crowds out independent voices; blurs independence	Ethiopia (EPRDF era) party-aligned leadership in CSOs; policy steering

3.1 Formal legal tools

Buyse (2018) identifies common types of restrictions at both the formal-legal and informal levels. At the formal level, these restrictions manifest through laws and regulations that hinder CSOs' creation and registration. Barriers at the moment of registration have been by themselves a big burden to the activities of CSOs in sub-Saharan Africa (ICNL 2011). Several countries in the region (Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe) have laws requiring mandatory registration, effectively prohibiting any informal associational activities, such as regular weekly meetings, without prior registration. Additionally, there are numerous examples of laws that complicate the registration process by involving multiple institutional bodies that must be consulted (Angola), requiring frequent re-registrations (Uganda, Zambia, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone), or demanding a large number of founding members (Angola, Sudan, and Mozambique). Moreover, in many cases, these laws are written to allow extensive discretion for government bodies when assessing registration applications (Mozambique, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe).

Another type of restrictions directly targets advocacy-related activities, especially in the field of human rights, completely prohibiting them (Equatorial Guinea, Angola, South Sudan) or limiting the category of actors that can engage in them (Ethiopia). The 2016 Non-Governmental Organization Act of South Sudan, for example, presents a list of “Non-Governmental Organizations activities” which includes only objectives related to the management of “natural or man-made disaster” and never mentions advocacy and policy influencing activities, with the exception of “formulating, implementing relief, reconstruction, rehabilitation and resettlement programs” (Republic of South Sudan 2016). Rugeiyamu and Nguyahambi's (2024) extensive investigation into Tanzanian NGOs reveals that the crackdown on advocacy NGOs is much stronger than that of charity NGOs, with the former having to face deregistration, intimidation, and legal challenges. Moreover, according to the same study, the nature of advocacy-related activities of an NGO directly determines how broad the civic space of that NGO is (Rugeiyamu and Nguyahambi 2024).

Governments may require CSOs to provide extensive information about their activities or subject them to stringent reporting requirements. Moreover, access to resources is often restricted for CSOs through legislative provisions or government policies. This includes limitations on foreign funding or requiring rigorous vetting processes for receiving financial support from international sources. A notable example of a country with this type of restrictions is Ethiopia. The 2009 proclamation established that Ethiopian Charities or Societies, i.e., the NGOs composed of Ethiopian citizen members and administrations whose budgets are at least 90% locally sourced, are the only type of organizations allowed to work on human rights issues, democracy, elections, and similar activities (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2009). In other words, actors that engage in advocacy activities cannot receive more than ten percent of their funding from foreign sources. This provision erased any potential for domestic organizations in Ethiopia to get significant funding from international partners.

3.2 Informal/coercive tactics

States frequently use informal means to restrict civic space, such as threats against advocacy CSOs or attacks on their members, as well as the arbitrary applications of laws that fall “between legal and extra-legal action” (Buyse 2018, 971). In Sudan, internet shutdowns have been employed strategically to obstruct communication during protests, particularly after the 2021 coup, limiting CSOs' ability to monitor

and report on government violence (CIVICUS Monitor 2022d). In Zimbabwe, authorities have disrupted CSO meetings and arrested participants under restrictive assembly laws, as seen in multiple raids on youth and women's rights meetings in 2022, highlighting efforts to prevent civic engagement ahead of elections (CIVICUS Monitor 2022b).

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, CSO offices have been targeted through break-ins, with computers and sensitive documents stolen in incidents where traces indicated possible security force involvement (CIVICUS Monitor 2022a). Similarly, in Mozambique, a human rights lawyer faced a break-in at his office, following threats tied to his advocacy work. These break-ins and the selective targeting of property and information send an implicit message, fostering an atmosphere of fear that undermines the work of CSOs and human rights defenders across these contexts (CIVICUS Monitor 2022c).

Another common non-legal tactic employed by various governments consists in the co-optation and manipulation of CSO activities to align them with state agendas, thereby compromising their independence and autonomy. In Ethiopia, co-optation tactics have seen CSOs increasingly aligned with government agendas, as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) filled leadership roles in CSOs with party affiliates and directed resources for political ends. This control blurred CSO independence, as they were often compelled to comply with state demands under the threat of repression (Pellerin 2023).

3.3 Official justifications vs. observed effects

Governments provide various justifications for such restrictions, which Rutzen finds to be mostly about "protecting state sovereignty", "promoting transparency and accountability", "enhancing aid effectiveness and coordination" and "pursuing national-security, counterterrorism, and anti-money laundering objectives" (Rutzen 2015, 31). In practice, enforcement is selective. Critics are targeted while pro-government groups are tolerated or co-opted. In some cases, such as Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, governments have justified restrictions on foreign funding by invoking the need to protect the state from Western interference. Internationally funded NGOs were portrayed as non-democratic and illegitimate, echoing the rhetoric of NGO critics to legitimize these measures. (Dupuy, Ron and Prakash 2016; Dugger 2008).

The validity of such justification has been consistently questioned, since in many cases governments implement restricting laws to target specific organizations that challenge them while sparing or even taking control of others that bring them advantages. What is clear, however, is that the implementation of restrictive laws has tangible effects on the lives of advocacy organizations, from the amount of funding they receive, to the types of activities that get financed, and the forms of action that they are able to undertake.

The next two sections will summarize the findings of the limited number of studies that have globally analyzed the causes of and the trends in the diffusion of restrictive laws, as well as their consequences on international aid management. Following that, we will explore studies that investigate how CSOs in the sub-Saharan region have responded to the threat and the enactment of new restricting laws.

4 What triggers crackdowns: causes and diffusion

Studies point to a cluster of conditions under which governments are more likely to restrict advocacy-oriented CSOs, especially when they feel politically vulnerable or see a “model” to copy in the region. Understanding these triggers helps organizations anticipate risk and plan pre-emptive responses. Evidence is stronger on some points than others, and most of the cross-national evidence is observational. Findings should therefore be interpreted with caution.

4.1 Domestic triggers: electoral risk, protest and contentious projects

A first strand of research links crackdowns to moments when CSOs raise the political costs of rule by informing voters, monitoring elections, mobilizing protest, or contesting high-stakes development projects.

Chaudhry (2016) finds that states may perceive NGOs as threats for several reasons. First, NGOs can influence electoral politics by educating voters and monitoring elections, thereby disrupting government efforts to manipulate outcomes. Second, they can support domestic mobilization by organizing or amplifying protests around social and political issues, creating instability that governments want to control. Third, they can challenge state or elite economic interests by opposing development projects that may harm communities or the environment, potentially deterring international investment.

However, international vulnerability also makes states cautious. Highly visible crackdowns on international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) can trigger diplomatic criticism and may risk losses in foreign aid. Governments may therefore prefer legal and administrative measures over outright repression, especially when they want to constrain advocacy-oriented organizations while limiting international backlash.

In short, where electoral stakes or visible contention rise, restrictions tend to be channeled through law and procedure rather than brute force, particularly when governments are attentive to external audiences.

4.2 Foreign aid inflows and political survival

A second strand emphasizes aid politics. Foreign aid creates a strategic trade-off for governments. On the one hand, aid-dependent governments have incentives to avoid highly visible repression because it can damage their international reputation and potentially trigger donor sanctions. On the other hand, when foreign aid is channelled through advocacy-oriented NGOs, governments may perceive it as strengthening actors that can monitor elections, expose abuses, mobilize citizens, or support opposition claims.

Dupuy, Ron and Prakash (2016) therefore argue that governments may restrict foreign-funded NGOs when they see them as a threat to political survival, especially after competitive elections. In their cross-national event-history analysis of 153 low- and middle-income countries from 1993 to 2012, higher foreign-aid inflows are associated with a greater risk of adopting restrictive NGO laws. A log-unit increase in foreign aid is associated with a 6.7% increase in the probability of adopting restrictive NGO laws, and the interaction between foreign aid and competitive elections increases the probability of adoption by around 11%. Because the analysis is observational, this should be treated as low-certainty evidence for causal inference. The point is not that governments ignore economic or reputational costs, but that they may accept those costs when foreign-funded civil society is seen as a threat to incumbency.

This political-survival logic is also emphasized by Christensen and Weinstein (2013). Using original data from nearly 100 countries and case evidence from East Africa and the former Soviet Union, they argue that governments are more likely to restrict foreign support to civil society when they feel vulnerable to domestic challenges, although fear of international retaliation may limit how far they go. This complements Dupuy, Ron and Prakash's argument: foreign-funded NGOs are not targeted simply because they receive external resources, but because those resources may strengthen groups that monitor government, promote rights, support democratic accountability, or otherwise raise the political cost of rule.

4.3 Neighborhood effects: learning from examples

A separate strand of research shifts attention from domestic vulnerability to regional diffusion. Glasius, Schalk and De Lange (2020) ask whether governments learn to restrict NGOs by observing other states in their regional environment. Their theory distinguishes between two possible mechanisms: "learning from threats", where governments respond to regional protest or instability, and "learning from examples", where governments observe that other states have adopted restrictive NGO laws and then copy the decision or the legal form.

Using data on NGO restrictions in 96 countries from 1992 to 2016, Glasius, Schalk and De Lange find limited evidence that regional mass mobilization or unrest drives new restrictions. By contrast, they find stronger evidence that prior adoption of NGO restrictions in a country's regional environment is associated with subsequent adoption. They also find that governments are more likely to adopt the same types of restrictions previously adopted by nearby or regionally proximate states. The authors interpret this as "learning from examples": governments observe that other states can restrict NGOs with limited reputational costs and then copy both the decision to restrict and the legal form of restriction.

Their statistical analysis is supported by close textual comparison of laws in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, where similar legal provisions appear to travel across jurisdictions. This strengthens the diffusion interpretation. However, the evidence should still be presented cautiously. The study provides evidence consistent with a causal diffusion mechanism, but it does not fully rule out broader regional trends such as democratic backsliding, changing attitudes toward civil liberties, or other common shocks.

Interestingly, the same study finds that stronger NGO growth is negatively associated with the expected number of restrictions adopted in some models. This should not be interpreted as evidence that NGO growth itself protects civic space. Rather, it suggests that the spread of restrictions cannot be explained simply as a delayed reaction to the expansion of civil society. The more cautious conclusion is that governments appear to learn from regional examples of restriction, while domestic and regional political conditions still shape how and when that learning is translated into law.

Overall, the evidence points to a pattern of illiberal norm diffusion: foreign-funding caps, registration hurdles and restrictions on "permissible activities" tend to spread across neighboring or regionally proximate states. For CSOs, this means that monitoring legal developments in nearby countries can help anticipate possible future restrictions at home.

5 The impact of restrictions on international aid

Recent studies have examined the effects of the global crackdown on CSOs across multiple dimensions. A significant focus of this research has been the impact of restrictive laws on the foreign aid that flows to CSOs in the countries where such restrictions are enacted. At the global level, these studies analyze variations in the total flow of aid, the types of projects receiving funding, and other aspects of aid management. Quantitative studies that include data from countries from every continent provide valuable insights into how foreign aid shifts under these laws.

5.1 Changes in total aid allocations

A comprehensive study by Dupuy and Prakash (2017) find that the adoption of restrictive NGO laws leads to a significant reduction in bilateral aid. On average, countries that enact restrictive NGO finance laws experience a 32% decline in bilateral aid inflows in the following years. This decline persists as long as the restrictive laws remain in effect. The study covers a panel of 134 countries from 1993 to 2012 and controls for factors such as changes in democracy levels, trade levels, population, income, armed conflict and extreme weather events, as well as the influence of U.S. military aid and alignment with U.S. foreign policy interests.

Interestingly, the study finds that while bilateral aid drops significantly in response to these laws, multilateral aid flows are not similarly affected. The aforementioned study by Christensen and Weinstein (2013) also report a similar pattern. According to Heiss and Chaudhry (2025), differences in donor responses to NGO restrictions stem from how much they rely on local NGOs, with multilateral donors being largely unaffected since they to a greater extent fund governments directly, while bilateral donors – especially those that depend more on civil society partners – are more likely to reduce aid in response to NGO crackdowns.

Chaudhry and Heiss (2023) also find that restrictive NGO laws have a negative impact on the total flow of foreign aid. Specifically, the adoption of barriers to advocacy – such as limits on NGOs' political activities – leads to a significant reduction in aid, with a 43% decline in the following year. In contrast, barriers to entry, like difficult registration requirements, and barriers to funding, such as restrictions on receiving foreign donations, do not significantly reduce overall aid flows. When all types of legal barriers are considered together, the total effect on aid is negative but not statistically significant.¹

5.2 Changes in the nature of funded projects

Chaudhry and Heiss (2023) find that barriers to advocacy have a significantly negative impact on the funding of contentious activities: they are associated with an 80% lower ratio of contentious to non-contentious aid. Donors respond by reducing their funding for contentious projects like governance and human rights when advocacy-based programming is restricted. In contrast, barriers to entry and barriers to funding are associated with increases in contentious programming (by 9% and 13%, respectively), likely reflecting donor attempts to counteract these less targeted restrictions. In short, donors scale back their

¹ This analysis controls for variables such as the level of democracy, GDP per capita, trade levels, political corruption, government capacity, the presence of internal conflict and natural disasters.

programming in response to advocacy bans, but increase contentious aid in reaction to entry and funding restrictions.

Right, Springman, and Wibbels (2022), analyzing data from 2005 to 2019, show that anti-NGO laws result in a large reduction in advocacy aid, especially from advocacy-oriented donors. They find that they reduce their advocacy funding by 74% in the years following the passage of restrictive laws. Non-advocacy-oriented donors, however, show smaller and more delayed reductions in advocacy aid. Additionally, advocacy-oriented donors do not reduce their development aid, indicating that their response to anti-NGO laws is specifically targeted at advocacy-related projects (Right, Springman and Wibbels 2022).

5.3 Changes in aid channels: domestic vs foreign NGOs

Chaudhry and Heiss (2023) also examine how restrictive NGO laws affect the channels through which aid is delivered. They find that adding a new legal barrier beyond a country's average level is associated with a 15% increase in the ratio of aid channeled through domestic NGOs vs. foreign NGOs in the following year. This effect is primarily driven by barriers to funding: countries imposing an additional funding restriction experience a 34% increase in aid flowing to domestic NGOs, while the proportion of aid directed to foreign NGOs decreases by 29%. However, when countries introduce entry barriers, the opposite effect is observed: the ratio of aid to foreign vs. domestic NGOs increases by 36%, as donors shift funding toward foreign organizations that can more easily navigate these restrictions.

It is worth noting that while, following the imposition of additional legal barriers to funding, aid is redirected from foreign NGOs to domestic NGOs, the shift is uneven. The increase in funding to domestic NGOs is much smaller compared to the significant drop in funding for foreign NGOs (Chaudhry and Heiss 2023).

6 The impact of restrictions on the socio-political context

Beyond their effects on international aid, restrictions on CSOs have significant consequences for the broader socio-political environment in the countries where these laws are enacted. These restrictions not only reshape the operational capacity of CSOs but also influence political engagement, governance, and civic participation.

Decrease in voter turnout: Recent work explores how restrictions affect political participation beyond organizational activity. Dupuy and Prakash (2022) indicate that restrictive NGO foreign funding laws in Africa are associated with lower self-reported voter turnout. Their findings suggest that the turnout is reduced through two key mechanisms:

- Signaling democratic recession: the laws send a message to citizens that democracy is in decline, leading citizens to discount the value of voting.
- Undermining social capital (limited support): by restricting NGOs' ability to receive foreign funding, the laws weaken NGOs' capacity to build networks and trust within communities that encourage collective action. However, the evidence for this pathway is weaker than for the signaling mechanism.

Impact on individual philanthropy: research has also shown that restrictions affect individual donors' activity, even though they are not directly targeted by the laws themselves. The main finding is that donors

with higher trust in political and charitable institutions are more likely to continue supporting INGOs that face legal crackdowns from host governments. These high-trust donors remain willing to donate to contentious causes, such as human rights advocacy, despite the restrictions. In contrast, lower-trust donors tend to avoid organizations facing repression, instead supporting NGOs that maintain amicable relationships with governments and focus on less controversial issues like emergency response or refugee relief (Chaudhry, Dotson and Heiss 2021).

Impact on socio-economic outcomes: This review does not attempt to catalogue every socio-economic consequence of NGO restrictions; only a few well-cited findings are highlighted here:

- One comparative study examines the consequences of shrinking civic space on poverty, hunger, and development in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe (Hossain and Oosterom 2021). Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2018, including key informant interviews and participatory workshop with NGO staff, activists, journalists and government and business representatives, the authors explored how restrictions affected civil society's capacity to influence policy and deliver services. The findings indicate that while some countries, such as Ethiopia, have achieved economic growth and poverty reduction despite restrictions on civil society, these restrictions tend to exclude marginalized groups. Civic actors that would typically advocate for the needs of the rural poor, indigenous people, and other disadvantaged populations are increasingly shut out from policy discussions, leading to less inclusive development and deeper inequality. Reflecting on the Ethiopian case after the 2009 anti-NGO law, Nega and Milofsky (2011) argue that government's restrictions can severely undermine local development by silencing NGOs working on rights and governance issues. Local organizations had played a key role in fostering community entrepreneurship, building trust, and supporting partnerships with government, but the law's limits on foreign-funded NGOs disrupted these efforts, curbing innovation, participation, and the social networks essential for sustainable development.
- Closing civic space can also hinder civil society's ability to hold governments accountable for hunger and poverty-related issues. In Zimbabwe, restrictions on civil society limit their influence in shaping poverty alleviation policies and weaken their ability to deliver critical services to those most in need. This trend increases the risk that progress toward reducing poverty and hunger will stagnate, particularly for the most marginalized groups (Hossain and Oosterom 2021).
- Moreover, the literature has also investigated the relationship between civic space and human rights. Chaudhry and Heiss (2022) find that *de jure* anti-NGO laws (formal legal restrictions) alone offer limited predictive power for future human rights abuses. However, *de facto* NGO repression (the actual implementation of these laws and broader harassment) is a strong predictor of future declines in human rights protection: as governments implement repressive measures targeting NGOs, particularly through legal and extra-legal means, the probability of increased political terror and deteriorating civil liberties rises. NGO repression is therefore a useful early-warning indicator of broader repressive actions by states, indicating future violations of both physical integrity rights (e.g., freedom from torture and unlawful detention) and civil liberties (e.g., freedom of speech and association).

7 How African CSOs respond to the crackdown

This section reviews how CSOs have responded and adapted to these restrictions. Research documents the strategies CSOs have employed, both successfully and unsuccessfully, to navigate increasingly restrictive environments.

However, the nature of the evidence here is notably different from that presented in previous sections. Most of the available research is qualitative, comprising case studies that offer in-depth insight into the experiences of local actors and CSO members, detailing their strategies and tactics. Unlike the broader, quantitative studies on aid or political consequences, these case studies rarely attempt to identify overarching trends or measure the success of different strategies. The qualitative orientation of this research, combined with a limited number of case-studies, diverse research designs, and varied outcomes, further complicates efforts to find clear patterns in how CSOs respond to closed civic spaces. To the author's knowledge, only one cross-country comparative study (Fransen et al., 2021) investigates organizational responses across multiple contexts. While this study offers more generalizable findings, it focuses primarily on the activities of Western-headquartered CSOs operating in the Global South and Eastern Europe, largely overlooking the experiences of local organizations rooted in those countries.²

Because the evidence is context-specific, the strategies below should be treated as options to test, not as a universal playbook. We first look at pre-emptive mobilization (before laws pass), then at adaptation once laws are in force.

7.1 Pre-emptive mobilization (before laws pass)

Several studies examine how CSOs mobilize to prevent restrictive laws. These studies aim to 1) understand which strategies have been effective in blocking or moderating restrictive legislation and which approaches have been less successful; 2) identify structural factors in the social and political context that facilitate or hinder those efforts and shape the strategies that CSOs can undertake.

Overall, the evidence on pre-emptive mobilization remains limited. This subsection synthesizes findings from comparative and case-based studies, highlighting key strategies and tactics CSOs use to resist restrictive legislation.

Baldus et al. (2019) identify elements commonly present in successful campaigns (in Kenya and Zambia, among other countries):

1. **Domestic campaigns matter:** A strong domestic campaign is crucial for resisting restrictive NGO laws. Successful resistance often involves broad alliances that extend beyond human rights and advocacy organizations to include social service NGOs, trade unions, and media.
2. **Form of resistance:** The resistance takes the form of multiple coordinated efforts led by organized groups, rather than mass protests. These campaigns are usually driven by coordinated CSOs, highlighting the necessity of solidarity and collaboration among various stakeholders.

² While the study does include some local NGOs, this occurs only in the second sample, which focuses on actors from organizations in Bangladesh and Zambia. In contrast, the first sample of organizations working across various continents, primarily focuses on Western NGOs and their subsidiaries in the global South. Moreover, even in the second sample, local NGOs are considered only if they have or have had partnerships with West-European NGOs (Fransen et al. 2021).

3. **Strategies for resistance:** The strategies employed in these campaigns combine general advocacy with targeted lobbying efforts. The emphasis is on highlighting the tangible negative consequences of the proposed laws, rather than relying solely on abstract human rights arguments.
4. **Role of external actors:** Although external actors provide some support, their role tends to be more limited compared to domestic efforts. International pressure may be present, but the primary driving force behind successful resistance remains the domestic coalition.
5. **Counter-narratives:** Successful campaigns typically deploy counter-narratives that focus on the socioeconomic impacts of the proposed legal restrictions. This approach resonates more effectively with lawmakers, especially when framed in terms of the potential negative effects on the public.
6. **Political context:** The political environment plays a significant role in the success of mobilization efforts. Successful campaigns often occur in contexts where civil society can leverage some degree of political space and access, allowing for lobbying and judicial appeals.

Berger-Kern et al. (2021), comparing Kenya (2013) and Kyrgyzstan (2013-2016), likewise stress favorable political conditions, effective framing, and sustained engagement. They report strong local-international coordination in Kyrgyzstan but not in Kenya. Cheeseman and Dodsworth (2023) caution, however, that “behind-the-scenes” international support in Kenya may be undercounted. The authors note that successful campaigns are domestically based and often pre-emptive, with Kenyan CSOs organizing early – including through regional consultations – to build a constituency that made it politically costly for MPs to support restrictive measures. They also argue that framing the arguments in terms of the impact on local service delivery, rather than focusing solely on democratic values, resonated more with members of Parliament. Engaging both informal political dynamics and formal parliamentary procedures, as seen in Kenya, was key to the success of the campaign (Berger-Kern et al. 2021).

Anecdotal evidence aligns with these patterns. Ibezim-Ohaeri (2017) offers a more focused, qualitative account of successful pre-emptive mobilization against restrictive NGO laws in Nigeria, where civil society actors adapted to the shrinking civic space by leveraging digital activism, cross-border coordination, and research advocacy. Collaborations between NGOs and influential bloggers played a key role in mobilizing public opposition, particularly through social media campaigns that rapidly spread awareness and created significant public pressure. For example, such collaborations helped block the 2016 Bill Prohibiting Frivolous Petitions, also known as the “anti-Social Media Bill”, which would have required citizens to swear affidavits in court before posting any statement about the government or its officials on social media. Constant vigilance over policy proposals also proved crucial, as NGOs carefully monitored and analyzed legislative drafts to detect harmful provisions, using public hearings to challenge and defeat oppressive bills. Additionally, Nigerian NGOs built partnerships with international organizations, benefiting from technical assistance and expertise that bolstered their advocacy efforts. For example, the support that came from the European Center for Non-Profit Law (ECNL) to the Nigerian NGO Space for Change made it possible for the organization to bolster its competence in legal research and advocacy and to “develop skills, relationships and synergies needed to address issues around resisting the closing spaces more effectively” (Ibezim-Ohaeri 2017, 136).

Some efforts fail despite early organizing; Section 7.3 explains how political context and international leverage can determine outcomes.

7.2 Adaptation after laws (how CSOs operate within constraints)

The challenges CSOs face in restrictive environments vary across contexts, but certain adaptive strategies have emerged as common patterns. Fransen et al. (2021) is the only cross-country comparative study that examines organizational responses across multiple countries, highlighting patterns of how NGOs adapt their operations under repression and regulatory constraints. These patterns, which include disbanding, shifting focus, tempered advocacy, and changes in language and collaborations, align closely with strategies seen in individual case studies. This section synthesizes these findings, categorizing strategies and illustrating them with examples from Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe. Below, these strategies are grouped into four practical pathways.

7.2.1 Reframe and relocate the work

One prominent strategy is for NGOs to shift their focus from contentious advocacy to less politically sensitive activities such as service delivery or development work. In Ethiopia, for example, after the 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) restricted foreign funding for human rights and advocacy-focused NGOs, many rights-based organizations either closed or reoriented their activities toward health, education, or other non-advocacy fields (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015). Similarly, in Zambia, political advocacy NGOs largely disappeared or moved underground, opting instead to focus on needs-based service delivery (Fransen et al. 2019).

NGOs that continue advocacy often adopt less confrontational approaches, focusing on local rather than central government and addressing specific issues rather than broader political reforms. This tempered advocacy involves using more neutral and less political language to reduce the risk of backlash. For instance, in Zambia, CSOs shifted their advocacy efforts to provincial or municipal governments, which were more receptive to their messages and less aligned with national elites (Fransen et al. 2019). Similarly, in Ethiopia, advocacy organizations began reframing their messages away from human rights and democracy, instead adopting development-oriented language: terms like "human rights" were replaced with less provocative phrases such as "community welfare" or "capacity building" to reduce confrontation with authorities' narratives (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015).

In Tanzania, CSOs adopted subtle advocacy strategies by integrating socioeconomic issues like education into their work while framing their demands in ways that could spill over into institutional strengthening without overtly challenging the government (Rugeiyamu and Nguyahambi 2024).

7.2.2 Work the system

Where feasible, NGOs have employed legal strategies to navigate restrictive environments. In Uganda, the Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) initially registered under alternative legal frameworks, such as the Companies Act, to bypass the scrutiny of the NGO Registration Act, although this loophole was later closed by the 2016 NGO Act (Jjuuko and Du Toit 2017). In Zambia, CSOs adopted even more creative approaches by registering as businesses or consultants to circumvent restrictions. For example, some organizations redefined themselves as social entrepreneurs, as this legal category under Zambian law provided greater administrative flexibility compared to the stringent requirements of the 2009 NGO Act (Fransen et al. 2021). Similarly, in other countries, domestic subsidiaries of international NGOs, particularly those focused on human rights and labor, registered as independent consultants and

signed commercial agreements with their foreign partners (*ibid*). This strategy allowed organizations to avoid having their funding frozen or monitored while continuing their advocacy work discreetly.

Litigation has also been a powerful tool. Tanzanian CSOs filed cases at the East African Court of Justice and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights to contest restrictive laws. They also used regional courts to challenge the Political Parties Act, setting precedents for civil society engagement (Rugeiyamu and Nguyahambi 2024).

7.2.3 Broaden the tent

Collaboration with other organizations is another critical adaptation strategy. By forming coalitions, NGOs can amplify their voices and share resources while also shielding themselves from individual targeting. In Uganda, the Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) joined coalitions such as the Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Constitutional Law to resist repressive laws like the Anti-Homosexuality Bill. This collective action delayed the passage of the bill and contributed to its eventual nullification in 2014 (Jjuuko and Du Toit 2017).

Similarly, in Tanzania, organizations like the Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC) and the Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC) collaborated to challenge restrictive laws through litigation and collective advocacy, bringing petitions to national, regional, and international courts (Rugeiyamu and Nguyahambi 2024).

In many cases, NGOs rely on international networks to counter restrictive environments. Ethiopian NGOs, for example, mobilized transnational allies and international media to raise awareness and resist the CSP. These alliances provided critical support by amplifying their voices globally, helping them bypass local restrictions (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015). (See Section 7.3 for when international ties can become liabilities under repression).

7.2.4 Protect the house

Some NGOs have turned to grassroots structures to continue their work discreetly. In Ethiopia, organizations partnered with traditional associations like funerary groups to advocate for rights-related issues without falling under government scrutiny (Pellerin 2023). Similarly, Tanzanian CSOs engaged in citizen capacity-building, using social media and community training to inform citizens about civic space and encourage participation in local planning (Rugeiyamu and Nguyahambi 2024).

While grassroots and community-based approaches are often effective for navigating restrictive environments, sometimes political and social factors render them not feasible. Notably, Ethiopian NGOs faced unique challenges that prevented them from leveraging local support. Several factors contributed to this limitation. First, the government's crackdown signaled to the public that supporting rights-based organizations was risky, leading to fears of association with opposition politics (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015). Second, many Ethiopian NGOs had weak ties to the communities they served, as their hierarchical structures treated beneficiaries more as recipients than as active participants, leaving them without a broad constituency to mobilize in times of crisis (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015). Additionally, the Ethiopian public showed little inclination to donate to NGOs, perceiving their role primarily as distributors of foreign funds rather than community-based entities. This view was reinforced by extreme poverty levels, with

most Ethiopians unable to contribute financially, and a cultural preference for giving through traditional, religious charities rather than formal NGOs (Asabu and Pandey 2022).

To survive in hostile environments, NGOs have implemented measures to protect staff and maintain morale. In Uganda, HRAPF provided counseling and psychosocial support to employees following attacks, while also enhancing office security to ensure a safer working environment (Jjuuko and Du Toit 2017).

Finally, in some contexts, NGOs have leveraged the relative freedom of online platforms to spread awareness and mobilize support. Zambian CSOs, for example, used social media to engage with their audiences and maintain outreach, as these platforms remained less controlled by the government compared to traditional forms of communication (Fransen et al. 2019).

7.3 What shapes success or failure (conditions and allies)

CSOs' ability to block restrictive laws depends heavily on structural features of the political context, especially political openness, legislative checks on the executive, and international connections.

A comparative study by Cheeseman and Dodsworth (2023) compares successful cases of resistance against restrictive NGO laws, including Kenya, and unsuccessful cases, such as Uganda. The findings reveal that domestic CSOs in Kenya were more successful in mobilizing against government restrictions due to greater political openness and stronger legislative constraints on the executive, which made coordination easier.

In contrast, Ugandan CSOs faced significant challenges in mobilizing against the NGO Act due to a less democratic environment and a dominant ruling party that stifled dissent. The lack of a coordinated and proactive response limited their effectiveness, resulting in the passage of the restrictive law. Overall, effective campaigns engage pragmatically with both formal legislative processes and informal political rules, allowing civil society to navigate the complexities of their political environments.

Ethiopia (2009) is a significant example where pre-emptive mobilization and negotiations by NGOs did not shift core provisions due to structural and contextual factors. A crucial factor that hindered these efforts was Ethiopia's strategic importance on the international stage. As a key ally in regional stability and counterterrorism efforts, particularly for Western governments like the U.S. and the EU, Ethiopia was able to leverage its position to resist international pressure. The government knew that donors, despite their concerns over the CSP, were unlikely to reduce or cut foreign aid, given their vested interests in maintaining cooperation with the country. This diminished the effectiveness of external advocacy and negotiations aimed at altering the draft law (Birru and Wolff 2018). Moreover, the government asserted sovereignty and ownership over domestic policy, framing the law as national security and accountability to citizens rather than to foreign donors. This narrative made it difficult for international actors to contest the law without appearing to infringe on Ethiopia's sovereignty, further weakening the ability of NGOs to rally effective opposition. Only minimal adjustments were allowed, leaving the core advocacy restrictions intact.

While international alliances can strengthen domestic campaigns, repression often forces these ties into the shadows. In Zambia and Ethiopia, organizations reported concealing foreign partners to avoid reprisals, which made collaboration quieter and more opaque, and complicated financial and information

management. This fragility means external support helps most when it bolsters domestic coalitions while minimizing visibility risks for local partners (Fransen et al. 2019; Pellerin 2023).

7.4 Risks and trade-offs (what can backfire)

In South Sudan, adopting cautious and non-political approaches was key to maintaining access and legitimacy. CSOs avoided contentious political topics and emphasized humanitarian work, believing their contributions to economic and social development gave them subtle influence over the government. However, this approach also reinforced the political status quo and limited broader reform efforts (Robinson 2023). In short, keeping a low profile can preserve operating space but often leads to non-confrontational engagement that sustains the status quo by avoiding systemic challenges (Robinson 2023).

The Zimbabwean case reflects broader trends while showcasing unique dynamics. INGOs in Zimbabwe have maintained their presence by collaborating with the government on service-oriented projects like education, healthcare, and food security, avoiding politically sensitive advocacy (Ntini and Sooryamoorthy 2021). While this compliance enables humanitarian work, it limits INGOs' ability to challenge authoritarian practices.

Domestic CSOs, once active in contesting Robert Mugabe's regime, have shifted under Emmerson Mnangagwa's leadership toward service provision and self-censorship, becoming less confrontational in response to the repressive environment (Dendere and Taodzera 2023). Activists justify this shift as a focus on rebuilding the country rather than opposing the government, aligning with the post-coup narrative.

Taken together, these adaptations keep doors open but can entrench existing power relations unless paired with longer-term coalition-building and legal strategies.

8 What can we learn?

The global crackdown on advocacy-oriented CSOs highlights the need for careful, context-sensitive approaches to navigating restrictive environments. This section synthesizes the review's findings, focusing on the nature of restrictions, the factors driving them, their consequences, and the strategies CSOs employ to resist or adapt. The takeaways below should be taken as options to consider – there is not a one-size-fits-all recipe.

Nature and diffusion of restrictions. The evidence demonstrates how governments impose legal, financial, and administrative barriers to suppress advocacy activities. These restrictions often travel regionally, with authoritarian and hybrid regimes learning from one another. Thus cross-border monitoring helps anticipate copy-cat rules and clause designs.

Impact on aid and civic space: Restrictive laws reshape international aid. Advocacy-oriented CSOs, particularly those working on sensitive issues, often see funding reduced or re-channeled toward service-oriented projects perceived as less politically. This reflects donor caution but risks weakening grassroots advocacy and long-term reform. Restrictions also disproportionately affect organizations rooted in marginalized or underserved communities, limiting their capacity to address socio-political inequalities and amplifying existing disparities. Maintaining strong links with grassroots organizations and their social base is essential for CSOs to remain connected to the communities they serve and to mobilize collective

action. These connections not only enhance the legitimacy of advocacy efforts but also foster resilience by ensuring that civil society remains embedded in local contexts, even under pressure.

Lessons on resistance and adaptation: Examples from sub-Saharan Africa show that effective resistance to restrictive laws relies on coordinated domestic campaigns supported by diverse alliances that go beyond advocacy CSOs to include service organizations, trade unions, and grassroots actors. These coalitions are most successful when they build on strong social bases and frame their arguments around tangible socio-economic consequences of restrictive laws. By focusing on how these laws harm public services, employment, or access to essential resources, CSOs can connect their advocacy to broader public concerns, making their case more compelling to lawmakers and the public. The role of grassroots connections is particularly significant, as these links amplify the voices of those directly impacted by restrictive measures, creating pressure from the ground up.

Adaptation strategies also highlight the resilience of CSOs, as they adjust to operate within or around restrictive environments. This includes shifting focus to less contentious issues, reframing advocacy in non-political terms, or leveraging international partnerships for support and visibility. However, these adaptations often involve trade-offs. For example, depoliticizing advocacy efforts or prioritizing service delivery can dilute the transformative potential of CSOs, leaving structural issues unaddressed. The reliance on grassroots networks is vital here, as these connections allow CSOs to sustain their legitimacy and maintain relevance, even when external funding or international visibility is constrained. Grassroots ties also serve as a critical resource for navigating restrictive environments, enabling CSOs to adapt their approaches while remaining rooted in local realities.

Why context matters (multi-level): Success in resisting or adapting depends heavily on political context. Open or semi-democratic systems provide opportunities for lobbying, coalition-building, public campaigns and legal mobilization, while authoritarian regimes often necessitate covert strategies and greater reliance on international advocacy. Careful legal analysis can also create operating space by exploiting law-on-the-books gaps, or by mobilizing courts to check executive overreach. Although restrictive laws often resemble each other across countries, responses only work when tailored to the specific political-legal environment.

Context also operates beyond the nation-state. At the international level, the relationships between governments and foreign states or donors can significantly shape how restrictive laws are enacted and enforced (e.g., Ethiopia's strategic alliances). Conversely, in some cases, international pressure or alignment with global norms has influenced governments to moderate or justify their restrictive policies. At the local level, the behavior of sub-national actors, such as regional or municipal authorities, often diverges from the national government. Local governments can, at times, be more receptive to collaboration with CSOs, especially when such partnerships address pressing community needs. This willingness to cooperate provides CSOs with an entry point to continue their work and maintain relevance, even in otherwise restrictive environments.

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