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UNDERSTANDING ACTIVISM

HOW INTERNATIONAL NGOS,
FOUNDATIONS AND OTHERS CAN
PROVIDE BETTER SUPPORT TO
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

rhize

ABOUT THIS REPORT

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FOREWORD

BY ERIN MAZURSKY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF RHIZE

We are in what social scientists call the “Age of Movements.”¹ The past decade has seen more nonviolent movements than the three previous decades combined.² At the same time, civil society is under renewed threat. Over a hundred countries have seen a net decline in freedom over the past ten years.³ Proponents of strong and open civil societies globally — international organizations, foreign governments, philanthropic donors, individuals — increasingly recognize the expanding role movements play in shaping civil societies but continue to grapple with their role in supporting them. This report looks to the catalytic leaders and their often informal or loosely affiliated groups driving movements to understand how support has affected their work and what they really need to do their work more successfully.

Understanding Activism focuses on the relationships between activists campaigning for political and social change and the foreign governments, foundations, nongovernmental organizations, and private individuals that support them. Many activists have had support—in forms that include funding, training, media relations, and more—from these types of outside actors, yet there has been insufficient research on their perceptions of this support. While there is no shortage of anecdotal or case-specific evidence of effective approaches to supporting activism transnationally, *Understanding Activism* breaks new ground by combining first-person accounts from activists with quantitative data from across many different contexts.

We focused on activists for the study because they are the actors on the frontlines of campaigning and organizing for open civil society. For the sake of the study, activists were defined as those active in social movements, community organizing, blogging, legal activism, investigative journalism, and forms of civil resistance that are nonviolent. We did not seek views from those working professionally in international organizations or international non-government organizations, unless they are also involved in other forms of activism. These activists work on a breadth of issues and experience a diversity of constraints, but one thing unites them all: every activist surveyed shares a deep commitment to organizing their community and advocating for justice and democracy.

In order to gather the data for this report, we worked with well-connected activists to survey over one thousand activists in ten countries—Colombia, Egypt, India, Kenya, Russia, Sudan, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, and Venezuela—chosen for regional diversity as well for countries with closed, semi-closed and closing civil society spaces. By surveying diverse networks of activists, we were able to better identify the types of support that activists need as well as the ways outside actors have helped or hindered their work in the past.

This study provides a broad base of evidence from which we can better understand the current state of activism and how outside actors can best support it. Broadly, there were three key questions that focused and directed the research:

- (1) **What types of support have activists received to date, if any?**
- (2) **Which types of support were helpful or harmful?**
- (3) **What types of support do activists really want?**

While the results of the study brought a great deal of insight into the experiences of activists with outside actors, this is only the tip of the iceberg. We came to understand the broader categories of support individuals and groups seek, but we also hope to expand our research efforts in the future to better understand these types of support and to include other countries. That said, the responses to these questions have led to conclusions that can help point allies in a more strategic direction when it comes to effectively implementing support for activists in the future.

KEY INSIGHTS

First, across the data one thing was clear: activism is under threat. Conditions are worsening around the world as activists face increased repression, though the specific realities of repression differ country by country. The biggest crackdowns activists cited were around safety, free speech and access to information. Activists attributed these worsening conditions to a variety of actors, which reflects an overall trend of a rise in authoritarianism around the world and a crackdown on outside actors operating in many of the countries studied. This data runs consistent with similar data from other watchdog organizations such as Freedom House's Map of Freedoms, which has cited an overall decline in open civic space over the last decade. This study found that the backsliding of rights compounded with actions of the local police and security forces limited activists' ability to operate. For marginalized communities, religious organizations and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), alongside local police and national government, are highlighted as having negative impact on activists. This addition of INGOs is troublesome given that INGOs explicitly intend to provide support, yet can cause harm both through direct relationships with activists and through indirect impact.

Second, external actors providing support often differ in their approach, depending on whether or not the recipient is an organization or an individual. Most organizations receiving support from external actors are registered organizations, as opposed to movements or loose organizations. This suggests that outside actors have less ease supporting movements, thereby indicating potential barriers that impede direct support to activists at the grassroots level. Meanwhile, individuals receive support from external actors most commonly in the forms of access to leadership programs, international conferences, and network memberships. The research found that these types of support are often awarded to people in more formal and senior positions, which limits access to support for emerging and nontraditional leaders at the grassroots level.

Third, among activists, experiences of support differed. When focusing specifically on organizations that received external support, there was a small margin between positive and negative experiences of support, which indicates that organizations often had mixed experiences when receiving external support. Among individuals, though, activists were

more likely to have a better experience when receiving outside support. The key differentiating factors that impacted experiences of support centered around whether activists felt their power and autonomy was respected by outside actors. Meanwhile, the factors that most negatively impacted experiences of support were when external organizations "did not know enough about our context," "imposed their own agenda," and/or only provided "short-term support."

Fourth, when focusing on the types of support offered by external organizations, it becomes clear where outside actors' strengths lie and where there needs to be vast improvement. Security-related support was the most mentioned negative experience. Activists often cited that external organizations overemphasized digital security as opposed to their physical security, thereby overlooking the ways in which activists are vulnerable. A more favorable view can be seen in how activists referred to the delivery of funding. The most effective funding types were those that allowed for flexibility and built longer-term infrastructure without being tied to specific project outcomes. Additionally, individual activists cited that funding was often inaccessible to them due to bureaucratic barriers, seemingly designed to keep funds out of loose networks or unregistered organizations.

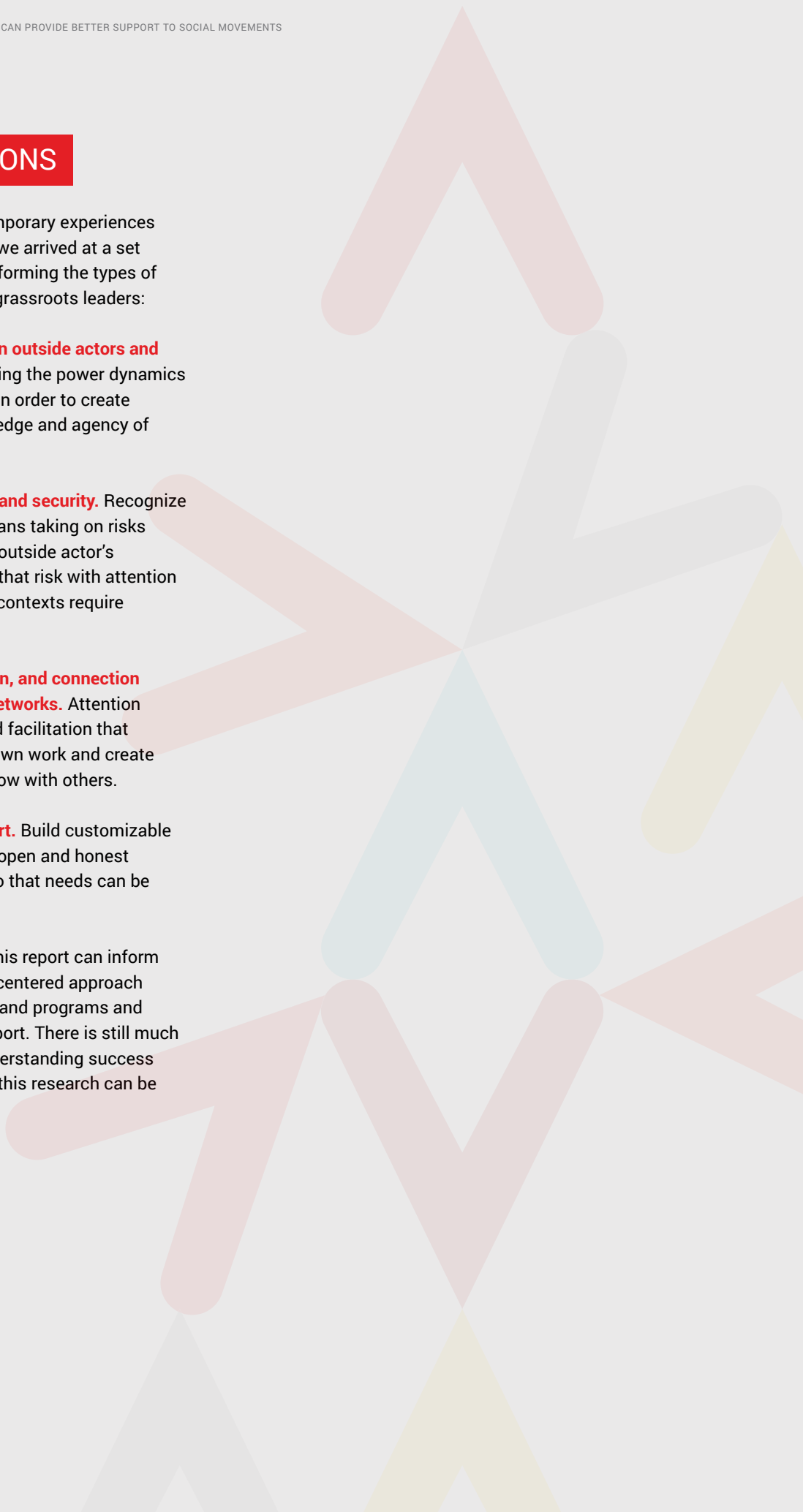
Finally, activists made clear the kinds of support they most want: closer collaboration, security support, amnesty or safe passage, and media coverage. Activists felt greater support in these areas would make the most difference in their work. Overall, activists emphasized that they most wanted to gain the skills and resources necessary to sustain their work long term. This is rooted in activists' understanding that it takes time to build the momentum needed to create social change. Activists are interested in working in smarter, more impactful ways with a focus on scaling their work by reaching more people and increasing safety and security so they can have success over the long term.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Through analysis of both the contemporary experiences of support and what activists want, we arrived at a set of recommendations aimed at transforming the types of support outside actors can offer to grassroots leaders:

- 1. Redefine relationships between outside actors and activists.** Invest in understanding the power dynamics between donors and activists in order to create relationships where the knowledge and agency of activists is respected.
- 2. Improve approaches to safety and security.** Recognize that working with activists means taking on risks and as equal partners it is the outside actor's responsibility to help mitigate that risk with attention to the ways in which different contexts require different security protocols.
- 3. Prioritize training, collaboration, and connection among and between activist networks.** Attention should be paid to trainings and facilitation that directly relate to an activists' own work and create space for them to learn and grow with others.
- 4. Tailor collaboration and support.** Build customizable and flexible support based on open and honest conversations with activists so that needs can be effectively identified and met.

Our hope is that, taken as a whole, this report can inform donors who want to use an activist-centered approach to shape their institutional agendas and programs and create more effective means of support. There is still much to learn when it comes to better understanding success factors for supporting activism, but this research can be seen as a starting point.



INTRODUCTION

A Colombian man participating in a campaign to enact a law to protect a national park under threat from mining companies. A Ugandan transgender activist campaigning against an anti-homosexual bill faces acts and threats of violence because “people can’t accept who I am.” A Venezuelan woman campaigning for the freedom of political prisoners kept in a basement without windows or ventilation. A Turkish activist from a small town working to mobilize the protests in Gezi Park in support of democracy. A seasoned Sudanese activist training thousands of young women and men in peace building, conflict analysis, and resolution has his organization closed down by the government. An Indian woman fighting for the rights of forest-based communities despite opposition from government forest officials.

These are just a few of the 1,107 activists from Colombia, Egypt, India, Kenya, Russia, Sudan, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, and Venezuela who answered a survey about their experiences and hopes for relationships with organizations, networks, and individuals from outside their country who want to support their efforts.

This research project aims to understand the perspectives of local and national activists on relationships with these outside actors, which include international nongovernment organizations, foundations, diaspora groups, activist networks, and foreign governments. The research used a survey including quantitative and qualitative questions, translated into seven languages, that was administered online and through face to face and telephone interviews by research coordinators in each country who had connections with social movements. The respondents include an almost equal split of activists who have received individual support from foreign organizations and those who have not been afforded those opportunities. However, a higher number have had some experience of relationships with outsiders through their organizations or movements. The full demographic details are in Appendix 1.

The results confirm the worsening situation for activists in the majority of these countries. Respondents most often reported that the safety of activists (marked by increases in physical violence, arrest, and other targeting) was worsening, followed by freedom of speech, freedom of information, and freedom of the press. It was only in Ukraine and Colombia that the majority of indicators (aside from safety for activists) were improving. The activists had experienced this deterioration directly. The challenges and abuses they faced included accusations of representing foreign interests, threats of violence, and tightening restrictions on receiving foreign funds. Uganda, Kenya, Sudan, and Venezuela reported the highest number of challenges or abuses with Russia and Ukraine reporting the fewest.

The results paint a clear picture of activists who want support but experience frequent restrictions and obstacles with the support they receive—particularly at an organizational level. While the majority of experiences of individual support were positive, respondents were almost as likely to report a negative experience as a positive one when they partnered with outside actors. The majority of negative stories related to a lack of respect for the local organizations’ knowledge and autonomy. In addition, the actions of outside actors at times undermined the safety and security of local activists and organizations, particularly for activists identifying as indigenous or as part of an ethnic minority.

Program officers, global activists, diplomats, and diaspora can gain much from this report—from understanding the impact of how they relate to local and national activists to gaining insights into the challenges local groups face. Local and national activists can use this report to help reset some of the relationships that exist, and to acknowledge those that enable and strengthen their work.

ACTIVISM UNDER THREAT

The 1,107 individuals active in national and local social movements who answered our survey in early 2016 raised the alarm that their work and, often, their personal safety were under threat. In general, respondents reported an overall worsening context for their activism—that critical freedoms to organize, speak, use the internet, assemble, associate, engage the press, and access information were getting worse. Respondents most often reported that the safety of activists (marked by increases in physical violence, arrest and other targeting) was worsening, followed by increasing suppression of freedom of speech, freedom of information, and freedom of the press.

This downward trajectory correlates with Freedom House's reported net decline in freedom in 105 countries over the past 10 years, with only 61 countries experiencing a net improvement.⁴ According to CIVICUS, 6 out of 7 people globally live in countries where civic space has experienced serious challenges recently.⁵ Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other organizations have documented increasing repression of citizen movements, use of draconian laws to suppress dissent, use of excessive force against demonstrators, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and inhuman treatment, extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances, and sophisticated new methods of censorship and information control.⁶

The direction and extent of change differed by country. Colombia and Ukraine reported that all measures of rights and freedoms were getting better, aside from safety of activists. India, Kenya, and Uganda, in addition to Colombia and Ukraine, reported that freedom to use the internet was improving. Egypt, Russia, Sudan, Turkey, and Venezuela reported that all measures were getting worse—most critically in Egypt, Venezuela, and Turkey.

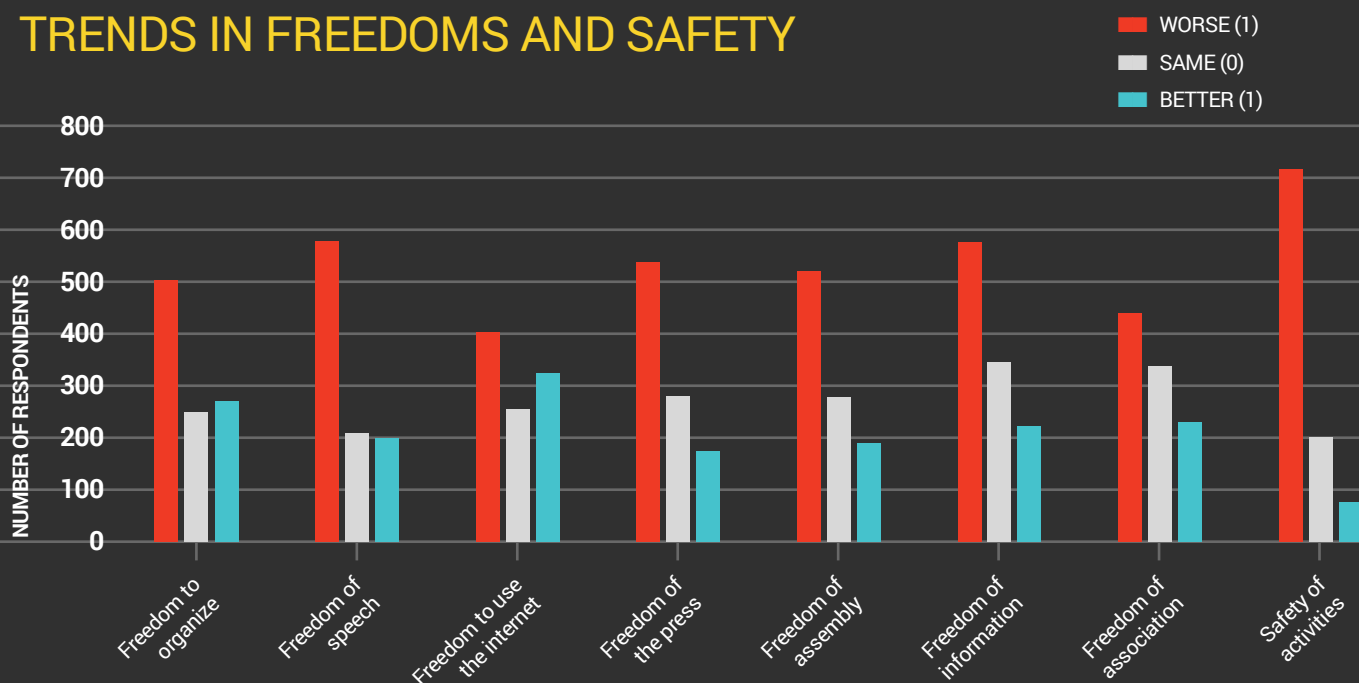
Respondents reported experiencing 1,163 instances of challenges or abuses of their freedoms. **The most common challenges were being accused of representing foreign interests, threats of violence, and requirements of government approval for foreign funds.** Kenya, Sudan, Uganda, and Venezuela reported the highest number of challenges or abuses with Russia and the Ukraine reporting the fewest. Activists working on corporate accountability, gender or LGBTQI justice, human rights, and peace building were slightly more likely to face challenges or abuses

than respondents working on other issues (1.2 per person compared to around 1).

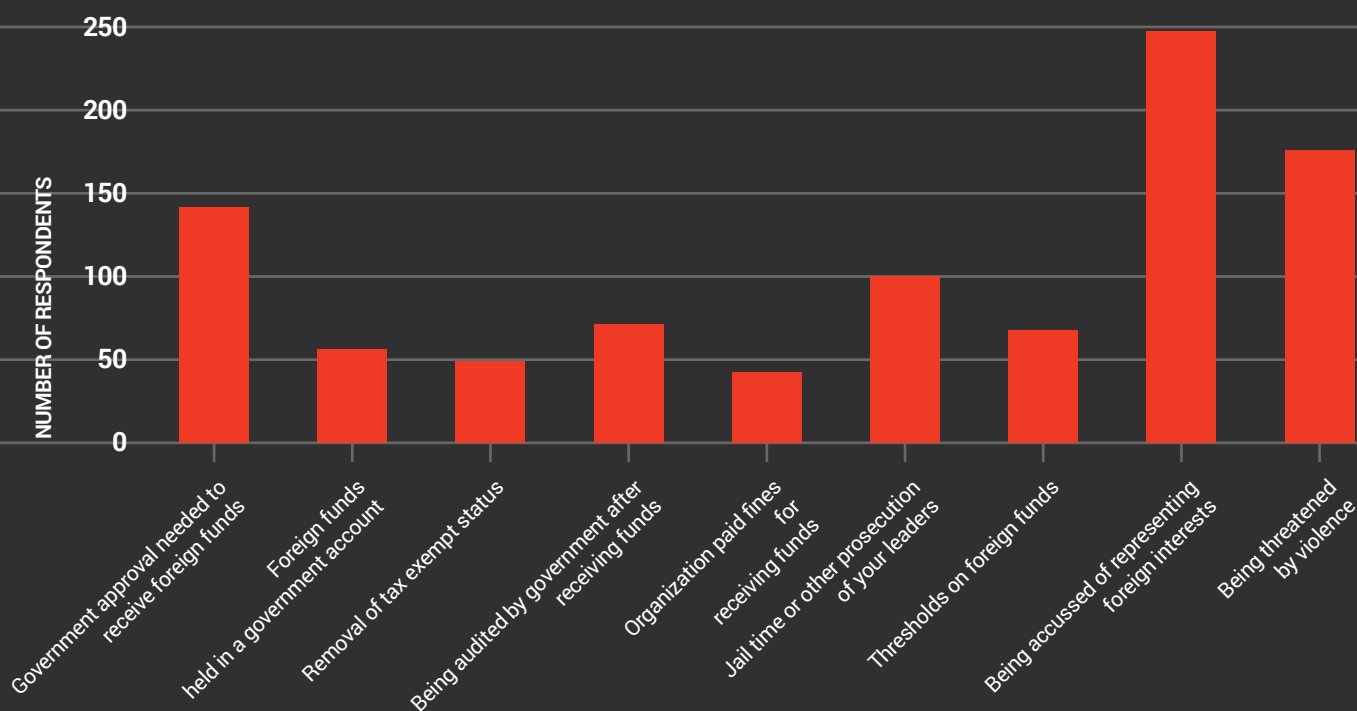
Respondents rated local police and security forces, national governments, and militaries of foreign governments as having, on average, a negative impact on a cause. In contrast, respondents gave individuals, university and student groups, foundations, international media, INGOs, and national or community-based organizations the highest average rating for having a positive impact on a cause. This varied by country. In Turkey, no actor was rated as negative on average; in Egypt, India, Sudan, and Uganda at least six actors were rated as having a negative impact on a cause. In Egypt, negative actors included corporations, foreign militaries, national or community-based organizations, local media, national government, and local police and security forces. In Uganda, India, and Sudan, negative actors included corporations, foreign governments, foreign militaries, foreign assistance, national government, and local police or security forces. Religious organizations were also on average negative in India, Russia, and Sudan.

When limited to responses from potentially marginalized groups (women, LGBTQI, people living with a disability, indigenous or ethnic minorities), the negative actors change. Religious organizations and INGOs are highlighted as particularly negative alongside local police and national government. For people identified as transgender and for ethnic minorities, religious organizations came out as the most negative actor. For LGBTQI-identified respondents and indigenous peoples, the national government was the most negative. For people living with a disability and women, the police were the most negative. The fact that some INGO interventions are having a negative impact on activists' work calls for a serious and critical examination of INGO engagement approaches and the programs they are supporting from an intersectional justice perspective.

TRENDS IN FREEDOMS AND SAFETY



NUMBER OF CHALLENGES REPORTED



ACCESS TO SUPPORT FROM OUTSIDE ACTORS

Respondents reported on their relationships and engagement with outside actors including governments, INGOs, diaspora, foundations, multilateral organizations, research institutions, and transnational solidarity groups

SUPPORT TO THEIR MOVEMENTS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND CAUSES

Respondents reported receiving support for their cause from a range of international actors, with the most prevalent being INGOs, individuals, and foundations. Activists in Colombia, India, Kenya, Uganda, and Venezuela reported the highest rate of support from outside actors, with those in Kenya reporting two to three times the rate of other countries. INGO support was most concentrated in Colombia, Kenya, and Ukraine. Diaspora support was most prevalent in Turkey and Uganda. Transnational solidarity groups were significant in Kenya and Turkey. Foundations were most prevalent in Colombia, Kenya, and Ukraine. Foreign governments and aid were most prevalent in Egypt and Ukraine.

We analyzed proportionate access to support by the issue focus of social movements that respondents were part of and found a slightly higher average access by national independence or self-determination movements, human rights, and corporate accountability. However, the difference was not large with all issue areas reporting a similar level of access to support.

A much more significant difference lay in the types of movements that reported access to support. **Registered local or national organizations reported by far the highest level of access—over three times the rate of any other form of movement (e.g., unregistered community-based organizations, loose social movements, coalitions).** This likely reflects the greater ease for international organizations to provide support (particularly financial support) through a registered organization, the common focus on organization building for the purpose of receiving support (and the focus of international organizations on such organizational development), and the potential difficulty in providing support to looser forms of social organization. However, it also raises questions about to what extent organizational form is impeding the ability of outside actors to effectively support social movements, particularly in their nascent states.

SUPPORT TO INDIVIDUAL ACTIVISTS

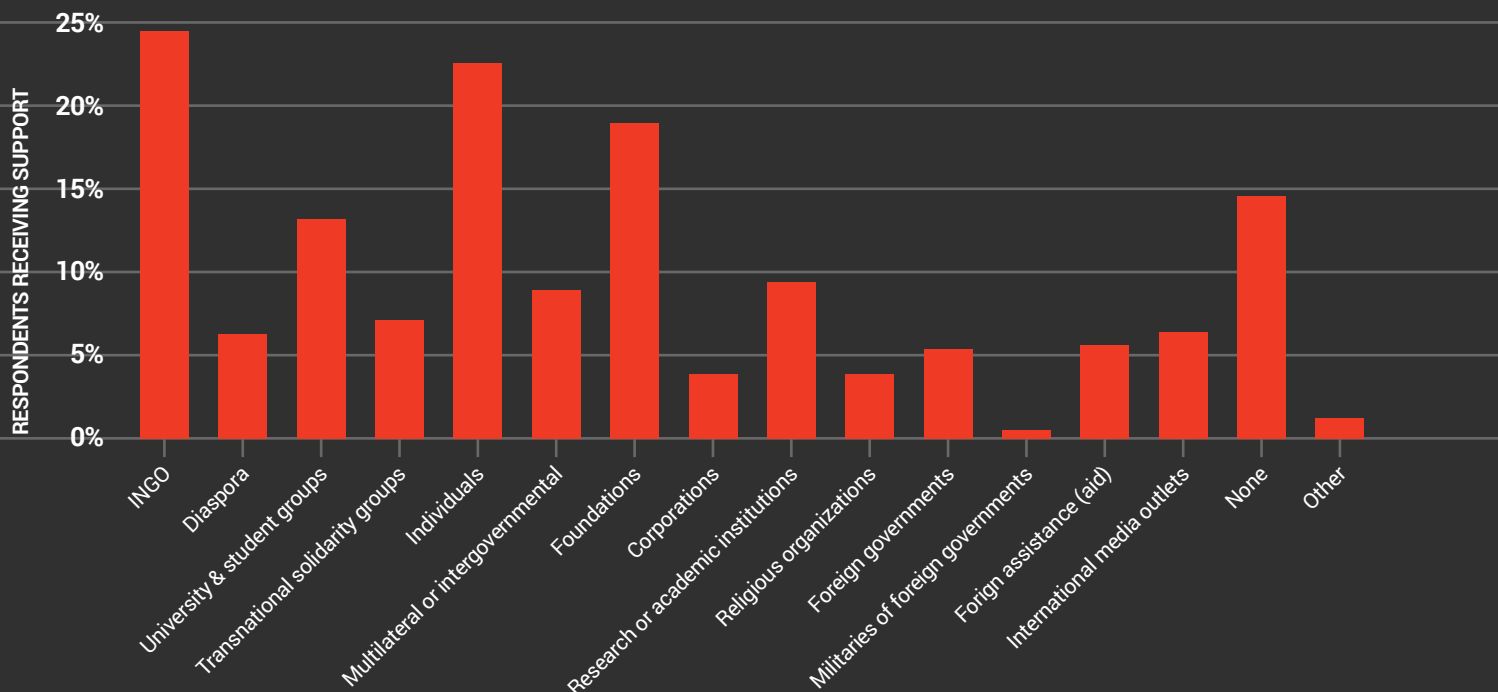
Around half the sample had experienced access to individual support opportunities such as leadership programs, access to international conferences, and membership in networks.

Broken down by country, Kenyan, Turkish, and Ugandan activists had the most access to individual support as a proportion of total respondents from each country. Activists from Egypt, India, and Sudan reported the least access to individual support from outside actors. Access to opportunities is fairly even across geography (rural to urban), indigenous and non-indigenous, ethnic minority identified and not, and gendered identity, with LGBTQI identified activists reporting greater than average access to opportunities. **The most significant differences in access to individual opportunities were related to seniority of role, with increasing average access to support as roles became more senior as seen in the chart below** (note: the majority of those who selected other identified as members of a movement).

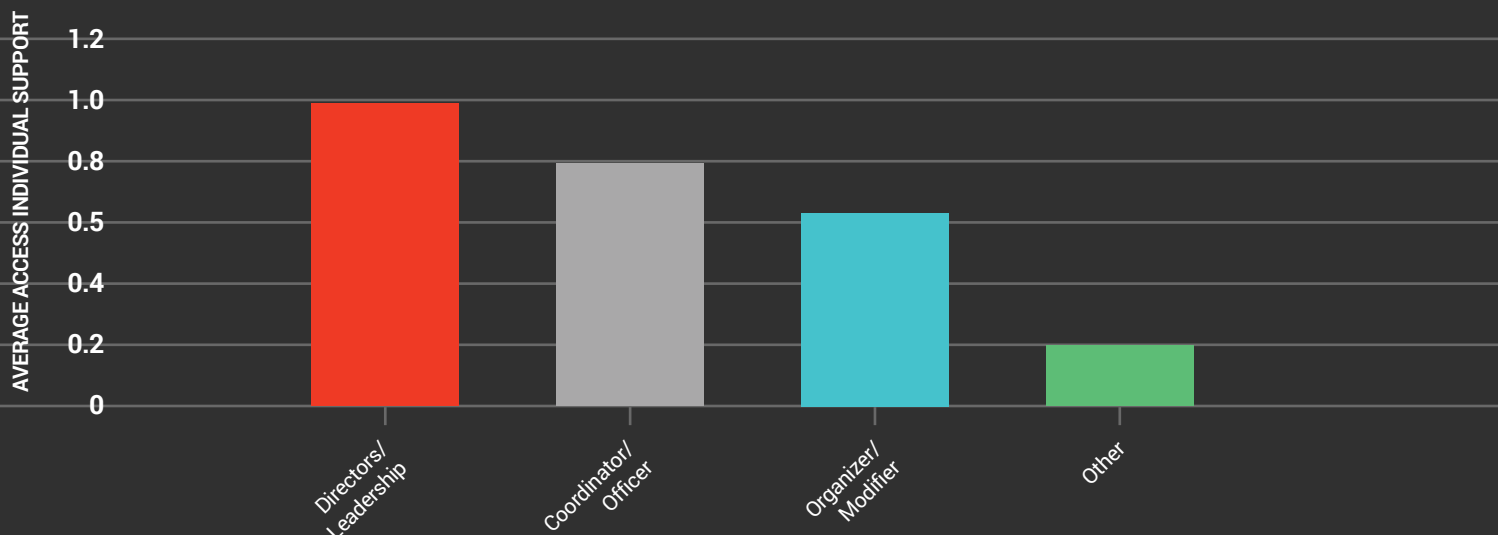
These findings highlight the lack of access to individual support for members of a movement, which is not surprising considering the challenges outsiders have in providing opportunities to members who work more informally (unassociated). It is more likely that outside actors would provide support to identifiable leaders of those movements or to staff of formal organizations that participate in movements.

Two other differences stood out. First, there was a correlation between the average access to support and international travel, with support increasing as international travel increased. Second, respondents in the 25-35 age range had the highest average access to individual support, followed by those in the 36-49 age range. This suggests that there is potentially a strong targeting of emerging or young leaders for leadership development.

TYPES OF ACTORS PROVIDING SUPPORT



AVERAGE ACCESS TO INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT OPPORTUNITIES BY ROLE



“THEY DO NOT RESPECT (US)”

THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES OF OUTSIDE SUPPORT

Activists shared both positive and negative experiences of organizational and individual support from actors outside their own country—with more positive than negative experiences across both categories and all countries with one exception (there were slightly more negative experiences of organizational support in Venezuela). However, **the margin between positive and negative experiences in support to movements, organizations, and causes is small across all countries.** The small margin demonstrates a consistently mixed experience of outside support; according to activists, they are almost as likely to have a negative experience as a positive one when they partner with outside actors. **Conversely, positive experiences of individual support were, for some countries, at a factor of up to eight times the negative experiences (Ukraine) meaning that, based on these activists’ experiences, they are more likely to have positive than negative experiences of individual support.**

FEEDBACK ON:

EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT

“[The] implementation of foreign models without taking into account local circumstances...leads to negative consequences[.] It discredits reform.”

DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST

Male, 36-49, Ukraine

“When the government... declared its plans to review the constitution, some international institutions believed that the government was genuine and came with plans to support the process that many of us considered unrealistic. We suggested having a comprehensive discussion and consultation to assess the move by the government in order to reposition our activism. This suggestion was not heeded, and the international institution went ahead with its plan... The result is that the government aborted the process, obstructed the international actors’ work, and went ahead with writing its constitution unilaterally.”

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Male, over 50, Sudan

POWER AND RESPECT

The most significant factors defining both positive and negative relationships are power and respect.

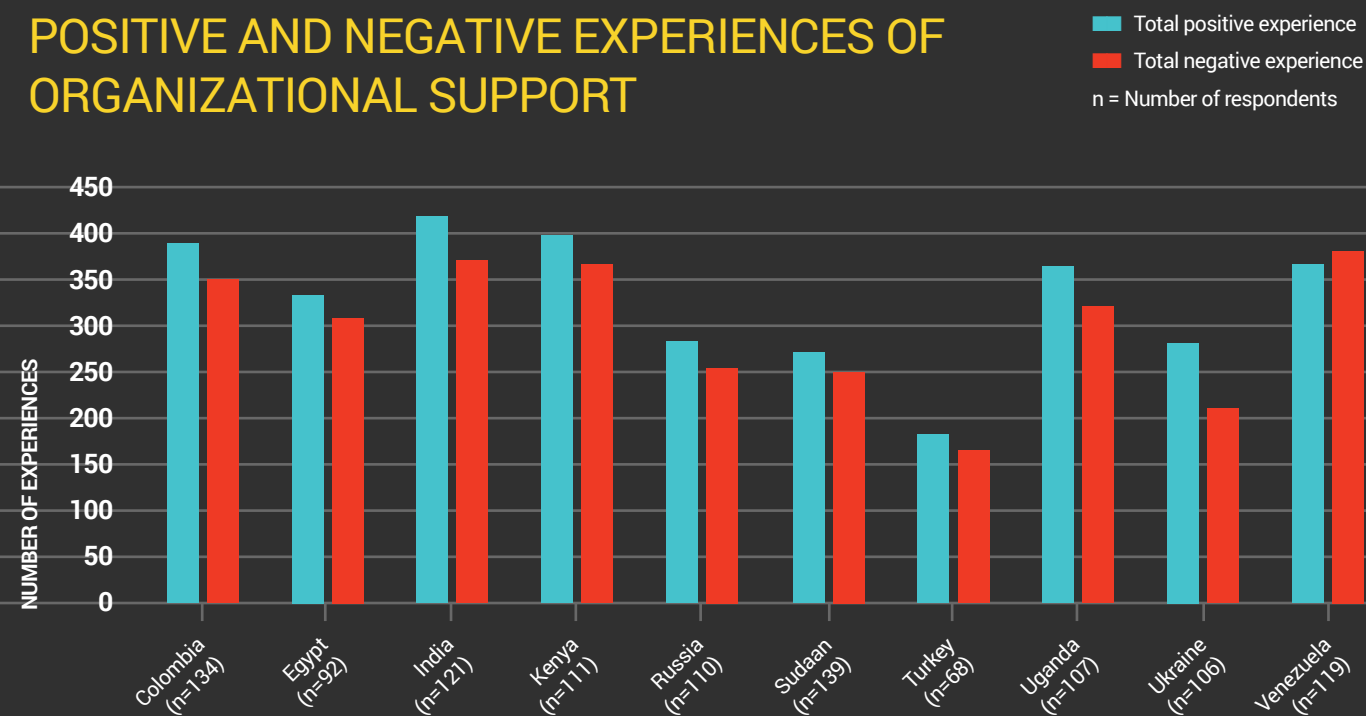
When asked to rank positive factors for support, the top answers were “connections with activists like us,” “respect of our agenda and our decisions,” and “trust.”

This did not vary significantly across countries or by movement issue or demographics. The existence of relationships with other activists could both be seen as facilitating valued connections to other movements and opportunities for learning from and with other activists, as well as contributing to trust by showing a level of familiarity and commitment by outsiders. Notably, a donor’s direct experience as an activist was ranked 11th out of 17 options, meaning that relationships with other activists are viewed as more important than direct experience as an activist.

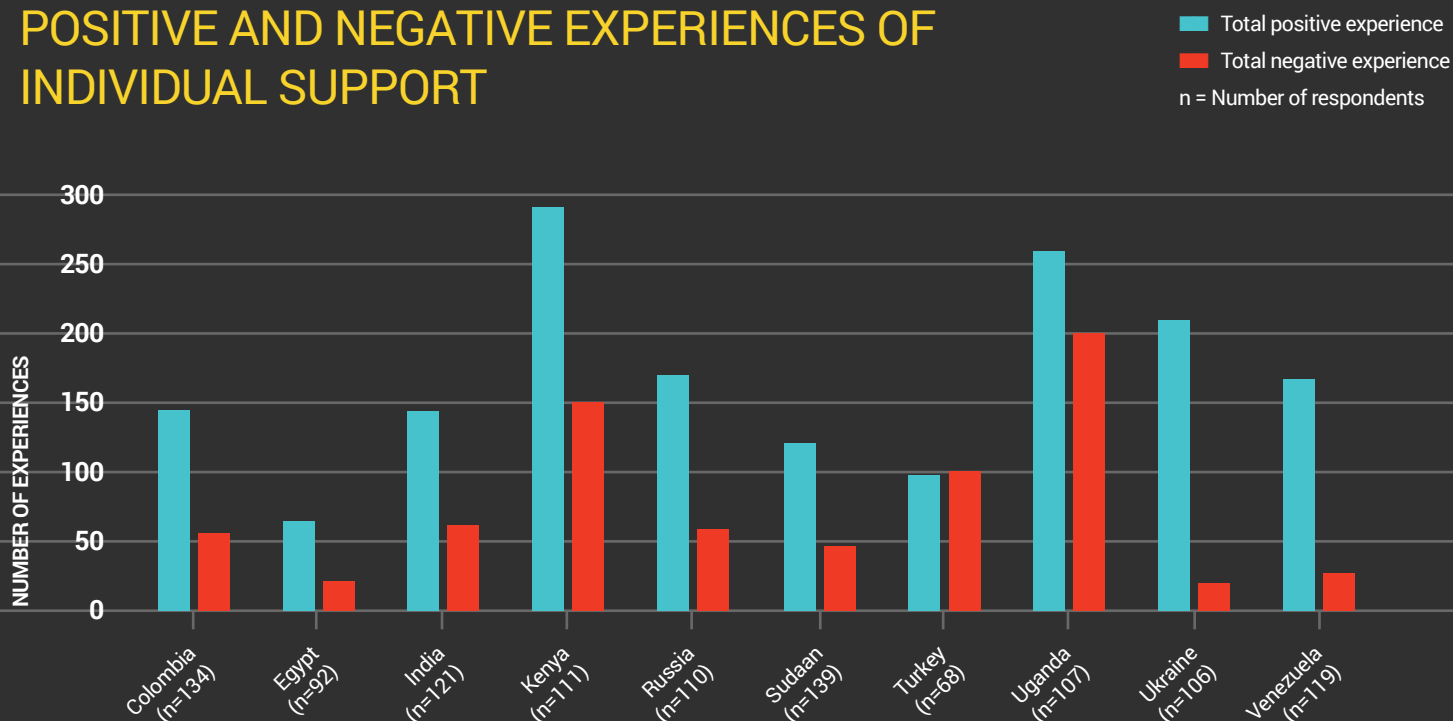
The negative factors ranked highest were “not knowing enough about our context,” “imposing their own agenda,” and “their support is short term.” Issues of power and agenda dominated descriptions of negative experiences, including outside groups imposing approaches that may not fit the local context and appropriation of local work. In some cases, these experiences resulted in more significant negative effects than the failures of a specific project, including contributing to the disunity of movements or discrediting broader efforts at reform.

Negative experiences also centered around a lack of respect for local actors and their own knowledge

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES OF ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT



POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT



FEEDBACK ON:

EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT

“They do not respect our autonomy.”

PEACE ACTIVIST

Female, 25-35, Turkey

“Being part of a joint initiative between our network and an outside actor who had a fixed mind on how everything was supposed to happen, and who did not seem to want to listen to local perspectives.”

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Male, 25-35, Kenya

FEEDBACK ON:

SECURITY AND SAFETY SUPPORT

“[Our priority was] getting safe passage for a few individuals who had taken the government to court, and had been harmed as a result. Their lives were in grave danger, more so after one of them was shot dead.”

DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST

Did not disclose gender, 36-49, Kenya

“When the government decided to close my organization, we received a strong support and solidarity from our network and partners, such as the EU and international NGOs. Our partners continue to recognize us and support us despite the closure. When we moved our offices to a neighboring country, our partners continued to support us.”

PEACE ACTIVIST

Male, over 50, Sudan

and power. At worst, activists faced racism (Kenya), “orientalism” (Turkey), and stereotyping, or explicit dominance —“we have the money... We can make them do what we want” (Sudan)—in their relationships with outsiders. More consistent than these examples were complaints that outside actors did not listen or respect the decision-making of local partners.

These results show that the long-running problems of power and domination remain very real and harmful in the context of aid, development, and foreign policy.

International NGOs, foundations, and other actors need to do some soul searching to determine if their relationships with social movements and activists are based on mutual respect. In the section on “What Activists Really Want,” below, there is a strong call to reshape those relationships into greater partnerships based on two-way learning and a pooling of knowledge and power from all parties.

SECURITY AND SAFETY

Relationships with outside actors can worsen or improve the safety and security of social movement activists. The effect depends on both the extent to which governments and security forces target those with outside connections and also on the kind of attention and effort that outside actors pay to safety and security issues—physical and digital.

Of all respondents, a small number (4 percent; n=46) ranked security among the top five types of support that had made the most significant difference to their cause. Over a quarter of those came from one country: Kenya. However, the positive stories that were shared about security support were compelling, specific, and impactful.

On the other hand, security-related experiences were ranked in the top five negative experiences 334 times and were the most mentioned negative experience. Security challenges included difficulties in registering an NGO, accusations of foreign interference, physical assault and intimidation, and arrest.

Outside actors contributed to security or safety concerns by creating problems of association, providing poor advice (for example, focusing on digital security to the exclusion of more pressing physical security needs), and failing to take measures to protect partners, including when they have been targeted or arrested.

One demographic difference stood out as particularly striking within the data on negative individual support:

respondents who identified as an ethnic minority or as indigenous were twice as likely to experience targeting by the government, police, or others for connections to outsiders and to have experienced decreased safety and security because of their experiences with outsiders.

It is challenging for actors outside a country to fully assess the potential impacts of their support. Doing so requires investment and, crucially, listening to those partners around questions of strategy and safety. At a minimum, outside actors must attempt to “do no harm” by thinking about the impact of their own actions on those they work with inside a country. Part of respecting the autonomy of activists and social movements is respecting risks they may wish to take. But outside actors need to be clear about what kinds of security support is and is not possible.

FUNDING

Funding from outside actors remains crucial, particularly in contexts where raising local funds is challenging. Funding was rated fourth among types of support that made the most difference and third as a factor underpinning positive experiences of support. Positive stories of funding support focused on what it enabled: reaching new areas or new communities or having some financial and organizational stability. A consistent theme of positive stories was flexibility in funding that allows for changes and for local decisions on how money is spent, including deciding to invest in organizational development.

Funding also generated negative experiences. Challenges around funding included providing inadequate resources for the work that needed to be done but also the form of funding. For example, respondents cited difficulties in accessing “core support” including funding for personnel so that they could sustain their work long term instead of being reliant on project funding. Funding can also divide local movements by creating competition among activists, and some activists perceived an over reliance by outside actors on funding versus other ways to support a movement.

A familiar list of bureaucratic barriers also featured in negative stories: burdensome reporting requirements, lack of timeliness or responsiveness by outside actors, difficulties in registering as an NGO, lack of flexibility when facing changing circumstances, lack of transparency by donors or outside partners, requirements or conditions that were seen as imposed upon or undermining the work, and unfulfilled promises.

FEEDBACK ON:

SECURITY AND SAFETY SUPPORT

“The support received from foreign governments, although it is often beneficial, has helped to strengthen accusations that the student movement serves foreign interests.”

FREE SPEECH ACTIVIST

Female, 18-24, Venezuela

“Even concerns like security seem to be addressed with technical solutions that are not very accessible to us (use Telegram, hidden cameras) and they don’t necessarily see the extremities of insecurity and fear in the population that we face.”

CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY ACTIVIST

Male, 25-35, Uganda

FEEDBACK ON:

FUNDING SUPPORT

“The funds are limited and this is because generating funds internally is also hectic (“hectic”?) under a repressive government. There is too much we could do but also some Western partners always fear undemocratic governments.”

SOCIAL SERVICES ACTIVIST

Male, 25-35, Uganda

“[It is difficult] working with partners who think monetary support is the answer to all our problems. Sometimes, some other form of support is needed.”

GENDER ACTIVIST

Female, 25-35, Kenya

FEEDBACK ON:

POSITIVE VISIBILITY EXPERIENCES

“The international media coverage of protests ... were the most positive expression of support we have received so far. It helped legitimize our struggle and unmask the government, which until then had maintained a relatively stable and favorable international image.”

DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST*Female, 18-24, Venezuela*

“A story about our struggle for social rights in the community was highlighted by an international media outlet. The coverage made more people aware of what we were doing, and helped us get more allies to support us.”

ECONOMIC JUSTICE ACTIVIST*Female, 25-35, Kenya*

FEEDBACK ON:

POSITIVE TRAINING EXPERIENCES

“Alone [we] felt we weren’t important ... We have a lot [of] newly learned [lessons] in nonviolent actions and need to reach more people on these issues.”

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST*Female, 25-35, Turkey*

“We had support from a donor who helped us learn more about activism through exchange programs with other funding recipients. Through these programs different grant recipients came together and exchanged ideas. We weren’t working in silos. It was a good experience to learn from and share with others in the field.”

PEACE ACTIVIST*Male, 25-35, Kenya*

VISIBILITY AND ACCESS

A key positive contribution by outside actors highlighted by respondents was their ability to provide access to decision-makers and greater visibility to their causes. Media coverage was ranked second as a type of support that had made the most positive difference to respondents’ causes, and, in addition to social media support, was particularly high-ranking in responses from India, Russia, Sudan, Ukraine, and Venezuela (one or both appeared in the top three rankings as a type of support that made the most positive difference to their causes).

Media coverage was seen as enabling stronger influence and drawing more allies or supporters to the cause.

The flip side of this type of support appeared in negative stories in which work by local actors was appropriated by outsiders or stories in which outsiders prioritized their own reputations over the needs of the movement.

These results highlight the potential leverage of outside actors in raising the international visibility of local and national activists/movements and the importance of doing this in a way that serves and is in collaboration with activists/movements.

TRAINING AND STRATEGIC SUPPORT

Training was rated as one of the most positive experiences of support, rating in the top three forms of organizational support that had made the most difference to causes in responses from Colombia, Kenya, Sudan, Turkey, Ukraine, and Venezuela. Respondents shared stories about developing their skills as activists and being exposed to new ideas, contexts, and ways of thinking that strengthened their leadership and work. **Trainings in community organizing and nonviolence were consistently mentioned positively in stories of respondents’ most significant positive experience of individual support.**

Respondents also talked about the value of developing more technical skills, most significantly in online activism and engaging with government and media. Positive stories often focused on the benefit of learning with and from other activists.

“TO BE ON THE CREST OF THE WAVE”

WHAT ACTIVISTS REALLY WANT

Respondents also shared what kinds of support they thought would make the most difference to their causes and to them as individual activists in the future.

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The highest ranked areas of support that activists thought would make the most difference to their cause in the future were accompaniment (e.g., working closely together), security support, amnesty or safe passage, and media coverage. Analyzed by country, there were some significant differences. In particular, while Indian, Kenyan, and Russian respondents put removing aid packages to their governments as the top or second highest response, that same factor ranked last in response from Egyptians, Ukrainians, and Venezuelans. The different rankings most likely reflect the political and social economic realities in the respective countries, and diverse judgements about the effects of removing foreign aid. **Also appearing in multiple countries top three rankings but not in the aggregate results was education and having a safe space to work** (three times each).

The responses were more consistent in what was not ranked as highly. Financial support to a project, campaign or program; financial support to organizational development (“core support”); and moral support appeared most often at the bottom of the list when analyzed by country (four times, six times, and four times).

When asked what would make the most difference to their effectiveness as individual activists in the future, respondents highlighted mentoring, education, access to a safe work space, and security support as the most significant kinds of support. Mentoring was in the top three ranked options for six countries (Colombia, Egypt, India, Russia, Sudan, and Ukraine). Support to attend a university or university course or having virtual support/

FEEDBACK ON:

EXAMPLES OF WHAT ACTIVISTS WANT

“For us to be linked with other activists would allow us to be on the crest of the wave.”

ECONOMIC JUSTICE ADVOCATE

Male, over 50

“Diplomatic support ... helps put pressure on the government of our country from the outside ...”

DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST

Female, 25-35, Ukraine

FEEDBACK ON:

EXAMPLES OF SECURITY SUPPORT DESIRED

“...shielding our servers from attack...”

LGBT ACTIVIST

Male, 36-49, Venezuela

“...organizing legal help to the arrested...”

CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY ACTIVIST

Male, 18-24, Uganda

FEEDBACK ON:

WHAT MORE SUPPORT WOULD ENABLE

“It will help me by providing more resources that I can use to offer more support and cover a larger geographic area.”

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Male, 36-39 Egypt

“These kinds of support will develop more committed leaders who would work for the people and their rights.” –

ECONOMIC JUSTICE ACTIVIST

Female, over 50, India

education was in the top three for four countries each (respectively Kenya, Turkey, Uganda, and Venezuela for support to attend university; Egypt, India, Kenya, and Venezuela for attending a university course; and India, Russia, Sudan, and Venezuela for virtual support/education). Venezuela’s top three responses all centered on access to education. By contrast, support to attend university was in the bottom three for Colombia, India, Russia, and Ukraine.

Again, what was not ranked in the top three was more consistent: **fellowship and leadership programs were consistently ranked in the bottom three options for eight countries.** Fellowship and leadership programs were only in the top three for one country each (Turkey and Egypt, respectively). This may reflect the lack of access or awareness of these kinds of programs as half the sample had not had access to individual support opportunities such as fellowships or leadership programs. There were not qualitative responses that spoke to negative experiences of fellowships or leadership programs. It is hard to be conclusive about what this ranking means.

These differences reinforce the great need for in-depth and contextual discussions and dialogue over what outside actors can contribute. However there are also some consistent themes, explored further below.

When asked about what support would allow an individual or organization to do, the most common answers related to being able to do **long-term and sustainable work, scale up to reach more people, and increase safety and security.**

They cited specific results that support could help them achieve, including fighting corruption (Ukraine), advancing the LGBTQI cause (Venezuela), and addressing the slave trade (Russia). Funding was most often linked in comments to either working across a larger geographic area, accessing more people, or being more sustainable. **Respondents also said mentoring, training, and networking would help make them and their work more effective.**



RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this report highlight some consistent themes around how philanthropists, foundations, foreign governments, and other donors should think about supporting and enabling grassroots activists, organizations, networks, and social movements. Based on these themes, outside actors should critically examine their influence, positioning, and resources to ensure that they are leveraging them in the most effective ways. This includes looking at both how and *whom* to better support.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

Redefine relationships between outside actors and activists.

The most significant and consistent theme of this research is that trust, respect, and collaboration make the most difference in terms of what activists and outside actors can achieve together.

In essence, the findings are a call for outsiders to understand the power dynamics between donors and activists and to work with activists on a more equal footing by respecting their knowledge and agency. For instance, resources—financial or otherwise—can have a very positive impact on an individual or in a social movement but they can also create huge risks if they are deployed without proper consultation with people on the ground.

Based on the feedback of survey respondents, outside actors should:

- Operate with an approach that allows activists to define their needs and priorities and that respects local analysis of political, social, and economic dynamics;
- Develop and use new tools to identify the committed leaders who will make the best use of support (including by looking outside of formal structures, developing more effective grassroots mapping tools, and consulting experts about how to identify activist networks that often get overlooked);
- Facilitate trust and respect at the beginning of a relationship with activists. Partnerships should explicitly lay out how collaboration will unfold, including each side's contributions and obligations;
- Create time for (and devote resources to) regular reflection and feedback on the health of the relationship;
- Prioritize core operational support and leadership development with an eye toward building infrastructure that enables sustained action and participation. This means developing training, funding, mentorship, security, solidarity, and amplification methods that specifically address activists' current work and their stage of development. It also means creating training and volunteer infrastructures that build onramps for more people to participate in activism.
- Focus on accompaniment, security support, amnesty or safe passage, and media coverage as areas of support that can make the most difference to activists and their cause. While international organizations and INGOs are well-positioned to provide this type of assistance, diplomats serving in consulates and embassies overseas are often in a position to offer protection to activists, to attend trials, to speak out against government-sponsored crackdowns, to provide safe passage and amnesty for imperiled civil society leaders, and to

ADVICE FROM ACTIVISTS TO OUTSIDE ACTORS

“Ask us, the Sudanese people, what we think should be done and what we are doing.”

PEACE ACTIVIST

Female, 36-49, Sudan

“Consult with local activists in the development of programs [and] interact with a large number of activists.”

DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST

Male, 36-49, Russia

ADVICE FROM ACTIVISTS TO OUTSIDE ACTORS

“Understand the difficulty of the current situation in Egypt and use that knowledge as the basis for working in the country.”

DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST

Male, 36-49, Egypt

“Security support would enable me to do organizing in a way that protects my personal safety and the information that I handle in the course of my work.”

LGBTQ ACTIVIST

Female, 25-35, Kenya

provide safe spaces for meetings involving civil society and (where appropriate) government officials. The findings suggest that training for diplomats in how to engage activists and members of social movements, particularly in closed, closing, or transitioning societies (along the lines of the *Diplomat’s Handbook for Democracy Development Support*) would be particularly useful.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Improve approaches to safety and security

This research highlighted the significant impact of relationships with outside actors on the safety and security of social movement activists, including the uneven effects on marginalized groups. It is crucial that outside actors and activists understand which types of safety and security support are available—if any—and which are not.

Based on the responses of survey respondents, outside actors should:

- Recognize that working with activists means taking on a level of risk. They should not, however, let risk be a reason to deny support. Donors should strike a balance between helping activists adopt strategies that will keep them safer, and taking responsibility for risks that outside actors can mitigate (like working through digitally secure platforms);
- Work with partners and local groups to effectively evaluate risks and possible ways to mitigate them. Even if outside actors cannot provide protection, they should consider supporting and advancing community-based protection plans that the activists themselves can employ in lieu of (or in addition to) outside help; pay greater attention to the potential for support to have negative impacts, particularly for already-marginalized groups, and discuss this potential openly along with discussing what kinds of security support are and are not feasible;
- Adapt protocols and trainings to the local context, in collaboration with local partners. Security trainings require acute localization, based on the digital tools and multitude of physical risks that manifest themselves in different ways in different contexts;
- Invest more significantly in understanding and acting on security and safety issues. This may mean having a process or protocol that makes it clear what is possible and how decisions will be made. It also means acting more quickly with the mechanisms currently in place;
- Find ways to work with other organizations to provide some level of security support, particularly if one outside actor is unable to provide it directly. This includes learning and evolving grassroots strategies of protection, so that activists do not rely on outside actors for security they cannot provide.

2. Prioritize training, collaboration, and connections among and between activist networks.

Many of the most positive experiences shared by respondents related to being connected to activists in other countries or movements, or where learning happened in both directions—between local activists and international organizations. Activists expressed a desire for accompaniment and mentoring over formalized leadership and fellowship programs, for instance. In other words,

the manner and form of learning matters: activists don't want an agenda or content imposed on them from the outside.

Outside actors should:

- Define learning needs and potential ways to facilitate that learning together, in conversation, with both sides identifying areas for growth;
- Invest more in trainings that facilitate learning through activists' own work rather than through external programs. Doing so will not only create more opportunities for critical skills development but also answer the call from activists for strategic support;
- Invest more in mentoring and long-term strategic support that helps guide activists based on common experiences and goals;
- Connect activists to each other across countries whenever possible, including through convenings and other events where activists can meet to plan within their own groups;

3. Tailor collaboration and support

Respondents expressed a desire for financial support that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate changes in context and campaigns. Many also pointed to non-financial support, such as contributions outsiders can make to the visibility of activists' work by sharing it on their international platforms and drawing attention to it within foreign governments.

Outside actors should:

- Tailor support based on open discussions and planning with local activists based on a common understanding on what will best contribute to change;
- Explore models of funding that provide flexibility for changing circumstances;
- Think beyond financial contributions to other kinds of contributions they can make including influencing their own governments and working together on campaigns as equals;
- Provide visibility to partners' causes when it can make a difference, with a focus on enabling them to speak directly.

ADVICE FROM ACTIVISTS TO OUTSIDE ACTORS

“Connections...with like-minded people would facilitate and sustain my momentum.”

DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST

Female, 25-35, Uganda

“Collective work is the best way to achieve... together... although it is not an easy job [it] can only be achieved when there is consistency.”

GENDER ACTIVIST

Male, 25-35, Colombia

“The struggle is real. There has never been a greater need for partnerships and support, given how much the civic space in Kenya is shrinking.”

FREE SPEECH ACTIVIST

Male, 25-35, Kenya

CONCLUSION

The activists who participated in this research are determined and resilient. They shared their stories of continuing to organize their communities, create better lives, and to advocate for justice and democracy even as their own safety worsened or it became harder for organizations to continue to operate.

In large measure, these local and national organizers and activists welcomed and wanted support from organizations, networks, and institutions from overseas. They wanted to collaborate, to get security support, and to receive mentoring. They also wanted those organizations to create platforms for their cause internationally and with the media.

However, relationships and experiences with outside actors were mixed. Outsiders often came in with fixed ideas, models from elsewhere, or as experts off a plane. Some activists felt they weren't respected and their knowledge, insight, and political analysis wasn't always heeded. This can lead to more than just undermined relationships. It can also discredit reform efforts, legitimize repressive policies, and put activists and their movements in harm's way.

This report is a clear call to international nongovernment organizations, global social movements, foundations, and diplomats to recommit to equal and respectful partnerships with the activists they support and engage with. It calls for a re-examination and potentially a reconstitution of existing relationships as well as forging new relationships on these new terms. It highlights the crucial attention needed to security and safety issues in a time when civic freedoms are under threat and activists face serious threats to their own physical safety. It also provides ideas for a way forward—through new forms of relationships and recast forms of support.

Using this data and these recommendations, outside actors can rethink their program designs, priorities, and implementation approaches to better fit activists' needs. With new thinking and approaches, outside actors can collaborate with local activists and organizations to develop effective strategies for movements that will have a deep and sustained impact.

There are other areas where the report raises questions as well as provides answers—where a quantitative study, particularly with a limited sample per country, can only tell us so much. However, we hope that this can start conversations and new investigations to pursue some of those more open questions.

APPENDIX 1

METHODOLOGY AND RESPONDENTS

BACKGROUND

Understanding Activism was initiated by Rhize, with support from the Atlantic Council and the Open Society Foundations, to better understand the role actors—organizations, networks, governments, and institutions from outside of the country where a social movement is taking place—can play in supporting local activism around the world. Through an exploration of the experiences of activists in 10 countries—Colombia, Egypt, India, Kenya, Russia, Sudan, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, and Venezuela—we can better understand the impact of past support as well as what activists want from their international supporters and collaborators. In particular, the partners sought to understand how activists experienced support from outsiders in countries where civic rights—to speak, assemble, organize, and even receive financial and other support from overseas—are restricted.

The research was animated by an interest in getting a better understanding of what social movements need and how public and private organizations that provide support from overseas can be more supportive to their causes. The study aims to help Rhize and other organizations take a more data-driven approach to supporting the growing number of people-powered movements around the world. Most importantly, it places activists' experiences at the forefront of understanding the reality and needs of social movements.

METHODS

The 10 countries were selected with reference to Freedom House rankings on civil and political rights, press freedom, and internet freedom to provide a balance of countries on a spectrum of closed, semi-closed, and transitioning civil society space. This includes countries with closed civil society spaces are largely authoritarian contexts where it may be illegal or unsafe to politically organize; semi-closed civil society spaces are restricted in some ways but maintain some freedoms; and countries in transition are where there is a current trend of increasing restrictions or increasing freedoms. We selected final countries based on regional representation and on the specific experiences of the Atlantic Council, its partners, and Rhize in these locations.

The main method was a survey with quantitative and qualitative questions, which was translated into eight languages. Rhize worked with a research coordinator in each country who was selected based on their experience in and commitment to national social movements and their ability to access and build networks to reach a diverse range of respondents. All research coordinators were trained in research ethics and in the background to and methods of the research project. Research coordinators tested the survey and greatly helped refine the questions, explanations, and translations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- What is the prevalence of different kinds of support from outside actors to activists in closed, semi-closed, and transitioning civic spaces?
- How do activists perceive and judge the contribution (positive and negative) of different kinds of support from outside actors?
- What kinds of support from outside actors are activists seeking?

RESPONDENTS:

- Included activists who had received and not received support from outside groups;
- Were selected for diversity of age, gender and sexual identity, ethnic and indigenous background, and to include people living with a disability and in rural and urban areas; and
- Worked on a range of issues and in a range of roles.

Using online and offline methods, the research coordinators reached diverse people engaged in social movements in their respective countries. Their progress in meeting diversity criteria was shared each week and used to help problem solve in areas where there were gaps. Some research coordinators did surveys in person and travelled to a range of areas in their country; others contacted people by phone, used conferences and gatherings, or contacted people online. In our weekly conversations, the research coordinators demonstrated their dedication to ensuring that their country and its social movements were represented.

The research coordinators also highlighted the challenges of engaging in a survey of this kind in a range of restricted environments that included intermittent internet access and concerns about the security of participating in a foreign research effort. In order to protect the security of respondents, we did not require identifying information and the online platform did not collect IP addresses.

THE RESPONDENTS

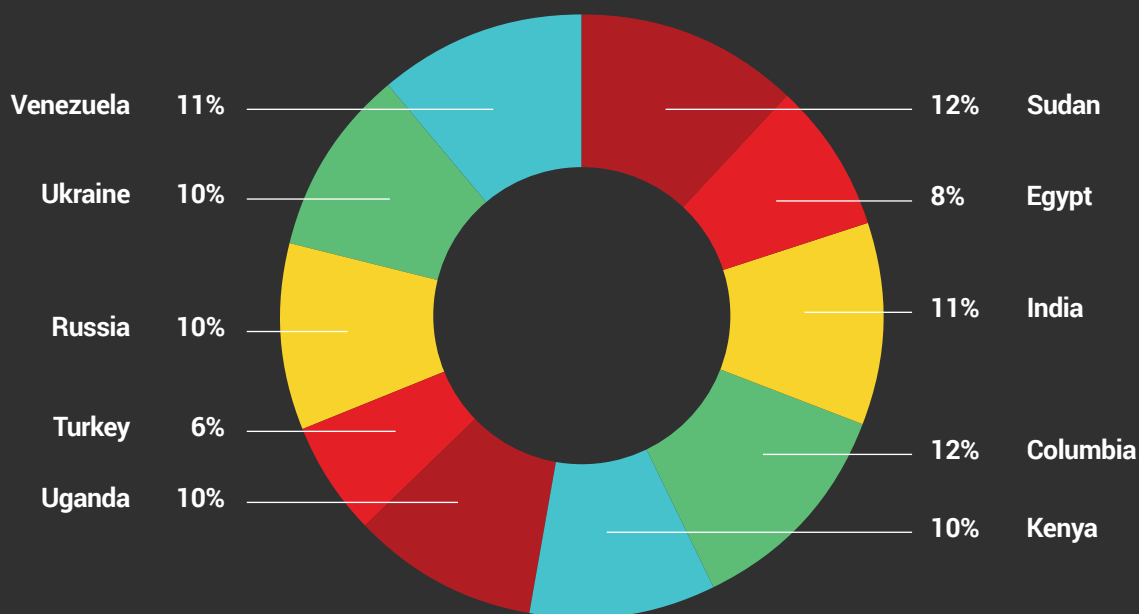
In all, 1,107 activists from the 10 countries participated in our survey, with the highest participation from Sudan and Colombia (12 percent each) and the lowest from Turkey (6 percent) and Egypt (8 percent).

Activists worked on a range of issues with a critical mass engaged in democracy and government accountability. The sample was balanced across leadership positions, coordinators, organizers, and those identifying as members of a movement. The sample was balanced between those who had (46 percent) and hadn't (52 percent) had access to individual support from outside actors (e.g., training, access to international conferences, fellowships).

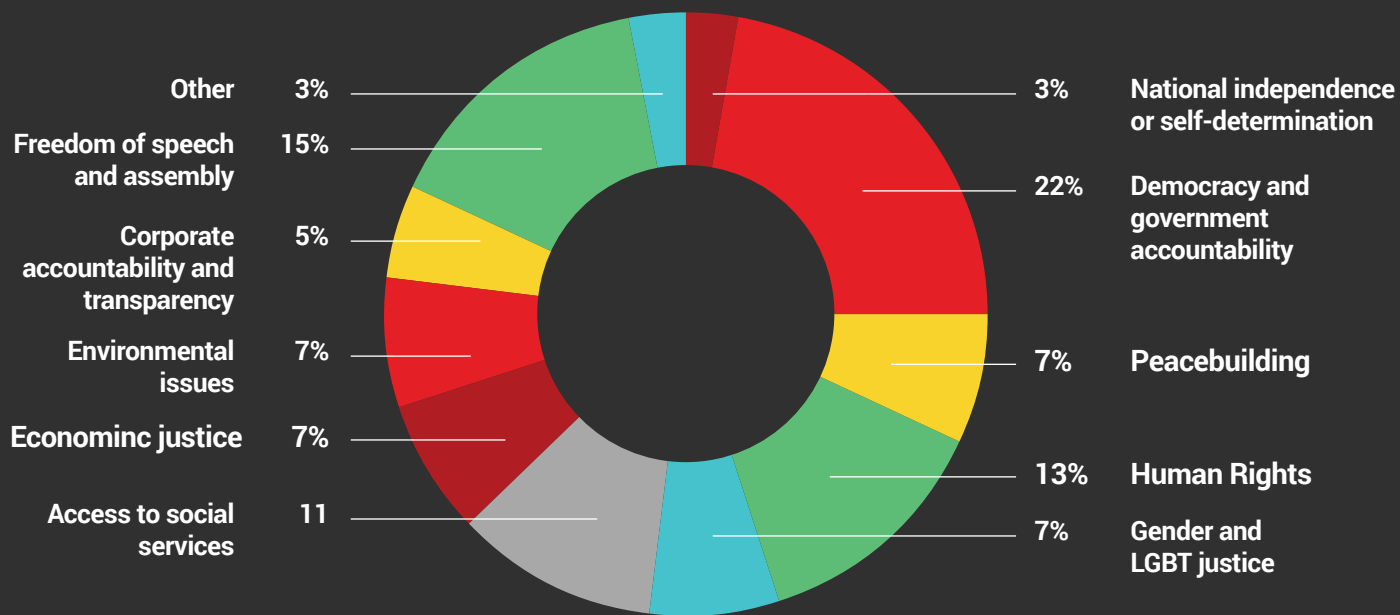
KEY DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Gender	40% male, 22% female, 1% transgender, 37% declined to disclose.
Age	2% under 18, 26% 18-24, 44% 25-35, 20% 36-49, 8% over 50.
Indigenous	38% identified as Indigenous.
Ethnic minority	15% identified as part of an ethnic minority.
Disability	6% identified as having a disability
Highest education	2% no or primary education, 12% only secondary education, 10% technical diploma, 46% bachelor's, 24% masters, 6% PhD.
Geography	46% capital city, 24% other large city, 16% town, 14% village or rural area.
Overseas travel	28% never travelled overseas, 13% left their country once, 28% travelled overseas 2-4 times, 31% travelled overseas more than five times.
Compensated for their activism	48% not paid, 13% salaried, 39% received some form of reimbursement, stipend or clientelism. ⁷

ACTIVIST'S COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



ISSUE FOCUS



ENDNOTES

- 1 Fuster Morell, Mayo and Berlinguer, Marco and Wainwright, Hilary (2007). "Networked Politics: Rethinking Political Organisation in an Age of Movements and Networks" at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2843528>.
- 2 "NAVCO Data Project." University of Denver. http://www.du.edu/korbel/sie/research/chenow_navco_data.html. Accessed 4 June 2016.
- 3 Freedom House (2016), *Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom Under Pressure*, Freedom in the World 2016, Freedom House.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 CIVICUS (2016), "Year in Review: Civic Space," *2016 State of Civil Society Report*, p. 7.
- 6 Amnesty International (2016), *State of the World's Human Rights—Report 2015/16*, Amnesty International, at 16; Freedom House (2016) at 3; Human Rights Watch (2016), *World Report 2016*, at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/twin-threats>.
- 7 Clientelism is used to refer to a job provided by a political party in certain countries.





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