



Reduction of Civic Spaces in Latin America and the Caribbean: The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Risk Accelerator

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The COVID-19 crisis has rocked the international community with its speed and scope since its origin, although it has not entailed a change but rather an acceleration of preexisting global geopolitical trends, one of which is the reduction of civic spaces. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the CSOs that work on conflict prevention, resilience, peacebuilding, and human rights were faced with a triple challenge in matters of civic spaces. Two of those challenges are tied to external mechanisms, decisions, and situations that influence their behavior, and a third aspect refers to their own inherent operational limitations. When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Latin America and the Caribbean, the region was faced with its own transition process, articulated by the emergence of a new international order, as well as changes to the regional political and economic map. The current situation set the conditions so that the governing elites could expand their panoply of tools to confront the pandemic, but at the same time these tools run the risk of being instrumentalized to advance agendas that predate the pandemic, contributing to the corrosion and contraction of regional civic space. The first external challenge faced by civil society organizations constitutes the tools of social control, repressive mechanisms, the expansion of executive powers, censorship, and excessive state actions that in turn have become recurring responses to COVID-19. According to the CIVICUS Civic Space Tracking Monitor (2020), data for Latin America and the Caribbean show that civic space has dropped in

22 of 32 countries, being obstructed and closed in eight of them.¹ In demographic terms, this means that more than half the population lives in countries with blocked (32%) or repressive (25%) civic space. The remaining 45 percent live in countries where civic space has been reduced in recent years.

The most obvious cases have been in Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela. Disregard for the risks posed by the coronavirus became the norm, and this was later replaced with an insufficient state response and/or an inappropriate political utilization of the pandemic to reinforce repressive state structures for purposes that exceeded the very needs of the pandemic response and that instead responded to the political interests of the government leadership.²

The second challenge faced by regional civil societies in continuing to advance the creation and consolidation of spaces is internal in nature. The promotion of their own agendas, independent of those imposed by the governments or by intergovernmental organizations at the regional level, are often obstructed by their own operational limitations. These operational limitations come not only from the establishment of agendas but also in relation to program execution, their sustainability over the medium and long term, adaptation to external changes, the availability of staff committed to tracking and reporting needs of donors, and the absence of collaboration and coordination between organizations



that work on the same topics, which at times is due to lack of knowledge about the work of other organizations and on other occasions is due to competition for scarce resources. This last point reinforces the vulnerable position of the CSOs in establishing agendas for discussion and permitting their successful development and execution.

Currently, and as has been previously observed, the conditions for effective citizen participation have not been facilitated at the national level. As we have pointed out, civic space tends to be repressed or obstructed in many countries in the region through legislation that prohibits and represses CSOs, violating the rights of citizens to organize, demonstrate, and mobilize. Faced with the imminent risk of conflict, violence, and instability, the CSOs play a key role in building resilience, strengthening dialogue mechanisms, and formulating policy recommendations to counteract these risks and contribute to a more stable and peaceful situation, as well as a more inclusive future.

One of the clearest examples of the current situation is the deepening of the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, which is the largest refugee crisis in Latin American history. At the time this brief was written, 5,093,987 Venezuelans had abandoned their homeland.³ During the last decade, civic space in Venezuela has been repressed. There, members of civil society who criticize the government run the risk of being surveilled, harassed, intimidated, incarcerated, wounded, or killed as a result of actions by state and/or nonstate actors, including illegal criminal organizations, drug cartels, and progovernment armed groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has fortified this repressive action by instrumentalizing the health crisis as a tool to legitimate military deployments for social control, expand state actions that violate rights like private property, and limit freedom of movement to reduce the possibilities of popular mobilizations in protest of the government's measures.

No country in the region has escaped the impact of this crisis. The states of Latin America and the Caribbean have always had a limited capacity for effectively responding to crises. Due to the fragility of their institutions, these capacities have become even more antiquated given the current situation, as will be observed in the case of El Salvador in the brief by Celia Medrano. Gaps in the health systems were the primary concern of many. However, the topic of the pending economic crisis, together with socioeconomic instability, quickly became a central topic of debate.

In September 2019, Michelle Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights, expressed her concern over the reduction of civic and democratic space in Brazil, characterized by attacks on human rights defenders and restrictions on the work of civil society. The document written by Gilberto Rodrigues illustrates this based on Decree 9759, enacted by the government of President Jair Bolsonaro, which reduces federal councils with participation from civil society from 700 to 50. This not only removes the voice of civil society from the formulation of public policy but also weakens transparency across intersecting causes across regional

and international policy, forcing them to work not only in fragile conditions but individually, unilaterally, and often in one direction.

As indicated before, the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela is not the only example of recent turbulence in the region. The 2019 wave of demonstrations in Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), Paraguay, and Peru reflect the institutional, economic, political, and social crises, which 2020 was only able to evade because of quarantine and confinement. The 2019 pressure cooker, put on pause in 2020, could in 2021 become even more complex for the entire region; the recent events in Peru confirm an imminent, postpandemic instability among already-deteriorated democratic institutions, where the protection of vulnerable populations will inevitably require joint action to provide multidimensional responses to the current crisis.

Will these actions that have a direct impact on CSOs around the world, but particularly in the Global South, be normalized, and will they continue to be implemented in a post-COVID-19 world? This is uncertain, but it is imperative to generate not only early-warning mechanisms but also early responses for the near future and the challenges we will face. Civil society has a key role to play; it cannot be pushed aside, especially in situations of polarized political discourse or imminent economic crises like those that are expected to worsen in 2021. Here, civil society should not only fill the voids left by the state, or in some cases even compensate for the state's absence, but it should also generate the necessary conditions for future instances of dialogue and negotiation that will be of highest importance. The roundtables, in the case of Nicaragua, have been essential, even though they are currently suspended, and in instances of rebuilding the social matrix their reactivation is imperative. There are cases where civil society can channel the will of certain actors to promote communication, dialogue, and negotiation, offering alternatives to the use of violence as a political tool. Repressive legislation does nothing more than reduce these spaces, which can be clearly seen in the briefs of Marlin Sierra on Nicaragua and Elienai Gonzalez on Venezuela. The COVID-19 crisis calls on civil society to act quickly, even when the action is being carried out from our homes.

A third external challenge that affects the operations of CSOs is financial in nature. Within the crisis context accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact on organizations that provide funding and the governments of donor countries is becoming increasingly evident. The reallocation of resources to face the pandemic has caused anything but promising financial perspectives for CSOs in the Global South. Although the majority of foundations and donor agencies have stepped forward to support their beneficiaries and partners over the short term, it is likely that overall availability of funding will be reduced over the medium term. This puts CSOs in a more vulnerable position than they have been in the past, especially if this is combined with repressive state measures and operational limitations.



This series of discussion papers about the reduction of civic spaces has appealed to professionals throughout the entire region, including members of organizations working in different fields, such as human rights, migration, conflict prevention, mass atrocities, and the Responsibility to Protect, with the goal of having authors contribute their own experience and analysis to the discussion on reduced civic spaces in each of their countries. The objective of these documents is not just to present a structural overview of how the situation of civic spaces has regressed but also to emphasize the human factor of these crises and how, in spite of it all, CSOs continue to work on protecting these spaces and collaborating with people directly affected by violence, humanitarian emergencies, and the vulnerabilities that the pandemic has made inescapable. Stemming from the Cúcuta Forum, members continue supporting the development of regional strategies to be able to deepen the approach to the current situation and generate epistemic discussions and pragmatic responses that allow us to generate recommendations in the immediate future at the regional level.

To conclude, participants want to share some recommendations and lessons learned from work with the Cúcuta Forum and on the design of strategies for the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities in Latin America and the Caribbean.

1. Include within civil society forums different organizations that work in different fields, such as human rights, migration, conflict and mass atrocities prevention, the Responsibility to Protect, and other governmental actors and academic institutions to contribute their own experience to the discussion.
2. Promote coordinated work and the exchange of information between organizations that work directly on the ground and organizations with a more academic approach; this allows

for feedback on approaches and generates comprehensive projects and programs to occupy vacant civic spaces.

3. Develop capacities and trust relationships for the exchange of information and monitoring relevant cross-disciplinary developments to maintain comprehensive peace at the regional level, cocreating new processes and forums for regular exchange and strategic collaboration.
4. Support the development of regional strategies to be able to deepen the approaches to current or future scenarios and generate epistemological discussions that will allow for new debates and windows of opportunity.

This Discussion Takeaway summarizes the primary findings of the workshop as interpreted by the authors. It should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

Endnotes

- ¹ CIVICUS, Monitor Tracking Civic Space, World Map, 2020, <https://monitor.civicus.org>.
- ² Human Rights Watch, Venezuela: A Police State Lashes Out Amid COVID-19, August 28, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/28/venezuela-police-state-lashes-out-amid-covid-19>.
- ³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, November 10, 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/platform>.



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