

# *Stand with Civil Society*

August 2015

# The Challenge of Closing Space

Because of the increased relevance of civil society, we see a growing, global crackdown on civil society, and freedom of expression, association and assembly. According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, since 2012, 50 countries – including some nominally democratic states – have adopted laws designed to restrict the activity of civil society organizations or to curtail funding for their work. If we include countries that have considered or enacted restrictive measures, the number goes up to over 90 since 2012.

# *Stand with Civil Society* Lines of Effort

In September 2013 President Obama launched *Stand with Civil Society* - a global call to action to support, defend, and sustain civil society amid a rising tide of restrictions on its operations globally. Working in partnership with other governments, the philanthropic community, and multilateral initiatives, we have focused on three lines of effort: (1) modeling positive engagement between governments and civil society and creating a supportive environment for civil society in accordance with international norms; (2) innovating our assistance tools and programs, including the civil society hubs that the President announced last year at the Clinton Global Initiative; and (3) coordinating multilateral and diplomatic pressure to push back against undue restrictions on civil society.

# We are making our support for civil society a part of everything that we do

- After we launched *Stand with Civil Society*, we drew lessons from all of our diplomatic posts about what they were doing to support civil society – what worked, and what didn't. We learned that while many Embassies and USAID missions are doing extraordinary work, there wasn't a clear prioritization – or roadmap – for how to combat closing space and support civil society. We lacked a concerted effort to make this a priority across all of our different agencies operating overseas.
- The **Presidential Memorandum (PM) on *Deepening U.S. Government Efforts to Collaborate with and Strengthen Civil Society*** focuses our efforts, globally, on expanding and strengthening our engagement with civil society, opposing efforts by foreign governments to restrict the freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly, as well as providing technical assistance and support to governments who want to strengthen collaboration with civil society.

# We are finding new ways to support civil society

- We are expanding innovative support to civil society, in partnership with others. As part of *Stand with Civil Society*, a Donor Coordination Group -- including the US, Sweden, and private philanthropic partners -- is supporting new and established approaches to promote, strengthen, and connect civil society in open, closing, and closed spaces through the establishment of demand-driven and cutting-edge Civil Society Innovation Initiative, or CSII, Hubs. These regional Hubs will encourage cooperation, innovation, research, learning, and peer-to-peer exchanges. To create the Hubs, CSII will catalyze national, regional and global actions among a wide array of actors from civil society, government and the private sector.

# We are enlisting multilateral and diplomatic pressure to push back against undue restrictions on civil society

- The **Open Government Partnership (OGP)** is one of the primary ways in which we can work with countries around the world to promote democratic, transparent governance and partnership with civil society.
- **In July 2015, the United States became the President of the Community of Democracies (CD), and will serve in this capacity for two years.** We have committed to providing \$3 million over three years in core funding to the Community to bolster the CD's ability to protect and promote civic space.

# We are expanding stakeholder engagement

- Engagement with civil society leaders, like-minded governments, the private sector and leaders in the philanthropic community are essential to sustaining the pushback against civil society.
- We welcome this ongoing dialogue and feedback from stakeholders to identify how we can effectively work together.
- As we are developing our third open government national action plan, we welcome civil society input and proposals, including under “citizen engagement.”

# Some things we are learning

- Safeguarding space and building capacity for civil society must be a long-term effort
- Early action during democratic transitions is critical, with local civil society in the lead
- Identifying civil society champions in government and the legislature is essential
- Expanding consultations that include civil society and government to develop sound legal frameworks is also crucial
- Support for civil society efforts at self-regulation, transparency and accountability is important in its own right but also makes it more challenging for those who want to discredit and delegitimize the sector