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Crackdown on Environmental Action: How Funders Can Respond

by David Gordon & Chris Allan Apr. 24, 2019

Environmental and conservation funders are finding new ways to support civil society organizations as restrictions on their work rapidly increase.

As world leaders gathered in Paris to negotiate a new climate agreement in December 2015, more than 600,000 people in 175 countries marched in support of the process. Meanwhile, the French government used emergency powers, originally intended to fight terrorism, to put two dozen environmental advocates under house arrest for the duration of the negotiations.

In India, the government has stripped the right to receive funds from abroad from some 20,000 NGOs since 2014, nearly two thirds of the eligible organizations. Civil society groups that suggest alternatives to environmentally damaging megaprojects like agribusiness plantations, dams, and mines have been frequent targets.

In the United States, Native American leaders led highly publicized protests to protect the lands and waters of the Standing Rock Sioux from oil pipeline construction. Now, proposed bills in at least 17 states aim to limit environmental protests against “critical infrastructure” such as oil and gas pipelines, and several states have successfully enacted such laws.

Brazil may be the most dangerous country in the world to assert your land rights—in 2017 alone, 57 environmental activists were killed doing just that. And President Jair Bolsonaro now promises to “supervise, coordinate, monitor, and accompany” NGOs in the country and to “put a final stop to all forms of activism in Brazil.” Upon taking office, he immediately weakened protections for biodiverse Amazon forests, transferring power to demarcate indigenous lands to the Ministry of Agriculture, which is known for defending agribusiness interests.

These are hardly isolated incidents. The ability of citizens to organize themselves and redress grievances is under attack in 111 countries around the world, according to CIVICUS, an international nonprofit dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society. As environmental groups achieve greater conservation success and public attention, they must also reckon with a new reality of restrictions on their work that are rapidly increasing in scope and scale. For environmental and conservation funders, these restrictions limit the ability to achieve key program outcomes, whether in wildlife protection, forest conservation, or climate change mitigation.



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Restrictions take many forms from bureaucratic hurdles to murder. (Image by Maysmith Design LLC, David Gordon, and Chris Allan)

Restrictions on civil society fall along a continuum. At first, they may seem innocuous—the kinds of smears in the media or petty government harassment that many activists face regularly. If unaddressed, these attacks can grow into threats of violence or restrictions on activities or funding. And if further left unchecked, this trend can lead to closure of organizations, imprisonment, or even murder—impeding environmental and conservation outcomes around the world.

Funders’ Early Interventions

Civil society organizations and their funders are finding ways to engage and intervene at the earliest stages of restrictions on civil society, when advocates are faced with public stigmatization and bureaucratic hurdles, rather than waiting until they are jailed or murdered.

For example, in Canada, government ministers and a politically-motivated blogger vilified environmental groups and US funders for their campaigns against oil and gas extraction and in favor of renewable energy. As a result, the Canadian Revenue Agency initiated extensive audits of several environmental groups. These targeted organizations and other civil society groups mounted public relations campaigns to highlight their work, engaged with government officials, and defended their policy activities in court. Now, spurred by a favorable court ruling supporting civil society advocacy and with the backing of Canada’s Department of Finance, the Canadian government amended legislation to remove a cap on charities’ spending on nonpartisan political activities.

And in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, two countries that receive significant foreign funding focused on the environment, proposed bills would have restricted domestic NGOs’ access to international support. Civil society coalitions supported by international NGOs defeated both bills using petitions, expert analyses, demonstrations, public relations campaigns, and education of individual parliament members. This early action reduced the need to defend citizen action after restrictive legislation was already in place.

Common Approaches

We’ve identified some common tactics that environmental funders are using to help grantees deal with the closing civil society space. These approaches are relevant for funders working in other sectors facing similar challenges and restrictions.

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- **Supporting physical and digital security:** A group of grantmakers partnered to create the Environmental Defenders Collaborative, a pooled fund designed to stop attacks on environmental activists. The Collaborative supports work to: protect defenders through rapid response grants and security trainings, prevent attacks by supporting legal action, reveal the actors behind the attacks, and secure justice by enabling communities to seek redress.
- **Investing in women leaders and resilient funding practices:** Global Greengrants Fund, a grantmaker that supports local experts to make decisions about funding grassroots organizations all over the world, is investing in women's leadership in environmental action, helping to address gender-specific threats. It also supports unregistered organizations, collectives, and movements, allowing for more flexible and resilient support of environmental efforts in countries that restrict formally-recognized civil society organizations.
- **Managing risk together:** A funder that wishes to remain anonymous has committed to continuing its support of environmental initiatives in Russia, across the former Soviet Union, and in Central and Eastern Europe. Observing the high risk to civil society in these countries, this funder has become a linchpin for both environmental organizations and other grantmakers. Recognizing that people will continue to defend their environmental interests no matter what, this foundation has increased its efforts to discuss risks with grantees to make sure communities are supported safely.
- **Defending the rule of law:** Wallace Global Fund supported grantees and partners to launch Protect the Protest, a task force to assist public environmental advocates under threat from judicial intimidation through Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, or SLAPP suits. The task force unites lawyers, journalists, communications professionals, and activists to defend the free speech rights of activists. It has particularly focused on environmentally related suits filed by pipeline and logging companies.

Many environmental funders are exploring these issues and solutions together through the Environmental Funders Working Group at the [Funders' Initiative for Civil Society](#). To learn more, read our briefing paper, *Closing Civil Society Space: What Environmental Funders Need to Know*, which offers additional detail on threats, their root causes, and opportunities for action.

Nothing can bring back the hundreds of environmental defenders around the world who have been killed in recent years, or mitigate the lasting impact their loss has had on their families, communities, fragile ecosystems, species, and climate change. But as environmental grantmakers, we can come together with other funders, governments, and NGOs to address the root causes and manifestations to help citizens in their efforts to protect our planet.

David Gordon (@dkgordon) is an independent consultant with a background in strategic philanthropy and environmental grantmaking to support international conservation and indigenous rights. He consults for philanthropic organizations including The Christensen Fund, Silicon Valley Community Foundation, Global Greengrants Fund, and the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation.

Chris Allan (@phurf) is executive director of Ajabu Advisors, an environmental justice consulting firm for strategic planning and grantmaking, evaluation, and organizational development.