



Defending Rights in Hostile Contexts

Understanding and Confronting the Crackdown against Activists and Civic Space

Initial Reflections and Key Take Aways, November 2017

Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) & JASS (Just Associates)

Berta Caceres was murdered last year. Many people see her as a seed who multiplies herself. When they assassinated Berta they made us think about how to better defend the defenders.

- Ana Paula Hernandez, FGHR, Program Officer for Latin America

In recent years, activists and the international groups supporting them have invested considerable effort in addressing ‘the closing space for civil society’ and the protection of human rights defenders and their organizations and movements. Yet, escalating repression and backlash pose increasing risks for human rights defenders. Many activists, researchers, donors and local, regional and international organizations working on human rights, development and the environment have come to believe that current approaches to protection are inadequate to address the threats. From **November 15 – 17th, 2017, JASS and the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) convened a learning exchange in Johannesburg, South Africa** for a mix of civil society actors – activists, international NGOs and donors from Mesoamerica, East and Southern Africa, and Southeast Asia. The goal was to deepen our understanding of the current realities in our contexts and to critically assess and rethink strategies to protect and promote the civic space necessary for movements, civil society, and human rights defenders. The gathering was designed to ensure that the conversations were shaped by the analysis, aims, and approaches of those most deeply affected by increased restrictions and violence, particularly grassroots activists, their communities and movements.

We are capturing the richness, depth and diversity of the reflections that emerged from this interregional dialogue through two outputs. First, this initial document which gathers some of the key “take-aways” from the convening. They are not precisely a synthesis of the dialogue, but rather a series of points and reflections that JASS and the FGHR assembled from notes and our recollections to enable and invite further discussion. Additionally, we are preparing a multimedia on-line report that integrates reflections, quotes, images and videos from the dialogue – paying attention to the safety of the information we are sharing – which we will disseminate in next few months.

The importance of understanding shifting contexts and power dynamics

Little by little, the convergence of crises, which brings people together, leads to learning and sharing and cross-hybridization, not just in working together, but in making the same demand for system change.

- Erick Burke, Friends of the Earth
- At a global level, increasing violence, hate speech, discrimination and a trend toward authoritarianism accompany the economic model of extractivism with its extreme inequities of enrichment and accumulations of power. The shrinking of civic space, the weakening of democratic institutions, systematic corruption, and the crisis of human rights enforcement and resulting impunity are not merely symptoms, but imperatives of this model.

- Restrictions and violence (in the form of ‘closing / shrinking civic space’ and attacks on human rights defenders) are not new. There have been other histories of repression and these experiences are long-standing for indigenous land defenders, women’s rights champions and LGBTI activists. **What is new is the extreme and pervasive nature of the crackdown on civil society and the brazen use of violence by both states and non-state actors** in a context of rising nationalism and right wing populism. Also alarming is the accompanying use of political narratives to strategically legitimize repression, while discrediting activists and civil society.
- **Under the pretext of “national and local security”, governments are constricting civil and democratic space**, overriding human rights and polarizing communities. The narrative of ‘nationhood’ is used to justify violent acts against civil society, while ‘security risks’, ‘sovereignty’ and the threat of ‘terrorism’ are employed to justify a raft of restrictive laws and expanded surveillance that impact civic space in many ways.
- **Repressive states, colluding corporate interests, and organized fundamentalists have never been so interconnected** across the world. For their goals – authoritarian and ideological – civil society and democratic dissent pose existential threats.
- These **trends affect the Global North as well**. Examples include: intensified attacks on those organizing to defend land and rights (e.g. Standing Rock in the USA); US states seeking to restrict the right to protest; and in Poland, government raids on women’s rights organizations after women resisted the anti-abortion law.
- On the other hand, communities and grassroots movements around the world are not only resisting violence and the impacts of human rights violations, they are **also promoting alternative social and economic models to address the urgent needs for peace-building, equality and environmental protection**.

Our discussions centered on a set of interconnected themes intended to help us rethink and reorient our work on protection and the opening of civic space.

The importance of understanding context and power dynamics

It was difficult but necessary to fight against the state repressions at the same time we confronted the institution of patriarchy.

- Dalila De Jesús Vásquez

- **Understanding power dynamics is vital to protecting activists and movements.** We require better research tools and skills to have the in-depth and contextual specific analysis of the convergences of power, risk and violence.
- The power framework presented by JASS enriches other forms of analysis, enabling us **to recognize different dimensions and nuances of power – visible, hidden and invisible** – as they relate to shrinking space. In particular, the framework reveals the significant role of hidden/shadow power actors (e.g. corporate interests, organized crime, religious fundamentalists and white supremacists) their interconnections with governments and the ways in which they advance their interests using particular political narratives – a form of invisible power – as well as fear and violence.
- This analysis points to the need for strategies that address all levels of power. **When we focus only on the visible power of the state – policies, laws and enforcement – our strategies are misaligned with the more complex dynamics of power.** They fail to address the rising influence and impact of non-state interests and the debilitating effect of narratives, which undercut and criminalize work for social justice and human rights, and legitimize inequities and repression.
- A strategic shift in approach, therefore, involves:
 - **Exposing and transforming the narratives used by hidden power actors to amplify fear, justify violence and the violation of human rights, and delegitimize the work of activists and movements.** Specifically, as protection approaches examine the role of non-state actors, it is critical to include how they manipulate and influence social norms and popular beliefs to discredit and isolate movement leaders and defenders in ways that increase risk and facilitate restrictions and violence.

- Devoting more time, resources and energy to **strengthening the collective power and protection of social movements and communities** so they are better equipped to deal with the powerful actors and risks in their contexts.
- Looking critically at the extent to which we focus on rights as an end in themselves – rather than as tools for securing basic needs and safety in the face of inequality and discrimination – and reviewing strategies and mechanisms that focus principally on the state as guarantor of defenders’ rights. The times in which we live **demand that a top-down norm-setting agenda on human rights be much more integrated with and informed by grassroots approaches to movement-building**, and mobilization that creates safe spaces, fosters local agency and demands accountability.
- Forging shared identity, vision and alliances for action within and beyond the human rights movement, including with grassroots movements, **asks us to develop common concepts and spaces for interaction, and to acknowledge the tensions, privileges and power differentials among us.**

Collective protection

We are dealing with collective security. Individual protection really doesn't exist – no one can defend themselves alone.

- Enrique Eguren, Protection International

- We need to challenge the orthodoxies that we have created in protection and the security of human rights defenders. Traditional protocols and measures continue to be important in order to secure offices, provide cameras and panic buttons, and protect individuals who are most at risk. In an increasingly hostile climate with a complex confluence of state and private actors, however, **protection and security also demand strategies that improve the sustainability and resilience of communities, organizations, and movements.**
- At the core of rethinking the protection of human rights defenders is the need to **recognize and support collective and community organizing and protection.** Official protection strategies, international campaigns and other protection mechanisms can have a greater impact if they are aligned and complement collective protection strategies developed by communities and territories.
- Work that is preventive, long-term, systemic and transformational is just as vital to safeguarding human rights defenders as the reactive, short-term, emergency action that currently commands more of our focus. For this, we **must recognize the knowledge and experiences of the activists and communities** who in facing violence have continued resisting, organizing and raising their voices. This collective experience should inform our rethinking of strategy and security protocols.
- The term ‘collective’ includes a range of strategies from community based organizing in specific local areas and territories, to different forms of collective organizations, networks and political structures. **Across diverse contexts and ways of understanding ‘community’, a rich array of collective protection processes are in use and developing.**
- **Collective protection does not mean abandoning individual protection**, especially when it safeguards the life and integrity of a person. **It does, however, generate questions about individual protection**, such as: Does visibility protect or expose the individual and their community to increased surveillance and danger? What is the collective impact of this approach? What other individuals and groups are affected? Does the protection strategy strengthen networks, cohesion and political practice or does it weaken them? Does the strategy treat the defender or community as an object or subject of protection?
- Strengthening collective protection and movements **creates the conditions for communities to confront authoritarianism and the closing of civic space.** Above all, these efforts strengthen the capacity and power of movements and communities to promote systemic change.
- From a movement building perspective, collective protection requires coordinated urgent responses to situations of imminent risk, coupled with sustained processes of organizational strengthening. This includes:
 - Supporting efforts to strengthen community connectedness and social fabric. These **strong social ties form the backbone of collective protection strategies** for organizations and communities, strengthen political action and increase community engagement, encouraging more people to get

involved with movements. Community centers, neighborhood houses, local economic alternatives, and popular education activities, all contribute to vibrant and resilient organizations and movements.

- **Building collective leadership:** having more people involved in decision-making and less top down and individual leadership makes it more difficult for aggressions to target individual leaders and divide organizations with violence.
- **Proactively addressing burnout, internal conflicts and divisions** within organizations and communities.
- Addressing the high level of precariousness faced by many movements and their members, and **fostering basic economic conditions for sustainability and political participation** through collective action.
- **Mobilizing resources and solidarity in support of organized resistance.**
- Creating organizational and community spaces for learning and the analysis of context and the internal dynamics of movements strengthen the capacity for collective protection. They enable communities to confront forms of violence and the misuse of power within organizations and movements which reinforce existing structures of discrimination, weaken movements and limit the political participation of their members.

Exposing and transforming the narrative

Fear is a new political ideology, influencing people to vote against their own interests.

- Lisa VeneKlasen, JASS

- The reality is that we are facing a damaging and threatening discourse – increasingly legitimized, popular and integrated into high levels of governance and politics – that is undermining activism, rights and the work to protect them.
- These narratives build on, manipulate and reinforce the invisible power structures of bias and inequity such as racism and misogyny.
- We do not need a ‘counter-narrative’, something reactive that risks validating the views it seeks to counter, but rather **a compelling narrative that communicates a positive vision and values that affirm the contributions of civil society, human rights defenders, activism and the good of our communities/societies.** Positive visions do exist (e.g. indigenous cosmovision) but a shared vision is yet to be articulated.
- We need a simpler narrative that **helps the wider society to value and protect those who stand up for their rights, and that invites people to want to take an active part in social transformation.** For this, we need to find ways of communicating in accessible language the ideas, agendas, and alternative economic and social models that communities and movements are defending, making a more explicit link between the defense of human rights and the building of societies that are free of violence, discrimination and inequality.

Intersectional feminism

As someone involved in different organizations but rooted in my identity as woman, African and queer. I cannot challenge only homophobia – intersectionality is essential.

- Phumi Mtetwa, Activist

- **There is much to learn from intersectional feminist perspectives on protection.** While bringing a clear understanding of the specific ways gender relates to risk and violence, it integrates an intersectional analysis – the ways in which all forms of discrimination intersect and compound one another. It also validates **the strengths that those marginalized by structures of power** (by race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) contribute to organizing, resistance, and collective power.
- We have yet to adequately integrate and act on our knowledge that **strengthening women’s leadership, voice and recognized roles within organizations and movements is essential to the safety and protection of women activists.**

- Protection includes **confronting the violence against women within social movements, the resistance to the leadership of women, and the overload of domestic work and care by women.**
- Strengthening the leadership of women means providing space and support for their participation (such as childcare), proactively strategizing on the specific risks faced by women activists. In re-thinking protection, we need to work out how **practically to support the crucial role women play in community resilience and security**, where women are often the first-responders to social breakdown; to health, economic and environmental crises; and to community conflict.

Coordination and alignment

Movements are like trees: reaching out and connected in many ways providing oxygen and life.

- Jethro Pettit, Event Participant and Facilitator

- Effective strategies for protection require coordinated, cross-sectoral responses – **an end to “siloes”** – that address the continuum of restrictions and violence targeting civic space and human rights defenders.
- Better coordination facilitates local-to-global links. We need **better alignment supporting locally-led strategies and more coordination at regional and international levels.** The collaboration needs to be driven by mutual solidarity and learning, not just North-to-South.
- We need to **foster protection networks that can prevent, not merely react to, threats and attacks**, in which all members of a community, organization or network are responsible for each other’s security, and where action can be taken more locally and quickly.
- It is through these deepened relationships that we can see how **our aims and strategies can complement one another and better enable us to tackle the root causes** and enablers of the crackdown, and strengthen collective protection.

Let’s protect our movements, and defend hope!

A symbol of movement is water – it can change and take many shapes, run hot or cold, but still remains water. Water is powerful. It finds ways to move despite challenges.

- Sita Mark Chan, Coordinator of Worker Information Center (WIC), The United Sisterhood Alliance

My symbol is a candle...Thousands of people came out on the streets. One candle is small, but thousands of candles together can make change and chase darkness.

- Sejin Kim, Senior Program Officer, Forum Asia