



International Development Committee

Oral evidence: FCDO and civil societies, HC 613

Tuesday 7 May 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 7 May 2024.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Theo Clarke; Mrs Pauline Latham; David Mundell; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 1 - 21

Witnesses

I: Nadine Tunasi, Survivor Champion, Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative and Coordinator, Survivors Speak OUT Network, Freedom from Torture; Ibrahim-Tanko Amidu, Executive Director, STAR Ghana Foundation; Channsitha Mark, Country Director Cambodia, ActionAid.

II: Andrew Firmin, Editor-in-chief & co-author of *State of Civil Society Report*, CIVICUS Lens; Nana Afadzinu, Executive Director, West Africa Civil Society Institute; Rowan Popplewell, Policy Manager, Civic Space, Bond UK.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nadine Tunasi, Ibrahim-Tanko Amidu and Channsitha Mark.

Q1 Chair: I would like to start this first session of the International Development Select Committee on the FCDO and civil societies. We all have an understanding of what civil societies are and we are all very grateful for the work that they do in our communities. The FCDO defines civil society as “uncoerced human association or interaction by which individuals implement individual or collective action to address shared needs, ideas, interests, values, faiths and beliefs that they have identified in common, as well as the formal, semi or non-formal forms of association and the individuals involved in them. Civil society is distinct from states, private for-profit enterprises and the family”. It is quite a clunky definition, but it gets us in the space that we want to be.

We are having two sessions today. Could I ask the panellists in our first session to introduce themselves and their organisations?

Ibrahim-Tanko Amidu: My name is Ibrahim-Tanko Amidu. I am the executive director of the STAR Ghana Foundation, which is a national centre for the promotion of active citizenship and philanthropy to achieve transformational change in Ghana. It transitioned out of a 10-year programme of support funded by a number of donors, led by DFID, as it then was, and then at the end of the 10 years, we transitioned the programme into the STAR Ghana Foundation to continue to support civil society in Ghana in achieving good governance and access to services for all citizens.

Nadine Tunasi: Thank you very much for having me. My name is Nadine Tunasi. I am originally from the DRC and came to the UK 20 years ago as a refugee. Now I live here, and I have rebuilt my life in this country.

I work for an organisation called Freedom from Torture, which is an organisation that helped me receive therapy and rehabilitation. I work there currently managing the survival activism network in this organisation. We are a campaigning organisation. We speak about torture and the impact of torture, but we also ensure that torture survivors receive rehabilitation.

As a result of my campaigning work, I was appointed in 2019 by the UK Government as a survivor champion of the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative, hence my connection with the FCDO.

Channsitha Mark: I am Channsitha Mark. I am working with ActionAid Cambodia as a country director. ActionAid is an international organisation that works with women and girls living in poverty. We are dedicated to ending violence against women and girls and changing lives. Our vision is for a world free from poverty and injustice, in which everyone enjoys the right to a life with dignity.

Chair: Thank you all for the work that you are doing. We admire what



you do hugely.

Q2 Mr Sharma: Nadine, why is FCDO's support for civil society organisations important?

Nadine Tunasi: The work is very important because civil society organisations are on the ground and really understand the impacts of what is going on in a conflict zone.

As I said in my introduction, I am from the DRC. My country has been at war for many years. As far as I can remember, I have always seen an organisation in my country doing some sort of work. It is really important to have civil society organisations getting to see the impact of what is going on, because they are able to also link with the population at the heart of what is going on, sometimes even in rural examples.

The FCDO is very important because it is part of the UK Government, and the UK is perceived to be a leading country. People do not just admire the leadership because a country has a better system, but also because a country can set an example of how to conduct certain things. Working with civil society organisations is really important because civil society organisations that are doing work on behalf of the FCDO can be inspired by the model. As a leader, people have high expectations. They expect not only to get funding, but also to learn from that country. What I have seen over the years is the leadership that is very important. Countries feel that they can be inspired, be part of, and learn from that.

Q3 Mr Sharma: Tanko, how could the FCDO better place civil society organisations at the centre of decision making?

Ibrahim-Tanko Amidu: In Ghana, I have seen moves towards putting civil society at the centre of the work of the FCDO. Much has been achieved, but there is still more to be done.

I mentioned in my introduction that the STAR Ghana Foundation came out of a 10-year programme of support that DFID, as it then was, and other donors put together to strengthen civil society in Ghana, to achieve good governance and better delivery of public goods and services.

That highlights one of the ways of doing this: long-term engagement and support for civil society organisations. Very short-term support, while it may achieve some results, does not lead to sustainable results or build the kinds of relationships that enable civil society organisations to work with their stakeholders to achieve sustainable results.

Beyond the provision of grants, important as it is, FCDO can also help to broker relationships, both internally within the country, and also externally between civil society and other stakeholders, towards addressing the drivers of poverty, exclusion and inequality in countries. That is something that, in Ghana, FCDO has done quite well, providing spaces and fora for civil society engagement with Government,



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Government agencies, the private sector, and other development partners. That is quite important.

The third point is around the whole issue of capacity strengthening in terms of bringing in expertise, access to information, and also in terms of the involvement of civil society in strategic thinking, planning and implementation. Involvement strengthens capacity, and that is one of the ways in which this can be done.

Overall, it is about grants, the brokering of relationships and the provision of spaces, civil society engagement with other stakeholders, and capacity strengthening.

A quite important area that is beginning to emerge is about how FCDO supports human rights defenders within the country who may be at risk of being targeted as individuals or as individual organisations because they raise controversial issues or go against Government policy.

Q4 **Mr Sharma:** Sitha, how regular is your engagement with the FCDO, and what form does it take?

Channsitha Mark: Cambodia got project implementations funded by FCDO through our working relationship with ActionAid UK. We got funding for the women-led alternative that is responding to climate change in Cambodia. With this project, we worked closely with ActionAid UK and FCDO. We have monthly meetings and have started implementation of the project. We work very closely with ActionAid UK and communicate on the implementation of the work.

ActionAid Cambodia worked closely on designing the project. It is a very collaborative process. We work with the UK office, our partners on the ground and also the community to design and develop the actions. Our work is to ensure that the support from FCDO funding is strengthening and supporting the women to do their work on the ground, and to continue to showcase their leadership in providing the support to the community that is needed. Also, it is about influence in terms of women's needs and voices in policy, and also in the sub-national and national Government of Cambodia.

With the support of FCDO, we see that there are open conversations and discussions on issues that emerge during our implementations. Because of the regular meetings and conversations, we can pick up and open those discussions, and also make some adjustments where needed.

Another added value that we are engaging in with FCDO funding is to open up our engagement with the British embassy in Cambodia, so that we can have broader engagement and support, and work more closely with the embassy here in the country. With a close working relationship, we also developed our capacity in bringing quality programming that impacts the life of the community, especially the women and children that we support.



However, we also observe some challenges as well, because the operational system of the FCDO fund is sometimes quite strict, as are the report requirements and deadlines, to some extent. Although we are engaging closely, sometimes it feels discouraging and disempowering. We hope that we could, in some way, support more local-led development and a self-defined agenda. The work on the ground is quite challenging, so we hope to further explore how to best set timeframe and reporting requirements that are suitable to the context, especially when we are working with grassroots and civil society organisations on the ground.

Q5 Mr Sharma: You have touched on it, but what else would you like to see from the FCDO in this regard?

Channsitha Mark: The support from the FCDO so far is great. However, we hope that the funding and support is going to be long-term, flexible, and multi-year, and also that it will allow for self-determined priorities, especially for civil societies and women's rights organisations on the ground.

The second point is to simplify the funding requirements. We hope that ActionAid Cambodia can work together with ActionAid UK to create possibilities for women's rights organisations and civil society. If the civil society organisations can access direct funding from the FCDO, that would be great, but funding requirements need to be simplified and bureaucracy reduced in terms of timelines, deadlines and other strict compliance if possible, creating more space for bringing in what might work best on the ground in the context where the FCDO works in partnership, such as in Cambodia.

Another point is about building meaningful and long-term partnerships with civil society, where the voices of civil society are also reflected in the grant-making and grant implementation. I really appreciate this opportunity to be one of the witnesses to speak to the Committee.

Q6 David Mundell: Tanko, how have cuts to the UK ODA budget affected the delivery of your services?

Ibrahim-Tanko Amidu: We have been affected in a number of ways. The first has been the predictability of funding. Most of the funding that we access through the High Commission or FCDO Ghana may be multi-year, but the release of the funds is on a yearly basis. Usually, by the time you go through the discussions and arrangements and then sign the agreement, it is around August. Then, by the end of March, you have to wrap up and then wait for the next funding cycle or release. That really affects work, because it is stop and go, et cetera. That is something that has really affected our work.

The second point is in terms of the scope of work. For the support to be meaningful, to achieve sustainable results, and to help address the drivers of exclusion and poverty, you need long-term, multi-year funding, such as what happened under the STAR Ghana programme, where DFID



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led in mobilising support with other donors—the EU, DANIDA and USAID—and provided 10 years of support to civil society in Ghana, managed through a grant mechanism. At least organisations were assured of support for a programme of work over a period of time. That ensured an integrated approach to addressing these issues. That is also one of the areas where the cuts have affected us.

The areas of support used to be quite broad. Now we have narrowed it down to delivery of services, particularly to women and girls, and then private sector development. Issues around climate change and governance underpin all these challenges that we are trying to address. Therefore, when we narrow to just two or three key areas, it becomes quite problematic.

I am happy that the White Paper has spoken about climate change, voices, fighting exclusion and poverty, and we hope to see that these are reflected in the kinds of areas that the FCDO supports on the ground.

Q7 David Mundell: You have answered my next question to you, which was going to be about what the challenges of the FCDO's current duration of project cycles are. You have given an answer in relation to the on-off difficulties that creates for your organisation.

Sitha, what are the risks to your programmes of UK ODA levels remaining low? Are your programmes at risk in the future if the level of money from the FCDO remains at its current level?

Channsitha Mark: Yes, because when it comes to supporting the community, it takes time, especially when we look in terms of a transformative impact and changing the lives of the community that we are working with.

We can see that the support of the FCDO continues our previous work on the ground. It is built on the existing work, and then it adds value to strengthening the capacity and leadership, especially the collective leadership of women, to respond to the climate crisis and the impacts on their lives, their community and their natural resources. It is also about their role in terms of building resilient alternative livelihoods.

If the support gets low and is unable to continue for the long term, the challenges could be around how the impact will be sustained, and how the work on the ground levels up to a policy and sustainable change at the national level, as well as perhaps contributing to the international and global level.

David Mundell: You have also answered the next question, because that was to be about how your programmes could benefit from guaranteed long-term funding. Sitha, you have just set that out, so thank you very much indeed.

Q8 Theo Clarke: Tanko, I understand that Ghana may soon introduce a Bill that will largely criminalise openly identifying as LGBT in Ghana. How is



the FCDO working with you, and particularly other civil society organisations, on this major change in circumstances?

Ibrahim-Tanko Amidu: The FCDO is not working directly with us on the Bill. Civil society organisations in Ghana—groups that are interested in engaging with Government and the media on the issue—have organised into coalitions and alliances that they are using to engage with various stakeholders around the Bill, particularly the aspects of the Bill that criminalise not just people’s sexuality but also their rights to associate guaranteed in the constitution, including the rights to engage with others on the basis of common association, the limitations on speech, and even the targeting of organisations that may be providing support to organisations of persons identified under the Bill as “not acceptable”, so to speak.

That is how we have been doing it, but we have not engaged directly with the FCDO on this. The FCDO may have engaged behind the scenes with Government or religious organisations, but not directly with civil society.

Q9 **Chair:** Tanko, on the specific example of the potential LGBT legislation, how does that work in practice? Was it an activist who came to you and alerted you to it? Was it your organisation that went out to the community and said, “This is something that we are concerned about. What do you think?” How is that relationship?

Ibrahim-Tanko Amidu: I mentioned earlier that the STAR Ghana Foundation, my organisation, arose out of a 10-year programme of support that DFID provided to civil society in Ghana, managed by the STAR Ghana programme. Under the programme, there were already discussions around how the programme could support organisations of LGBTQ persons without falling foul of the law, because at that time, even though there was no law, the media had whipped everybody into a frenzy and it became quite difficult to undertake advocacy actions openly. At that time, we worked with these organisations, but around the provision of social services, which would then provide entry points for discussions on the issues of freedom of association, et cetera.

When the Bill was introduced, a number of the members of our board—they are now called the famous eight or the big eight—mobilised and decided to fight the Bill as an association of individuals rather than under the banner of STAR Ghana.

There are some other organisations, such as the Centre for Democratic Development that have come out openly, taking a stance on this issue. We are now providing support to the advocacy actions, providing support for research that seeks to provide counter-arguments or narratives to what is being projected or put out by the proponents of the Bill and the religious organisations.

Q10 **Chair:** The UK Government have always, in my opinion, been very proactive and supportive around human rights, civil rights and



particularly LGBTQ+ rights. While you are not getting any funding for this programme, do you still have a close working relationship with the FCDO team on this?

Ibrahim-Tanko Amidu: Yes, we have had discussions, but not specifically on the Bill. I do not know, but I am just assuming that perhaps it is more in terms of consulting. We have had a number of discussions at the insistence of the High Commissioner that have discussed various issues, including the Bill and what civil society could do in terms of, first, advocacy against the signing of the Bill into an Act, but then also what we do once the Act comes into force and it criminalises even organisations that seek to provide support or speak on behalf of LGBTQ persons and their organisations.

Q11 **Chair:** Nadine, we are watching with horror the conflict in your region more broadly. What effect has the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo had on civil society organisations?

Nadine Tunasi: The majority of people who are living in the DRC cannot really make a difference. When they see civil society, as far as they are concerned, it is a representative of a particular Government. Because the country has been at war for a long time, people are unable to see the advantage of what impact that work can have.

Another thing that is contributing to the problem is the fact that, in my country, especially in the eastern part, people are reported to have private companies that seem to be contributing to the problem. They are accused of exploiting people who are living in the region. What that has done is that, when people are delivering a particular project, they cannot make a difference.

I am speaking more from the perspective of a survivor. I meet a lot of survivors on different platforms. I remember in December talking with a group of survivors who came from the DRC to a conference in the USA. We were talking about how the climate of sexual violence has been perpetrated. The majority were saying, "I can't make a difference to whether civil society is doing the work or whether it is also part of the people who are committing the crimes."

There has been a lot of confusion. In my country, being at war and suffering at multiple levels, on the one hand people see how the resources are being abused and taken. On the other hand, we seem to have peacemakers, but they are not really protecting the people who are there. You cannot deliver peace if people see those who are coming to help them as being part of the group that is causing the problem. You have seen some of the civil society groups being attacked or, even though they are doing great work, being targeted, because the population cannot see the difference. This prevents those who generally mean to do the work and help the population.



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When we are providing help in a recipient country, we want to be perceived to be leading, not only because we are handing in money, but because we are promoting the values that we set abroad, so people can see that, even if someone is from a civil society and happens to be part of the people committing the crime, they can also be held accountable, the same way a citizen of that country would have been treated.

It is tough, but I understand that my country is very chaotic. There are a lot of civil society organisations that have been able to help the population that have been dispersed. In the context of sexual violence, I know that civil society is helping children born of war. Because of funding, they have been helped to know how to cope with the issue.

As we are talking about civil society, it is very important that we do not forget that there are also survivor-led organisations. These are people who themselves have suffered the crime, but have used their experiences to help other women and young girls and boys who have suffered horrific crimes. They have really taken the initiative. Sometimes, when we are talking about civil society, we have often forgotten to mention them and to recognise that their work is also valuable. With little resources, they are also able to do great work and empower, if not help, survivors.

Q12 Chair: Thank you, Nadine, for raising the importance of survivor-led networks. You are absolutely right. To have that authenticity is vital.

Could I just pull you back on something that you were saying? Maybe I have misunderstood. Were you saying that, in the DRC, there are organisations that are effectively camouflaging themselves as civil society to get money, or are you saying that the public does not understand the difference between a civil society organisation and one that is doing it for financial benefit or ill intent?

Nadine Tunasi: I would not say people are camouflaging, because I have no evidence of that. I get asked questions when I am speaking to people. People know I do my campaigning in the UK, and they say, "Don't mention them. They are just the same. We do not know who is who." There have been incidents where there have been people from civil society who have committed crimes against civilians in the DRC. We know they have not been held accountable for that. It does not mean that everybody is the same. There is an issue of accountability, but there is also a funding distribution issue.

The reason why I wanted to raise the example of survivor-led organisations is that, as you probably know, they do not get the same exposure. They are not big NGOs that have a direct link with the FCDO. Quite often, if any grassroots organisation can get a little funding, that will probably be via another civil organisation that is linked with the FCDO. This is already creating a conflict.

The reason why there is a trust issue is because the population has seen people from civil society being part of activities that have also contributed



to the problem. What does that mean? It prevents acknowledging when somebody means well. It creates trust issues.

Having said that, I recognise that there are genuine civil organisations that are playing a key role. I have not been to the DRC since, but in Sudan I have had an opportunity to work with an organisation that is funded by the FCDO, and I have seen how vital the work was. I wish they had more funding to carry out that work. Even so, they had to work with a grassroots organisation. This grassroots organisation did not have the linkage with the FCDO, but it was through this organisation that it was able to reach a survivor network. These are the challenges that I am trying to highlight.

Chair: It is really helpful. This is our first session, so if there is more that you wanted to write in on that, or if other people wanted to give us evidence, please do so, because it comes to the heart of it around the trust, credibility, authenticity and transparency. These are things that we are battling with across the whole development sector, but they are even more acute when it becomes a conflict situation, and some seek to weaponise the very kindness and generosity of others. Thank you for raising that.

I am afraid we are going to have to end your session here, but this is the beginning of the conversation that we are having, so please keep in touch with us. Thank you so much for all the evidence that you have given us. It is a great start. Thank you all very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andrew Firmin, Nana Afadzinu and Rowan Popplewell.

Q13 **Chair:** Nana, would you introduce yourself and your organisation to us, please?

Nana Afadzinu: My name is Nana Afadzinu. I am the executive director of WACSI, the West Africa Civil Society Institute. It is a capacity development institute primarily for civil society in west Africa.

We are also an organisation that is very active in the discussions around shifting power within the international development space and looking at the issue around localisation. We host the Re-imagining the INGO project, which is a global project. We have worked with Bond to engage and consult civil society in a number of countries around the world, looking at FCDO civil society engagement.

Q14 **Chair:** We are a Committee that is also very engaged in localism and shifting power. Hopefully you have seen some of the work we have done on it. Thank you very much for being a voice for that, but I do not think you are going to be alone on this panel.

Rowan and Andrew, tell us about you and who you are representing



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today?

Rowan Popplewell: I am Rowan Popplewell, and I am a policy manager at Bond, which is the UK network for organisations working in international development.

Andrew Firmin: I am Andrew Firmin. I am editor-in-chief at CIVICUS, the global civil society alliance, where I co-lead our research work. CIVICUS is a membership network that supports and tries to strengthen citizen engagement and civil society around the world, defending and expanding civic space.

Q15 **Theo Clarke:** Nana, what do you think is the biggest driver of the shrinking of civil space globally? What is your assessment and what do you think is the biggest driver?

Nana Afadzinu: There are a number of reasons. One of them is the geopolitical developments that we are having globally now. We seem to be having a lot more support for right-wing populist Governments, and these are Governments that are not necessarily supportive of human rights, and would rather push towards trade and local security issues. Issues around widespread civic space and enabling that kind of engagement and open society are under threat. That is one of the reasons.

You have a number of Governments that have come into power that do not support these open society ideals and are therefore constraining the space for civil society to engage. Those who, because of political pressure and wanting to be politically correct, would have toed the line of human rights and enabling civic space to be open, no longer have that pressure, because you have this multi-polar world that we currently live in.

Secondly, over the years, civil society, particularly in the global south, has not been supported to have strong institutions. It has mainly worked on projects, so you have a largely weakened civil society space.

Thirdly, you have new things that are happening, new technologies. We are now in the fourth industrial revolution with technology. Speaking again from the perspective of the global south, a number of organisations that have to really engage these new technologies to be very effective in their space have not had access, or there is no affordability, so these new developments have also affected the way that civil society has engaged. These are different aspects.

Finally, let me add this. I am speaking now from west Africa. Because people seem to be disillusioned with democracy and the fact that they do not see democracy as having given them any dividends, you have citizens who sometimes, when these authoritarian Governments and military coups take over, support it, because they think that democracy and elected Governments have failed them. You have civil society organisations that are pushing for democracy, so in a sense we are caught between a rock and a hard place sometimes.



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These are some of the different things that are constraining the civic space.

Q16 **Theo Clarke:** Andrew, what specifically do you believe that the FCDO can do to address the problem that Nana has just outlined?

Andrew Firmin: The first thing is that the issue of restricted civic space needs to be mainstreamed in all the FCDO's responses. It is not just about providing support to civil society through funding or holding dialogues with civil society. It is in every engagement with both civil society and other states to mainstream issues of civic space. That includes expressing concern through diplomatic channels to Governments that are restricting civic space, and dedicating funding specifically to enabling civil society organisations and networks to resist the restriction of civic space and to actively defend civic space. It is also about allyship. It means being prepared to speak out publicly when, for example, civil society activists are detained or jailed.

One other thing is modelling exemplary behaviour domestically, practising the respect for civic space at home so you do not help create international norms of restricting civic space. These are all an important part of the responsibility, not just for the FCDO, but for any of the big global north states that provide ODA.

Q17 **Chair:** Rowan, can you give us your assessment of civil society and civil spaces globally now? Is the FCDO's shift from dispersing grants to giving contracts for programmes making any difference to how civil society is flourishing?

Rowan Popplewell: I will separate the two. When it comes to civic space globally, thanks to the work of CIVICUS, we have really good data that show the extent of the restrictions that are spreading. We know that it is a very established trend. It is sustained, and it is in different regions around the world. We have also seen the UK being downgraded on the CIVICUS monitor, so it is even in countries here too.

We have seen the FCDO shift towards the use of contracts over grants. I do not believe it is something that particularly helps with civic space, because what we hear time and again from activists, human rights defenders and civil society organisations is that they need direct funding from Governments, through the likes of the FCDO. If you are providing funding through contracts, that is not going directly to the organisation; it is going to private sector companies who manage these big consortia. Smaller organisations, which are often the ones most at risk of restrictions, are not the ones that are receiving this funding. It is not going to them.

The other problem with contracting is that what you tend to see is the FCDO coming up with a problem and defining it in their own terms, and then contracting it out to organisations to provide services to meet that problem, whereas what we are seeing with civic space is organisations



needing direct, sustainable, long-term funding that enables them to flourish and to respond to the problems that they face on the ground, and to identify the problems that they see. Grants are the only way to deal with that; contracts are not going to help.

Q18 Chair: Nadine in the last panel was saying that there was an issue around credibility. The big organisations get the FCDO contracts, so they are seen as legitimate and trustworthy, but when they are subcontracting it down to the grassroots, they do not have that badge of authenticity. Is that a thing that you recognise?

Rowan Popplewell: I am not sure about that, but what we do know is that, as the money goes further down the chain, there is less of it that gets to organisations at the grassroots. If we want to see a move towards more locally led development, which is something that the FCDO is committed to and fundamentally has to be part of the response to closing civic space globally, then we need to see more money going directly to these organisations. That may well help with authenticity as well, but I cannot speak to that directly.

Q19 Chair: Andrew, what are your thoughts about the FCDO and the way that it is operating and trying to support civil society?

Andrew Firmin: Your last question expresses the truth. As Rowan put it, the further down you get, the less money there is generally. I am not just speaking about the actions of the FCDO, but donors more generally.

There are parts of the world where organisations that stand up for democracy and human rights have simply given up trying to access ODA, because the transaction costs are too high. They do not have the time to invest in that. They know that larger organisations are going to attract the funding.

There is not enough localisation all round. Already, we know that hardly any ODA goes directly to global south civil society organisations. If you look at the DAC members, about 10% of the ODA goes directly to global south organisations. The UK is absolutely on that average, at 10.6% on the latest figures. We know that very little gets outside capitals. Very little gets to other locales. There are problems all down the chain.

Q20 Chair: Nana, do people on the ground feel listened to or empowered? How is civil society surviving?

Nana Afadzinu: There is a lot of discussion around how we make sure that we change the way international development works. For a long time, when it comes to engaging organisations in the global south, they have been seen as risky, not trustworthy, or organisations that you really have to keep on a short leash. That impacts the way organisations are engaged with, both by the bilaterals such as the FCDO, and also even by big organisations, such as the INGOs that they work with.



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This permeates through in different ways in the way they work. Right now, there is pushback, but there is also advocacy, including by INGOs, and there is also interest. WACSI is part of a programme that FCDO is running with STAR Ghana, other organisations in Malawi and Zambia, and Comic Relief on shifting the power, and so there is that interest to really change the way this partnership works. That means how we work with each other, including the way grant-making is done, the way we have discussions or agree on measurements of success, the length of the grants that are given, the way we do monitoring, evaluation and learning, the way we assess risk, and how we address issues of risk and compliance.

In a sense, there is some work that is going on, but the status quo has not changed much. We still have many civil society organisations that are facing complex funding processes. You have challenges like limited access to information when you are engaging, or the risk and due diligence approach, which, instead of being one that is supportive, seems more like one that is policing.

A number of speakers earlier spoke about project-specific funding. Sometimes there is co-financing, or people say, "Refinance, and then we will give you the funding when the work has been done", which is very challenging for smaller organisations. We have complex funding processes. You do not have the kind of systems that bigger, more resourced organisations would have, and so for smaller organisations that want to engage and be effective in the work that they do, it places them at a disadvantage.

Q21 **Chair:** Rowan, what would you hope to see in the forthcoming Open Societies strategy?

Rowan Popplewell: We know that the restriction of civic space is something that is happening globally. It is systemic, and therefore countries such as the UK and our allies need to have a strategic response to that. The strategy has to be fully funded, cross-departmental, and gender-sensitive, but it also needs to be structured around goals, and it needs to have indicators so that we can measure its progress and impact, but also so that we can hold the FCDO accountable. That is something that we really need to see from the strategy.

It has to have a strong focus on civic space, civil society and human rights defenders, and to set out how the FCDO is going to work with those organisations, particularly those at risk, to support them to do their work effectively.

We want to see it set out things like how the FCDO is going to fund civil society properly. It has to be locally led; therefore, it also has to reach across to the locally led strategy that the FCDO is talking about. We want to see a clear approach to protection and rapid response mechanisms, and then also look at how it is going to use all the levers in its diplomatic network to help respond to the challenge of closing space.



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Chair: Thank you. We now have to close the session. Thank you so much.