

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: FCDO and civil societies, HC 613

Tuesday 21 May 2024

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Members present: Theo Clarke (Chair); Dr Rosena Allin-Khan; Mr Richard Bacon; Mrs Pauline Latham; Nigel Mills; Kate Osamor.

Questions 22 - 56

Witnesses

I: Nicolas Kaczorowski, Country Director, Tunisia, International Foundation for Electoral Systems; Karla McLaren, Head of Government and Political Relations, Amnesty International.

II: Dr Nick Westcott, Former High Commissioner to Ghana and Ambassador to Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Togo and Niger; Edmund Fitton-Brown, Former Ambassador to Yemen.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nicolas Kaczorowski and Karla McLaren.

Q22 **Chair:** Welcome to the International Development Committee's second session on the work of the FCDO and the work of civil societies. Can I first welcome today's witnesses and ask you to introduce yourselves to Committee members?

Nicolas Kaczorowski: Good afternoon. My name is Nicolas Kaczorowski. I am a senior country director for the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, an organisation that builds resilient democracy for all. We do that together with our international and local partners.

Karla McLaren: Hi. I am Karla McLaren, head of Government and political relations at Amnesty International UK.

Chair: Thank you both very much for joining us.

Q23 **Mr Bacon:** I would like to ask about the civil society space and what effect its shrinking has on organisations like yours and those who support them.

Karla McLaren: We are seeing the civil society space shrink and with that goes repression of human rights defenders, who can be journalists, lawyers or teachers, but also often are working with civil society organisations. We see that space shrinking in every region of the world. In 2017, Amnesty International published a report saying that attacks on human rights defenders had reached unprecedented levels. I do not think that the situation has improved since then. In fact, it has probably got worse.

I think that you will know already that CIVICUS last year said that 30% of the world's population are now living in closed societies. That is the highest number that it has reported. We can say that it is extensive and we can also say that this shrinking of civil society space is happening in a systematic way. We see Governments in every region of the world using similar tools from the same toolbox: restricting protest, surveillance, restricting funding, restrictive legislation in terms of reporting and requirements for registration for civil society organisations, and, of course, physical attacks. That includes murder and torture.

I can give you an example of how systematic this is. Just in the last few months, we have seen anti-NGO legislation in Zimbabwe, Kyrgyzstan and Slovakia. The Slovakian legislation was a carbon copy, pretty much, of the 2017 Hungarian legislation. You can see how Governments are taking legislation from other countries and then reusing it in their own context. Of course there is existing anti-NGO legislation in Russia, Egypt and Israel, where organisations that are criticising Israel's human rights violations against Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere are facing particular restrictions right now.



The effect can be that civil society organisations can just not exist independently from Government. That has been the case for a long time in some countries, but it is also a reality that some very well-established human rights organisations are closing because of the restrictions being put on them. Memorial and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Russia are two examples.

Also, it is important to say that this restriction on civil society space and attacks on human rights defenders is not happening in a vacuum. It is rising alongside authoritarianism and the two go hand in hand. It is not a coincidence that the states that are particularly intent on ignoring the rule of law and undermining the international rules-based system are also the states where we see particular restrictions on civil society organisations and human rights defenders.

It is important to say that some organisations and some types of human rights defender will be affected more than others. Organisations that are working on minorities' rights or minoritised people's rights, women's rights organisations and LGBTI rights organisations will be particularly affected, because they are facing a global rollback on their rights. They will be affected in the same way that other organisations will be, but then they will also be targeted in particular ways because of who they are.

Q24 Mr Bacon: How effective is FCDO support for civil society organisations?

Karla McLaren: I think that there is recognition at the Department of this as an issue and the need to do something about it. We had a commitment from the Minister, Lord Ahmad, in 2022 to develop a civil society and human rights defenders strategy. That never materialised and we are now still waiting for an open society and human rights strategy, which has been inexplicably delayed. We do not know whether those two things will now be just rolled into one.

Mr Bacon: Can you repeat what the two things were?

Karla McLaren: The first one was a strategy specifically on civic space and human rights defenders, which is something that Amnesty and partners have been calling for for a long time. Then the merger of FCDO and DFID happened and there was an announcement that there would be an open society and human rights strategy. We are not sure whether those two things will now be combined, but we have not seen either of them.

We know that there is commitment at the official level to do more on this work. For example, we know that officials have developed a diagnostic tool for embassies to use to assess civic space in-country. Also, the UK Government have increased funding to Lifeline recently, which is a fund for embattled CSOs. There is some movement and we welcome that very much, but it is very ad hoc and inconsistent. That is because there is no strategy driving it. There is no identification of objectives. As far as we know there are no reporting or accountability mechanisms attached to



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any of these commitments. We do not see that there is a strategic drive to impact or an understanding of where the impact needs to be and how much impact they are actually having.

Nicolas Kaczorowski: Clearly, in the last two decades, democratic backsliding has been a defining trend in world politics. There is no consensus on the drivers. There is the rise of populism, authoritarian states, technology and social media, but also the inability of democracy to deliver. There are different methods and tactics being used by those autocratic leaders, but there is one point they have in common, which is to relentlessly undermine countervailing institutions, governmental but also non-governmental. This is where we have to focus our attention to see how the shrinking space impacts the work of civil society. By and large, it also directly impacts the work we do in terms of democracy promotion.

I see different—it was mentioned a little bit by Karla, but I would like to come back to it—legal restrictions and administrative burdens. We see law changes being increasingly repressive, adding requirements to organisations that do not necessarily have the capacity, including the legal capacity sometimes, to understand what the law says. Then it becomes very easy to stop the work of a civil society organisation because one small requirement was not done. This is one way we see, so increasing the requirements for registrations of CSOs, changing the law and asking organisations that are already registered to register again. This is opening the way to actually block the work of certain civil society organisations.

The other one is access to funding. We see it also increasingly. You just need to look at the news. Without funds and support from international organisations, very often the work of civil society has to stop.

When we think about shrinking space, we think of the personal security of our partners and how we safeguard their security. How do we work with them so that they are not repressed or, even worse, in prison?

All that undermines their work. What is their work? Their work is to advance democracy, and foster and promote human rights, but also foster social cohesion so that our society keeps together. All this work is undermined simply because there is a shrinking space and increasing obstacles to the way they deliver their work.

What can we do? To me, long-term engagement is one of the solutions. Working with civil society and working on democracy promotion has to make us modest and humble. We start by building relationships with our local partners, but this takes a long time. This is not a matter that a project can achieve in a few months. Becoming impactful and sustainable requires a long-term engagement, so that our local partners know that they can trust us and that we are not going to leave the country after a few months or half a year of work. They will see in us reliable and trusted partners so that we can have impact and open societies.



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Chair: Can I ask for slightly shorter answers, because I know Members have lots of questions?

Q25 **Kate Osamor:** I was going to ask Nicolas a question about what IFES offers, but you kind of answered that. I wanted you to tell us what the impact would be on those countries if the training that you offered was not available.

Nicolas Kaczorowski: IFES works on four pillars and we are adding one. I will come to that because it is very important. One is electoral support. The second one is building democratic institutions. The third one is how we bring and build inclusive democracies. The fourth one is how data and technology can serve democracy and not undermine it. Then we are discussing adding a very important pillar, which is building democratic culture. How do we place the citizen in the centre of our work? Institutions are important, but citizens are more important. How can we build a democracy without democrats and people who have in them the norms, the disposition and the attitude of adhering to democratic principles?

If IFES was not there and was not providing support in all these different pillars, I think that we would have societies that are less democratic. I would like to take one example of a training programme that we offer to journalists in Tunisia, funded by the FCDO. That is why I wanted to mention this one. This programme was meant to train journalists, but not at the national level. When we looked at the local system, we understood that national journalism is already so focused and centralised in the capital, so we decided to work with local democracy reporters who we trained.

It was not only providing skills. We do one training and we go. Did they get the skills, yes or no? The work we have to do is work where we are more connectors. We are more mentors and coaches. It is offering mutually reinforcing training so that, after the end of the process, not only can the journalist go out in the field and write a piece on local democracies, but they also feel that they have a network. They can work together with other journalists.

In Tunisia, journalists work in isolation. Here, through a platform we tried to bring people together so that collaborative journalism can have a greater impact. Given the discussion we just had about security, it is also important that journalists feel that they are surrounded. We use the journalists to mentor others as well, so that we can have a better impact and a better value for money. Each of the local democracy reporters had to go into their regions to mentor about 160 journalists. There were only 30 at the beginning.

This is how we can build impact, by understanding the system, looking at what the level of influence is for journalists and how we can help them to do a better job. How can we help them implement their missions, visions and goals? How do we then measure their performance as journalists and



not only whether they got this skill or that skill? We need to change our training approach to be more impactful.

Q26 **Kate Osamor:** Karla, what is the effect on civil society organisations and NGOs of stringent reporting requirements?

Karla McLaren: This is a real challenge and we know that from the work that we do with our partners, but also research that we conducted in 2021 for our report, which proposed a draft strategy on civic space and human rights defenders for the Foreign Office to adapt and adopt. As part of that, we interviewed 82 human rights defenders across eight countries. There were three things that they said, predominantly, that they needed from the UK. Long-term flexible core funding was one of those things. That was the second most commonly mentioned thing.

I am going to try to be really quick, but if it is okay, I would like to read out a quote from one of the people we interviewed, because I think it encapsulates it much better than I can say: "Lack of funding means we can only offer short-term contracts so we lose valuable people we need in the organisation. Long-term funding also enables us to do our work properly. We are constantly looking for where the next pound is coming from. We spend too much time doing logframes and not enough doing the actual work". That really hits the nail on the head in terms of why these onerous requirements are so difficult.

Also, there is a huge problem in accessibility. Of those 82 people we interviewed—the majority of them worked for civil society organisations—only 11% had ever received funding from the UK. A lot of them said that it was because the accessibility levels were too high in terms of the language, the amount of information that they would need to submit and whether they are even in touch with the UK, which 40% were not. This goes back to something that Nicolas was saying in terms of building those networks and that engagement. If they are not even aware of the funding that they can apply for, how can they apply for it?

Q27 **Kate Osamor:** What were the other two? You said that funding was one thing that came up.

Karla McLaren: The other two were outspoken diplomacy, so speaking out in support of human rights, human rights defenders and the work that civil society does, and against repression. The third one was protection, so providing protection mechanisms, whether that is in-country, regionally, or here in the UK.

Q28 **Kate Osamor:** Nicolas, again around funding, are you certain that the FCDO will scale up to the work that you need to do when it comes to funding?

Nicolas Kaczorowski: We hope so. We have to be smart. We all understand that there is shrinking finance available for the work we do. We have to recognise the world crisis and we understand that funding is not unlimited. We have to be smart in the way we do things. I am



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personally very convinced that it is not the millions that create impact. It is the smart approach that creates impact, but also sustainability.

I want to insist that, to me, what is more important than the amount of money is the time we can use it for. Building local ownership takes patience, time and relentless effort. Building sustainable programmes does too. We have to build those relationships so that we can create impact. I do not think that it is necessarily a question of money. We need money, but we also sometimes have to change our approach in our democracy support community. We are reflecting a lot on how we can be more impactful with less.

Q29 Mrs Latham: Karla, where would you say UK embassies are doing well at strengthening civil societies?

Karla McLaren: We definitely see good practice at the embassy level. It is also where we see nothing very much happening at all. It is a very good example of this ad hoc, inconsistent approach. It is because of this lack of a strategic capital-led delivery programme. We have lots of high-level commitments to do more on civic space and for human rights defenders, but we do not see the plans for implementation of that.

For example, in 2019, the UK published a document called *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders*, which set out a whole range of actions that embassies could take. When we interviewed those 82 human rights defenders, only a very small minority had ever even heard of it. We know from conversations with desk officers as well that a lot of them do not hear about it. You have the policy, but how is it implemented?

Having said that, we collected lots of examples of good practice through that work, such as embassies organising networking events, consulting with civil society and human rights defenders ahead of UN Human Rights Council meetings or universal periodic review meetings, engaging with defenders and civil society organisations for funding and platforming human rights defenders and civil society organisations, which can have a protective effect if they are facing repression. As far as we know, there is no reporting or monitoring attached to the work that embassies do for civil society organisations and human rights defenders, so it is quite hard to know what impact they are having. It is hard to know where the good practice is and where it could be improved.

Q30 Mrs Latham: I was going to ask you a bit about that. Some of the embassies' work is effective, but where would you say it could be improved mostly?

Karla McLaren: To be honest, we think that it needs to be improved across the board. There needs to be a minimum level of understanding, a recognition of the need for engagement and an understanding of how to do it from embassies and then responsive actions to the needs of the civil society sector in the country that they are working in.



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The reality is that, where good practice is happening, it is where it does not rub up against other geopolitical concerns that the UK Government have. We would like to see much more outspoken diplomacy in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where civil society is very heavily restricted, and Israel, where civil society organisations are facing particular restrictions now. We see very good action in Colombia, where there is also a very serious situation, and in Thailand, where there are difficulties.

The problem is that this inconsistent approach means that it is very easy for states to levy a charge against the UK that it is politicised and political, because it is. It is choosing the states where it takes action based on other concerns, rather than having a consistent approach, where it can then explain to its allies that that is why it is taking that action, because it takes it in a uniform and consistent way.

Q31 Dr Allin-Khan: Thank you both for coming and for painting the really stark picture for us, very honestly. Karla, what is your assessment of the FCDO's approach to protecting human rights defenders?

Karla McLaren: As I said in the previous question, there are pockets of good practice, but we see quite good high-level commitment. For example, in the 2021 integrated review there was a commitment to work with human rights defenders as a priority. Just last year, the Government committed, as one of their five priorities in the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights year, to prioritise working with human rights defenders. We do not see that implemented and turned into a reality. We do not see the actual impact on the ground. What are the strategies to ensure that those commitments are turned into a reality? Unfortunately, we then see ad hoc and inconsistent activities and initiatives.

As I said previously, the challenge with this is that there is actually quite good work, such as the 2019 human rights defender document, which we very much welcomed and set out a range of actions that embassies, for example, could take. Because there is no plan for implementing that, promoting it and making sure the embassies actually implement it, the Department is undermining its own work. Quite a lot of work went into production of that document, but we do not see the impact that it actually has on the ground.

The other thing that I would say is to repeat that we and partners have been saying for a long time that the Government need to take a strategic approach to this work. On other issues, for example torture, the death penalty and modern slavery, the Department has had strategies to drive the work, because it has recognised that it is a global issue that needs a strategic and systematic response. We, again, make the call that the Department should develop a systematic approach to challenging this global trend of civil society repression and improving support and protection for human rights defenders.

Q32 Dr Allin-Khan: Are there any examples of best practice that you could



recommend the FCDO adopts in this regard?

Karla McLaren: We know that in Colombia, for example, the embassy has a country-based strategy. I am reluctant to say that there need to be multiple strategies but, realistically, there needs to be a capital-led plan and strategic approach. We would recommend that embassies then develop their own country-based strategies, because every context will be different. It is so important in this work to understand that what might work for some individuals and organisations could be problematic or negative for others.

The engagement that Nicolas was talking about is so important. That long-term relationship building and those non-hierarchical relationships are really key. It is a shift from seeing human rights defenders and civil society organisations as mere recipients of support and providers of information to genuine partners, the experts in their communities, the experts on their issues and the lens through which the UK can achieve real impact on its own priorities, but also an impact for those individuals and organisations that are facing such huge challenges.

Q33 **Kate Osamor:** Karla, I wanted to ask you a question around what is happening in Georgia at the moment with the foreign agent law. I do not know whether you can speak to that, but do you have any thoughts on what we are seeing? There are a lot of people on the streets. It is a mixture of civil society and just citizens. I do not know what position the Foreign Office has taken in response to the law itself, because it has passed. Are you in agreement with its position, if you can speak to that?

Karla McLaren: I will be honest that I am not aware of the Government's position on it and I am not up to speed on the issue specifically. I can definitely provide more information and follow up to the Committee and to you, if that is helpful.

Q34 **Mrs Latham:** Nicolas, can you outline the work that IFES does in supporting democratic resilience?

Nicolas Kaczorowski: What is democratic resilience? It is a capacity of a community or society to absorb the shocks and stresses so that democratic functions can continue. Very recently, through a publication called *Paths to Democratic Resilience in an Era of Backsliding*, we have tried to give a structured approach to the work on democratic resilience. We need to look at the different stages. We saw very often that it starts with democratic erosions. Then we see a worsening situation where sometimes we see a democratic breakdown and sometimes all the way through to autocratic deepening. For each of these phases, we need to look at the sort of programming that we can do, together with our partners on the ground, to try to address the situation.

We try to be as flexible as we can, but also very adaptive to the environment that we are working on. Looking at the different levels of accountability, as I said in my preliminary remarks, autocrats are going to attack, first and foremost, accountability mechanisms. We talked about



civil society but it can also be democratic institutions, the media or capture of election commissions, so that we ensure that the outcome of an election will be the outcome we are looking for. We saw co-optation of democratic institutions, but also the democratic principle, to turn them into their own purposes. We need to be looking at those different levels of accountability and how we can strengthen the checks and balances of democratic countervailing institutions.

We cannot build democratic society without taking into account that, in democratic institutions, there are people who are making those institutions work. If they do not have the norms and the democratic principles in them, it becomes very difficult for these institutions to act and behave in a democratic way and serve the citizens. We have to invest more in citizens, civic education and political education. There are those who do not necessarily have access to education. I am thinking about vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities. They are double punished. They have a disability but very often they are early drop-outs, because in many countries there is no inclusive education.

We need to mainstream inclusion throughout our programme, so that everyone can benefit from civic education and build in himself and herself democratic principles that will make institutions more democratic or serve the citizens in the way they should work. That is what we are trying to do. It is to place more emphasis on citizens. It is not that processes and systems are not important, but very often, after a revolution, we believe that all citizens have become democrats. No, there is a rollover legacy of an authoritarian regime that shapes the mind, which needs to be, over a long period of time, changed, so that democratic values are also enshrined in every one of us.

Q35 **Mr Bacon:** Mr Kaczorowski, you are funded by a relatively small number of countries. I am looking at your website where you list them: the United States Department of State, USAID, which we visited last time we were in Washington, Australia, Canada, the British, the Swiss, the French, the Danes, the New Zealanders, the Swedes and the Indians. Then there are some famous private companies, such as Google, Meta and Microsoft. I see that you are funded by the Open Society, which is George Soros's organisation. George Soros was taught at the London School of Economics by Karl Popper, who wrote a book called *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Do you buy copies of it en masse to distribute to your client groups, by any chance?

Nicolas Kaczorowski: No, I do not.

Q36 **Mr Bacon:** You should. I am being absolutely serious. You should. Have you read it?

Nicolas Kaczorowski: Not particularly, no. There is a lot of literature on civil societies.

Q37 **Mr Bacon:** Yes, but not of that calibre. It is called *The Open Society and*



Its Enemies. It is by Karl Popper, who taught George Soros at the London School of Economics. I am, of course, biased, because I am an alumnus of there as well. What I really want to ask is whether this relatively small coterie of large international funders, a Western club largely and some very big capitalist companies, has an impact on how you are seen in the countries where you are active? Does it represent particular challenges?

Nicolas Kaczorowski: It can in certain contexts. As I said earlier on, democracy work is hard work. It is very sensitive. We recognise that. We have to be modest and humble in the way we are doing it. That also raises the issue of the branding policies of each of our organisations and funders. We always try to discuss that so that we make sure that we do no harm. We safeguard our local partners and we provide them training as well to make sure that they understand the risks they are taking. They create in their own organisation the procedures but also the system in place, so that they feel protected.

We did that, for instance, with the journalists we are working with, to make sure that they understand situational awareness when they go into a demonstration and the steps they should take to protect themselves, but also in the cyber world. This is also very important for journalists to keep their source secret but also to keep their own safety and data that they have together. We have to be flexible and adaptable, and to make sure that the entry points we are looking at are entry points that can provide impact.

Too often we look at our work at the national level. Going to local communities and building those relationships with those who are most marginalised allows us to not only have impact but also to show that democracy can deliver and democracy delivers best at the local level. In a democracy, there is no higher office than being a citizen. This is something that we all should keep in mind in our work.

Q38 **Mr Bacon:** What is your annual budget and what does it get spent on?

Nicolas Kaczorowski: I am sorry, but I cannot really speak to that. This is certainly a question to the CEO, but I can provide you with the figures. I am working in the field, not in the HQ. I can certainly respond to the Committee.

Q39 **Mr Bacon:** Where is your HQ?

Nicolas Kaczorowski: It is in Washington.

Mr Bacon: Washington DC, okay. If you are able to send us that information afterwards, it would be very helpful. Thank you.

Chair: You are welcome to write to the Committee afterwards with the relevant statistics. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Nick Westcott and Edmund Fitton-Brown.

Q40 **Chair:** Welcome to our International Development Committee session. Could I ask our witnesses to introduce themselves?

Dr Westcott: My name is Nick Westcott. I am currently professor of practice in diplomacy at SOAS, University of London, but formerly a British diplomat serving in a number of places.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I am Edmund Fitton-Brown. I am formerly the British ambassador to Yemen, with a range of postings before that.

Q41 **Mrs Latham:** Nick, can you describe FCDO's expectations for embassy staff to engage with civil society organisations?

Dr Westcott: Briefly, there is an expectation that British embassies and high commissions will ensure they have as wide a range of contacts with civil society as possible, wherever they are. That is obviously dependent also on means. A one-person mission in N'Djamena in Chad is not going to have the same capability as the Washington embassy. Within those understandable constraints and the need to prioritise, it is an integral part of the job.

There are different aspects of this. To some extent, civil society covers a very wide range of possible contacts. I tended to take a rather broad interpretation of civil society, including the churches, the traditional authorities—as when I was serving in Ghana or Tanzania—artistic organisations and cultural outfits, as well as what you would consider the more conventional non-governmental organisations pursuing particular interests. It seemed to me important to have links into all those different groups to get a real understanding of what civil society, if you like, is thinking, as well as one's official contacts with Government and political parties.

From my point of view—and I think the FCDO encouraged this—the aim was to get as wide a range of contacts and views as possible. That is distinct from specific support to aspects of civil society, where it varies enormously from country to country what the expectations are. That depends on the range of business, the state of relations and the form of government in each of the countries that you are serving in.

In some countries, such as Ethiopia, which I had a lot of dealings with, there was an expectation to be quite actively involved in supporting civil society, because there was a demand for support. In a country such as Ghana, where I was high commissioner, there was an expectation you would have a wide range, but there was less need for support, as it was a relatively open and liberal society. In a country such as the US, it is almost impossible because the range of people you could have contact with is so vast, and it is, at least at the time I was there, quite a robust democracy. I think that it is still a robust democracy. You could spend



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your life running around and talking to a myriad of different organisations. It is not to say that it is still not important to have that contact, but there is no need for support. They are fully self-supporting.

Q42 Mrs Latham: Edmund, did FCDO/DFID guidance exist on who you should engage with and how?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: Do you mean during my time working on Yemen or more broadly?

Mrs Latham: I mean more broadly.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: In terms of guidance, as was just observed, it would be very difficult to write one-size-fits-all guidance for the full range of embassies that we have, because the resources, tasking and environment of each are very different. We received very good and very easy guidance when we sought it, but, to a large degree, we had the freedom to work out for ourselves how best to discharge our functions in the field. Under the supervision of the ambassador, you would have a great deal of autonomy. Of course, you would be in organic daily contact with the Foreign Office, DFID and other stakeholders in such a way that you would very rapidly realise if you were not hitting the right buttons.

Q43 Mrs Latham: More specifically in Yemen, did that differ very much from other places you have been?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: Yemen was really sui generis. It was very different from anywhere else that I served, partly because it was a crisis-ridden country for a very long time and partly because of the high-threat environment. It was the only place where I was concerned with not directly serving, because, as you know, I had to operate from Jeddah during my time because of the civil war in Yemen. I was familiar with what was happening in Yemen before the embassy evacuated as well.

A third point would be the Arab spring, which was a bigger deal in Yemen than it was in many other places, or at least it was a process that, for a while, seemed to be leading in a very positive direction. The Yemenis wanted the help of the international community. As ambassadors, before I took over and to some degree even when I was ambassador and we were in exile, we were very active participants in what the Yemenis were trying to do. There was none of the distance that often applies between a Government and a diplomatic community. Because I knew I was going to be taking over as ambassador, I was very closely following the national dialogue that the Yemenis conducted, which for a while looked like an extraordinarily advanced piece of consultation for the region. Of course, ultimately it failed and was overwhelmed by the Houthi advance.

Q44 Mrs Latham: Nick, in your experience, is it effective for embassies to utilise the private sector when they are seeking to strengthen civil society across the host countries?



Dr Westcott: That is quite a tricky question, because it varies from circumstance to circumstance. To take a couple of practical examples, when I was serving in Ghana we would work quite closely with businesses, particularly those that had links to the UK, that had networks throughout the country, such as Unilever, a company that was very much into retail distribution. They would be able to tell us about the economic situation. Because they had a network throughout the country, they could also tell us if there were particular tensions or problems. Occasionally, there were civil disturbances on ethnic or religious grounds in some areas. They would very often be a source of information about that and who we should contact in that area. Yes, there are circumstances where we would use the private sector.

We tended to have more contact in this respect with international organisations, such as the UN agencies and the ICRC, or other international NGOs, such as CARE, Oxfam and so on, which were working more directly with civil society. There is one other area. It depends whether you wish to count it as civil society, but in the cocoa industry there were a lot of co-operatives. There were human rights concerns there, for example child labour. Therefore, it is quite important to talk to Cadbury, which bought Divine Chocolate as well, about what assurances it was getting in its supply chain that human rights were not being abused on the farms.

It was the same in mining, although that was less of an issue in the UK, but, again, child labour was being employed. There are areas where you need to go to the private sector to get a clear picture of what it thinks is happening on the ground, which may impact on either values we are trying to promote or interests that we need to protect.

Q45 **Mrs Latham:** A recent report from ICAI criticised the UK's risk appetite when balancing supporting civil society organisations with maintaining access to authoritarian Governments, which the Government partially accepted. What would your analysis be of this?

Dr Westcott: There are two quite good examples of where this kind of challenge was faced. One would be Ethiopia. This is going back some years now but, while Meles and the EPRDF were still in control, they were quite hostile to independent journalism and to some of the attempts to impose political rights and freedoms. We had a good active dialogue and a huge aid programme, so you would think we would have access and leverage, but we had to choose carefully how we raised these issues.

To do so in public, on a platform to ensure it was reported that we were trying to defend these things, we would often produce a counter reaction, a counterblast from the Ethiopian authorities. If we lobbied them behind closed doors, we would often get a more understanding response, although not always a positive one. There were questions as to why we were not imposing sanctions on the Ethiopian regime because of their suppression of free speech, as opposed to carrying on giving them aid programmes.



I was not the ambassador in the mission. I was observing this. In those circumstances there was a debate that went on as to what our interests in Ethiopia were. Should we continue with the aid programme, because we were successfully helping the Government improve education, alleviate poverty and expand the economy, despite the suppression of free speech, or should we suspend all activities until free speech had been fully granted? The judgment was partly that, even if we suspended all the aid, they would not actually improve free speech. They regarded that as a question of political existential importance and they would rather do without the money, in which case we would not be able to achieve the objectives that we had under the aid programme to alleviate poverty.

That is the kind of dilemma that we had, again, in Egypt as well. As President Sisi progressively turned the screws on, specifically, civil society organisations, there was a lot of pressure from civil society organisations saying, "Help, we are being squeezed out of here. Our freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom to lobby is being denied us. You must put more pressure on the Government because these are your values we are defending here". To come out publicly tended to reinforce the narratives that authoritarian regimes put out: "These people are merely serving the interests of external Governments who are trying to enforce their morals or their political system on us. It is the Ethiopians' right or the Egyptians' right to choose their own form of government. It is not for you to tell us what we should be doing".

Q46 Mrs Latham: Edmund, would you say that the FCDO produces internal guidance for ambassadors when taking these sorts of decisions?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I would not say that there is an instruction sheet, as it were. This is just too nuanced a subject and it is too varied between different embassies and different arenas around the world. It is very good at consulting. It is very good at accessing the necessary advice and then providing instructions. Again, it will depend a little bit on the kind of access that you have to London.

With Yemen we had exceptional access. We would have regular video teleconferences at which senior stakeholders in London would be present around the table. It was a very organic process of working through the issues and refining, but, of course, ultimately understanding and carrying out the instructions from London. It would be very different if you were talking about a more remote, smaller embassy. It would be rather more of a one-size-fits-all solution if you were just trying to manage with an ambassador and one assistant, or something of that kind.

The system works really well. It probably works pretty well for everybody, but perhaps better for the higher-priority embassies than for others. I do not think that what is needed is an extreme codification of what is expected.

Q47 Dr Allin-Khan: Edmund, what guidance exists on safeguarding members



of civil society organisations that receive funding from embassies?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: It is a good question. The guidance is going to be more in the nature of “do no harm”. Make sure that you are not going to create a problem. I think that on a previous question your colleague talked about whether the Foreign Office was risk averse. I wanted to chip in on that and ask, “The risk to whom?” That charge of being risk averse is usually levelled against the Foreign Office when it comes to ring-fenced national interests such as defence industry. While I do not deny that that is a factor, the question you are asking, I think, is more about the risk to the actors on the ground. That is one that you have to take extremely seriously and it varies enormously between different posts.

In a way an interesting contrast is between Yemen as it was just before I took over and Yemen as it was under Houthi domination. Before I took over, as I said, there was this sort of very high level of responsiveness of the Yemeni Government, particularly after the fall of Ali Abdullah Saleh, to foreign input. We had an extraordinarily high level of freedom to work with civil society, ask things on their behalf and, indeed, to facilitate their inclusion in the national dialogue. We felt that there was very little risk involved in that because the Yemenis were inviting it.

Later, when the Houthis were in Sana’a and we were in Jeddah, we of course had to be extremely careful about engagement with anybody who was, either directly or through family ties, under the threat of reprisals from the Houthis. That included our own former staff because we kept on our staff for a little while, but there were rules that were applied wherever we had had to evacuate, and that included Libya and Syria. We had standardised processes for how long we could continue to employ staff and then the terms on which we had to let them go. What was interesting to me was how many of the staff wanted to continue to help us, but how careful we had to be. The accusation of espionage, which in a totalitarian country is about as serious as it gets, was always on the verge of being made against anybody who did anything that could be presented as serving foreign interests.

Q48 **Mr Bacon:** Mr Westcott—Dr Westcott, I am sorry—you are a Cambridge PhD, are you not? Yes. There is quite a heavyweight Cantabrigian presence on this panel, not that I am against it. I just thought I would note it. You have been in a number of missions and served as the ambassador or high commissioner in various places. When you arrive somewhere and start thinking about engaging with civil society, what do you expect to find in terms of existing income streams and how they are allocated? Will you expect to find a specific tranche that is allocated over a long period of time, or is it money that you will then have upon arrival to decide how to allocate yourself? How does it generally work?

Dr Westcott: In most of the posts where I have been, particularly in Africa, where I have served in Tanzania, Ghana and neighbouring countries, there would quite often be already in existence programmes of support to specifically, say, the local journalists’ union. We would give



support of some kind to that. These would be done largely through the aid programme, though in one or two cases in the old days there used to be something called the heads of mission gift scheme, where you could support particular causes on a one-off short-term basis with a small single grant of money. Most of the rest would have been programmes, but relatively short term, so agreed for two or three years, not more than that. They were constantly stopping and you would need to renew or review who was getting what money and how effective the resources had been. It was usually not a large number and not a large sum.

Q49 **Mr Bacon:** What are we talking about in terms of money, roughly?

Dr Westcott: In Ghana, we would have had a total budget to give to civil society organisations of something like £100,000 a year.

Q50 **Mr Bacon:** What about in Cote d'Ivoire?

Dr Westcott: In Cote d'Ivoire we had less because I was there only occasionally. I do not remember us supporting any civil society organisations there. We tended to work with UN and other agencies, but I believe we made a one-off grant to a church organisation for observing the elections in 2010.

Q51 **Mr Bacon:** Mr Fitton-Brown, what is your experience in relation to funding streams?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: It is certainly less, in the sense that I served as ambassador in only one post, but that was very familiar with my experience as well. From the point of view of direct Foreign Office-provided support or missions-provided support to civil society, you would be talking about very small discretionary amounts. The overwhelming muscle for support would be DFID. Before the merger, it would be the Department for International Development that had these long-running and very large-scale programmes. As was just said, there was a tendency to work in partnership. You might work in partnership with other missions, the EU or the United Nations. There was not a lot of high-profile significant UK political spending.

Q52 **Mr Bacon:** If you are working in partnership with other missions, there is presumably an expectation on the part of those partners, whether it is the Germans, the Swiss, the Swedes, the UN or some other multilateral organisation, that the funding will be multiyear and that it will be spread over a number of years rather than just stop and start.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I just do not have enough context to give you a good answer on that in the Yemen sense.

Dr Westcott: There were a few organisations, such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, that would give multiyear grants. They were slightly autonomous of the high commission or the embassy itself. There were some educational charities that DFID would give maybe four or five-year support to. That could sometimes be politically sensitive. In a



country like Niger, women's education requires a little thought as to how to do it most effectively because of the culture in the country.

- Q53 **Mr Bacon:** Loads of witnesses have told us about how longer-term multiyear funding would help make a difference. Do you agree? How do you see that being implemented?

Dr Westcott: Yes, I do agree. It enables civil society organisations to plan ahead. The problem is how long you are able to commit money for under the existing aid rules. As I say, some of our contributions were just one-off grants because that is the money that we had available and flexible.

For some of the small civil society organisations, the bureaucracy involved had often been quite heavy for a multiyear aid-based grant, although there were efforts to streamline this and make it easier. We also have a duty of care to the taxpayer to ensure the money is going to what it has been given to do. There is a minimum that you cannot reduce.

- Q54 **Mr Bacon:** Mr Fitton-Brown, please come in on this too. How do you balance that challenge to keep it administratively light with accountability and due diligence?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: I certainly agree with the point being made about the importance of predictability and continuity. That is somewhat challenging in the system in which we are operating.

There was a particular way in which this often manifested, certainly in Yemen. We had some relatively large aid programmes running. They continued to run even after the embassy had to leave Sanaa. A lot of the work that was done was done in partnership or through the UN. Therefore, it was the UN that provided the continuity. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the UN was a major operation in terms of aid delivery in Yemen.

In terms of due diligence, there are problems that exist. Even when we were present in-country, we had a contracted-out third-party auditing system. That was regarded as quite satisfactory. That meant that in practice British embassy officials and DFID officials were not directly visiting projects on the ground up-country in Yemen. The reason for that was, of course, security. We were in an almost constantly deteriorating security climate right up until the time when we left.

Even when you were in-country, if you had a major project that was running 500 miles away, you were not going to be able to visit it so you had a system of third-party auditing. That was regarded as working relatively well and, therefore, did not change greatly after we left and the operation was then being run from outside Yemen.

There are concerns with the perverse incentive to continue to deliver and to accomplish the delivery of humanitarian aid. You were making the point about committing for three or four years and having predictability.



There is also a problem with predictability, which is that circumstances can change. If there is anything wrong in the audit or supervision chain, there is a risk around the priority to complete delivery and complete spend. It is quite hard to override that and say, "We have lost confidence in this project and we are going to pull the plug on it".

There is a serious problem now—I am not referring to British money, by the way—with the UN aid projects in Yemen, which certainly are prone to being essentially stolen from and exploited by the Houthis.

Q55 Chair: Finally, Nick, how effectively can well-funded civil society organisations act as an early warning system for atrocities—or not, as the case may be?

Dr Westcott: They can do. The best example that I can think of is in Ethiopia. Before the civil war broke out, with the secession and war with Tigray, the semi-official Ethiopian Human Rights Commission was saying, "You should be worried about this. Tension is very high. There could be an outbreak of fighting". It was saying this to us. That is a wholly local organisation, purely Ethiopian. It received some grants, not from the UK but from some other organisations and Governments. It was doing a fantastically good job and has continued through the war to collect evidence of atrocities by both sides. It is still operating to this day, acting very bravely. I see Edmund has views on that too.

That is an example of where, yes, they can act as early warning systems.

Edmund Fitton-Brown: Yes, I completely agree with what you just said. I want to underline it. One of the sad realities of working in an embassy in a capital with a Government is that you will be told what they want you to know. It is the responsibility of the embassy to do better than that and to make sure that it is providing a balanced understanding to all the stakeholders in London.

Let me just take an example where, happily, we are not talking about atrocities but about a risk factor. In Egypt, where I served multiple times, the default setting of the Government in Cairo—this is true now and was also true back in the 1990s when I was there—is to reassure no matter what. When diplomats come to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior or any other ministry to ask, "Should we be concerned about this? What about this risk factor?" you will always get the same answer, which will be, "Nothing to see here. Everything is fine. Don't worry. We have it covered".

Some of the time that is true, and some of the time it is not. This is not manifested in atrocities in Egypt—I hope it never will—but it certainly can happen with low-level outrages, such as the abuse of Coptic communities in some parts of the country. It is more notable with things like terrorist activity and the risk from groups such as Jama'ah al-Islamiyah, Egyptian Jihad or later ISIL. The absolute default of the Egyptians is not to tell you, and then all of a sudden something goes spectacularly wrong like



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the attack on the temple in Luxor, the downing of the aeroplane or those sorts of things. Of course, the embassies and Governments all then lose confidence in the Egyptian Government because they do not believe that they will tell them anything or give them any early warning.

The Egyptian Government would not want you to be using your civil society contacts for early warning, but it is obvious that they do potentially supply that early warning. It is one of the reasons that we always have to push the envelope in terms of maintaining contact with civil society. I mean civil society around the country as well. I do not mean just in the capital. Part of the issue is the degree to which you are able to keep out your sensors or your tripwires not just in the capital but all over the country.

Subject to that risk issue, subject to not putting people in harm's way and not having people arrested for espionage, you must use civil society for that purpose.

Q56 Chair: To pick up on that, you have mentioned that Governments may not tell you what is going on, so you are relying on civil society. Is it realistic to be expecting civil society to be the early warning system, given that some are very small charities and they do not have a huge amount of resource?

Edmund Fitton-Brown: It is of course not the whole answer. It is only part of the answer. Embassies are complex things. If you think about a medium-sized embassy, you are going to have a commercial department; you are going to have a consular department; and you may well have the British Council present. You are going to have a lot of access.

We are also talking about the private sector today. If you simply think about the value of big business contacts, those people, usefully, are often very well insured against risk themselves. They are so well connected in the Government that they have the licence to talk in a way that perhaps some more beleaguered activists do not.

It is all part of a bigger picture. That bigger picture also includes intelligence. You need all of that stuff operating if you are going to see things coming.

Dr Westcott: Another example where civil society organisations were able to give early warning is in relation to Boko Haram in Nigeria. Again, civil society groups were warning, "This is a very serious situation. The Government are losing control. Insecurity is spreading. Kidnappings are happening," long before the Government would admit that the situation was as serious as it became.

That enabled the UK to raise it with the Government. We did not necessarily get as positive a response as we could have. The civil society organisations could not really make that public. They would come to the high commission and say, "We want you to know because we are very



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worried about this. We cannot say so in public because then we will be excluded from the area or whatever, and we want to carry on helping people in that area. Can you raise this, please?"

Having those links with civil society where it feels free to come and talk to you and to give you this early warning then enables us to take action that may diminish the risk of outbreak of violence.

Chair: Thank you very much. Can I thank all of our witnesses for coming in today?