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The Implications of Closing Civic Space for Hunger and Poverty in the Global South

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Abstract

Concerns about closing civic space have focused on human rights, and little to date has been known of the impacts on development. This article traces impacts of closing civic space on civil society and social movements addressing poverty and hunger in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe. Countries that clamped down on civil society and social movements have not all fared badly in terms of poverty and hunger, as the 'developmental states' of China and Vietnam demonstrate. This article proposes that how closures of civic space affect development outcomes will depend on the role civil society plays in development, and specifically on the 'fit' between civil society and the state with respect to development policy and programming. Despite diversity in political and economic context, restrictions on civic space commonly prevent broad civic engagement in policy processes, in particular critique or scrutiny of government policy and practice, and hamper non-governmental organizations' service delivery. Because civic engagement matters most for marginalized and disempowered people, their exclusion from policy processes and services will deepen. Reversals or stagnation in progress towards addressing poverty and hunger indicate that as civic space narrows, the most marginalized and disempowered groups face a growing risk of being left behind.

Policy implications

- Research in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe found restrictions on civic space were compatible with high rates of economic growth and poverty reduction if political elites were committed to such goals.
- The poorest and most hungry groups were being left behind, unable to voice their demands or access the services they need.
- Restrictions on civil society adversely affected their efforts to tackle poverty and hunger, and reach marginalized groups.
- Governments pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals will need to create enabling environments for civil society.
- Researchers and policy makers must look beyond aggregate measures of poverty and hunger to worsening patterns of exclusion and inequality to understand the impacts of closing civic space.

The space in which civil society can operate legally and without fear has been shrinking worldwide for a decade (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014; ICNL, 2016). The phenomenon of 'closing civic space' has taken the form of legal frameworks and regulations to limit the operational freedoms of civil society actors; intimidation, criminalization, and surveillance; official discourses that delegitimize and undermine civil society and social movements; and other formal and informal restrictions on civil society actors that reduce their effectiveness or legitimacy (Brechenmacher, 2017; Buyse, 2018; Dupuy et al., 2015). The impact of 'shrinking civic space' on the work of human rights and democracy advocates has been extensively assessed and measured (see, for instance, Brechenmacher, 2017; Buyse, 2019). But while civic space has become a matter of grave concern in developing countries and for international aid donors, there

has to date been little analysis of the implications for development outcomes (Hossain et al., 2019).

One reason there has been little analysis of the relationship between civic space and development is that the pathways through which civil society impacts on development are complex: they depend not only on the freedoms or space permitted civil society, but also on the capacities of civil society organizations to engage with governments, to both collaborate and support government but also to question and critique its actions. This article draws on a conceptual framework and methodological approach that was developed to explore the pathways through which restricted civic space may impact on development (Hossain et al., 2019). The article traces the impact of closing civic space on efforts to tackle poverty and hunger in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe, countries selected because the

relationship between civil society and the state differs in each, and has been differentially affected by the closure of civic space. This article explores the effects of new restrictions on formal civil society organisations (CSOs) that had been implementing programs or engaging in policy advocacy around poverty and hunger, often with foreign funding. It aims to make a conceptual contribution by delineating the pathways or mechanisms through which changes in civic space may affect development outcomes.

Drawing on the literature on the role of civil society in development (Gaventa and McGee, 2010; Tandon and Brown, 2013) the article identifies two mechanisms through which restrictions on CSOs shape poverty and hunger policies and programs: (1) by preventing civil society from holding government accountable for poverty and hunger by limiting the scope for influencing, monitoring or otherwise holding government accountable for policies and programs that affect poverty and hunger; and/or (2) directly or indirectly affecting the services civil society groups deliver to people facing poverty or hunger. The article draws on secondary and published material and key informant interviews undertaken for case studies in each country to explore these mechanisms comparatively and longitudinally. For each country, it examines moments when civic space had been restricted through formal and informal measures deployed by the government, and then traces the impacts through to CSO activities on poverty and hunger.

The findings suggest that changes in civic space are unlikely to produce uniform impacts on poverty and hunger outcomes across contexts, and that restricted civic space will not necessarily mean more people living with poverty or hunger. Some governments that restrict civil society do so to push through policies and programs that yield high growth rates – albeit with adverse distributional, social or environmental effects. Others do so to exert greater control over civil society, but without pro-growth or developmental aims. But while there are important differences in how civic space shapes poverty and hunger outcomes across settings, there are also important similarities. Poverty and hunger reduction policies and interventions are likely to become less inclusive and less responsive to the needs of people living with poverty and hunger, regardless of the reasons why governments choose to restrict civic space. Civic actors and social movements find it more difficult to advocate for poverty- and hunger-reducing policies and programs, and may be constrained in their ability to deliver services to people living with poverty or hunger. Key principles of the internationally agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of inclusion, sustainability, and 'leaving no one behind' – are routinely violated under conditions where civil society actors are restricted. Overall, we conclude that it is less the net freedoms civil society groups have to operate that shape poverty and hunger outcomes, than the 'fit' between civil society and the state, and how that changes when civic space is restricted.

These arguments are presented as follows. The next section explains the phenomenon of closing civic space, and sets out the conceptual framework developed for the analysis of the 'fit' between civil society and the state. The third section presents the research methods. The fourth section features summarized case studies of changes in civic space and poverty and hunger outcomes in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe. The fifth section synthesizes the findings from across the country cases. It draws some conclusions about the prospects for achieving the SDGs and for the eradication of poverty and hunger under conditions of closing civic space.

1. Civic space and development

Civil society is widely recognized as important to development, and an enabling environment for civil society is understood to be essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular the injunction that development should 'leave no one behind' (HLPE, 2013; OECD, 2018; PartnersGlobal, 2017). Civil society here refers to voluntary or non-profit social organizations that mediate between the state, market, and societal actors and interests. This article focuses on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), typically aid- or foreign-funded, and human rights activists and environmental defenders, although civil society may also include professional associations, unions, and community-based organizations (Edwards, 2009; Howell and Pearce, 2002; Lewis, 2004). Restrictions on civic space may impact on development in several ways, including through curbing the ability of NGOs to provide services to people facing poverty and hunger. A study of 134 countries showed that bilateral (official) aid flows dropped by around one-third in the years after aid-recipient governments introduced new restrictions on NGOs, mainly because donors could no longer fund preferred NGOs (Dupuy and Prakash, 2017). Since many NGOs implement social protection and antipoverty programs, declines in foreign aid have meant cuts to services for the poor and hungry (Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014).

Civil society also informs, pushes for or complements public policy in ways that affect development outcomes such as poverty and hunger (Banks et al., 2015). Civic actors have been part of struggles by people facing marginalization, discrimination and poverty, making their issues visible, creating spaces for policy dialogue and oversight, and building alliances for change (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010; Gaventa and McGee, 2010; Tandon and Brown, 2013). Civil society and social movements have helped amplify voice and enable inclusion of marginalized groups, including women and minority ethnic groups. In their accountability or 'watchdog role', civil society actors push governments to be transparent and answerable for their policies and practices; help prevent corruption and abuse; and monitor gaps and other failures in policies or implementation (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006; World Bank, 2017). Civic activism in relation to accountability for public services is part of the governance apparatus necessary to ensure services 'work for poor people in development' (World Bank, 2003). NGOs and social movements have been unevenly successful in holding governments accountable for pro-poor service delivery (Hickey

and Mohan, 2005; Mansuri and Rao, 2012). However, a growing consensus is that 'social accountability' functions through coalitions of civil society actors working at multiple levels to monitor, demand and enforce accountability through long-term, political struggles rather than one-shot technocratic interventions (Fox, 2015, 2016).

While civil society has the potential to support policies that address poverty and hunger, much depends on the relationship between civil society and the state. Relationships between states and civil societies are situated within changing market and social relations, and shaped by global, national, regional and local forces, as well as specific histories of engagement, contention and mobilization (Howell and Pearce, 2002). In this article, we move away from the metaphor of 'civic space' with its attendant implications of autonomy as the necessary condition of civil society action. Instead, we draw on Peter Houtzager's discussion of the 'fit' between civil society and the state (Houtzager, 2003). The metaphor of 'fit' indicates both space or freedom to operate *and* capacity to engage closely with the state where necessary; in this instance to address poverty and hunger. Focusing on both civil society freedoms and capacities to engage the state helps to understand the diverse ways in which different polities have enabled civil society to engage with poverty and hunger policies in practice. It also allows us to take into account how civic space may be not so much *shrinking* as *changing*: actors such as right-wing groups and protest movements have gained space in many countries, and the space for civic action has itself expanded and altered with the growth of digital platforms (Hossain et al., 2018).

Houtzager (2003, pp. 2–3) argues that the extent to which civil society can help foster inclusive development is a function of politics:

> The capacity and nature of both state and societal actors are understood as a two-way exchange (. . .) The ability of political actors to produce a politics of inclusion is in large measure contingent on their ability to engineer a *fit* with political institutions that grant some actors greater leverage in the policy process than others.

It is particularly crucial to address the varieties of fit between states and civil societies in the process of tackling poverty and hunger, because it is clear that some countries that have curtailed civil society, such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, and China, have also seen rapid reductions in hunger and poverty. This is because elites have been committed to such goals, and built state capacity to address them (Hickey et al., 2015). Civil society is never absent from such 'closed' settings (Howell, 2012; Teets, 2013), but it may not function as per Tocquevillian assumptions about the need for autonomy for civil society to contribute to inclusive change (Mercer, 2002).

How effective civil society can be in advancing pro-poor policies seems likely to be shaped by the nature of its 'fit' with the state, which is in turn shaped by the nature of the state itself and space it creates. Houtzager (2003) warns that

a politics of inclusion cannot solely evolve around civil society as it is too uncoordinated, diffuses power thinly, and is itself often marred by inequalities and division. Civil society is often – and always potentially – contentious in its engagement with the state. The critical questions are whether civil society can gain traction and collaborate with the state if and when needed, but also whether it can challenge and critique if and when relevant. This 'fit' determines the ability of civil society to keep pressure on the state and ensure development is inclusive at any given time, but is also a function of the space and engagement the state has enabled in the past.

Our analysis draws on political economic analysis of the conditions that produce inclusive development, and specifically on the concept of political settlements, to help explore how relations between civil societies and their states in different settings influence action on poverty and hunger (Hickey et al., 2015). We recognize that the 'fit' between civil society and the state will depend on how civil society fits within the wider political settlement, which we understand as 'the balance or distribution of power between contending social groups and social classes, on which any state is based' (Di John and Putzel, 2009, p. 4). How states treat civic space will depend on how likely civil society is to disturb that balance and in whose interests (Khan, 2018).

Efforts to curtail civil society space are best understood as efforts by ruling elites to consolidate or regain power and undermine (support to) political opponents and potential critics. Any effort to undermine civil society is informed by a presumption among powerholders that (particular) civil society actors have too much or illegitimate power, or are aligned with and potentially increase oppositional power. While political settlements dominated by a single party would seem more likely to restrict civil society, democracies and authoritarian regimes have both done so in recent years. Nevertheless, we can anticipate systematic differences across types of political settlement. For instance, in countries where political elites clamp down on civil society to push through high growth poverty reduction policies, such as China or Ethiopia, tight restrictions and controls mean that civil society can only operate in close relation with – and under direction from – the state.

But to the extent that these are states whose political elites have been broadly committed to reducing poverty and hunger, such restrictions may not necessarily impede poverty- or hunger-reducing policies of kinds that are acceptable to political elites. The outcomes are likely to be very different to where dominant elites restrict civil society actors in order to remain in power with the primary purpose of enriching themselves and their powerful supporters (Hickey et al., 2015). In other words, the dominance of ruling groups over civil society – or the extent of civic space – does not tell the whole story: the fit between civil society and the state will be very different in 'developmental' types of political settlements than in those where elites are more simply predatory. By further contrast, in more competitive political systems, ruling elites may view civil society as supporting political oppositions, making civic action on hunger

and poverty policies more contentious and politicized. We can expect that civic space will remain relatively free to operate in more competitive or democratic settings; however, it is also less likely that civil society groups will be able to engage in constructive policy making and monitoring exercises, or to provide supplementary services in settings where such actors are seen as part of the political opposition. For these reasons, we believe it is important to explore the question of civic space with attention to the changing fit between civil society and states across different political settlements.

2. Research design and methodology

To assess the extent of 'closing civic space' we reviewed evidence on the various tactics deployed by state agents to undermine civil society actors, which have been extensively documented in scholarship on civic space: changes in legal frameworks restricting political freedoms; forms of intimidation, harassment and surveillance; and discourses that delegitimize and thus undermine civil society and movements (Brechenmacher, 2017; Dupuy et al., 2015). Based on the literature on the role of civil society in development, we identified two broad mechanisms through which the fit between civil society and state shapes action on poverty and hunger. These feature both 'intermediate governance' or 'process' variables (capacity to influence policy freely and in safety, including through mobilizing constituencies); as well as 'outcome' variables (how many and which people reached with which services). We assume that these mechanisms do not just have singular or linear impacts, but comprise iterative cycles through which civil society may gradually adjust activities, affecting the groups facing poverty or hunger, and state accountability for poverty and hunger.

The first broad mechanism we identified is 'Policy influence and feedback': how closing civic space impacted on the ways in which the interests and needs of marginalized groups living with poverty and hunger were being represented, advocated for, and taken onto the policy agenda. We focused on: (1) civil society participation in formal policy spaces in which policy is designed, implemented, or monitored; (2) space for mobilization advocacy, campaigns, and critiques of government policy, in which to inform or frame poverty and hunger debates; this includes freedom of association and speech issues and the independence of the media; and (3) protection of civil society activists from reprisal, so that they are able to advocate without fear.

The second broad mechanism is 'Service delivery': as civil society actors provide a range of services to people living with poverty and hunger, closing civic space could mean an immediate and direct reduction in the quantity or quality of services to (certain) target populations. However, even states where ruling elites are both predatory and seek to dominate civil society are generally accepting of charitable assistance and NGO service delivery. However, it is possible that in restricting civil society's policy influence and feedback activities, their service delivery may also be indirectly affected.

To explore variation in the 'fit' between state and civil society and how this mattered for CSOs' engagement with the state and their implementation of poverty and hunger programs, we selected countries that ranged from 'developmental' (where state power is exercised broadly in order to advance economic and human development goals) to more 'predatory' (where power is exercised chiefly to enrich ruling elites and their cronies). Brazil and Ethiopia were selected as relatively 'developmental' states, whereas Pakistan and Zimbabwe represented relatively 'predatory' states in our set of four country case studies. In the period studied, Brazil and Pakistan were both relatively competitive political systems in which civil society and the media were freer than was the case in either Ethiopia or Zimbabwe.

For each case, we specified moments when civic space had been in contention and had become constrained. Data on poverty and hunger trends were mapped onto moments of increasing constraints on civic space to detect overall impact on poverty and hunger trends (see Figures 1 and 2). This knowledge was then used to analyse the fit between civil society and the state by exploring the two mechanisms in qualitative fieldwork, whereby we explored how restrictions on civil society groups directly and indirectly affected their ability to engage in policy influence and provide services to tackle poverty or hunger. We traced both immediate effects (within a year of a shift in civic space, for instance when legislation was introduced) and longer-term effects.

Fieldwork was conducted in each country in 2018, involving key informant interviews and participatory workshops with civil society actors. Participants included staff working for national and international NGOs working on internationally funded aid programmes, journalists and independent human rights activists. NGO staff had worked on poverty and nutrition programmes, including social protection and humanitarian relief programs, and also democratic governance. A small number of government actors and business representatives was interviewed. Between 15 and 28 key informant interviews were undertaken in each country. Interviews and workshops explored trends in civic space and poverty and hunger, with a particular focus on groups experiencing political and socio-economic marginalization. Some of the research was curtailed because potential participants feared reprisal.

3. Changes in civic space and the impacts on poverty and hunger: insights from Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe

This section presents the changes in civic space for each of the five country case studies up to 2018, exploring how these affected programs and policies for poverty and hunger. Each country case describes: (1) how the dynamics of the political settlement shaped the fit between civil society and the state; (2) how civic space changed, and the implications for (3) policy influence and feedback and (4) service delivery by civil society groups. Case study sections are

Figure 1. The implications of closing civic space for hunger and poverty in the Global South. Proportion of the population living below the poverty line, Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe, 1990–2020.*Note:* for Brazil, figures are for a poverty headcount ratio at $1.90 a day (2011 PPP); Ethiopia, Pakistan & Zimbabwe estimates based on national poverty lines.
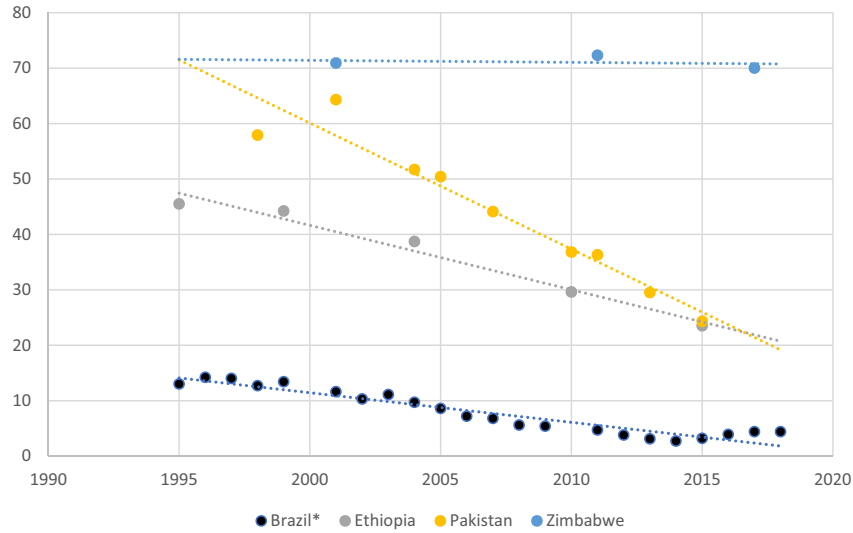
Source: World Development Indicators.

Figure 2. The implications of closing civic space for hunger and poverty in the Global South. Prevalence of undernourishment (% of population), Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan & Zimbabwe, 2000–2018.
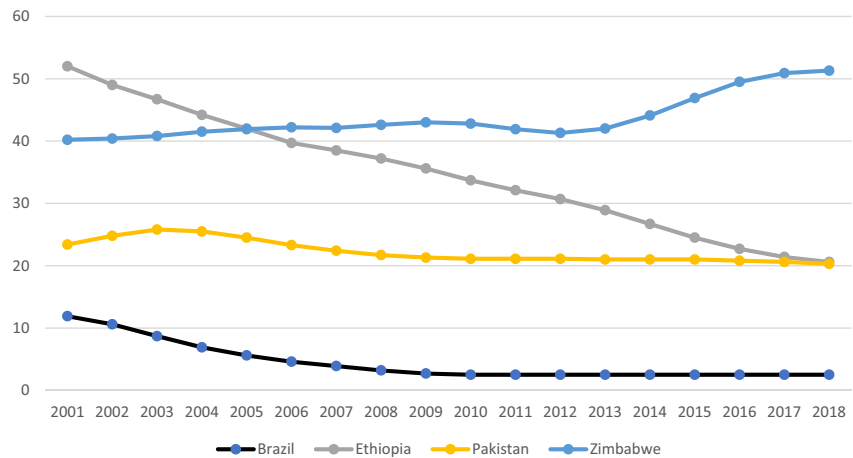
Source: World Development Indicators, based on Food and Agriculture Organization statistics.

based on more detailed country reports (Mohmand, 2019; Oosterom, 2019; Roberts, 2019; Sauer et al., 2019).

Brazil

Until the impeachment of President Dilma Roussef in 2016, Brazil was known for its innovative policies and programs arising from a unique degree and form of civic participation in public policy making. These had particularly benefited groups most affected by extreme poverty and hunger, notably Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian populations. The events of

2016 saw this situation change rapidly, as a rightward lurch in the political leadership saw the relationship between state and civil society abruptly deteriorate. The space for civil society to participate in pro-poor and hunger reduction policies shrank, reflecting their shrinking power within the political settlement; budgets and other provisions were cut or reduced.

Of the four cases, the Brazilian political settlement features the most competitive and democratic polity, yet democracy has coexisted with entrenched racialized, geographic and class inequalities rooted in historic injustices

and discrimination. For nearly three decades, civil society flourished and built strong engagement with the state's poverty and development policies, particularly under the Workers' Party (PT) government of 2003–2016 (Sauer et al., 2019). The PT government actively encouraged and enabled civic engagement with policy dialogue, monitoring, and feedback. The close 'fit' between civil society and the state had been effective in creating and delivering pro-poor and hunger-reducing social protection and human development programs: inequalities began to decline, and the poorest and most marginalized saw relatively rapid development gains, as their organizations contributed to designing and delivering policies for them. These programs were on a sufficient scale that the gains started to show up in a reduction of poverty and hunger; see Figures 1 and 2. The innovative *Bolsa Família* conditional cash transfer scheme was emulated around the world, as were participatory budgeting initiatives. This progress coexisted with continuing systemic violations of territorial and other rights of Brazil's 'traditional peoples and communities' (Povos e Comunidades Tradicionais (PCTs), including indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities). Their historic marginalisation is a direct cause of the high prevalence of extreme poverty and malnourishment among many PCTs (FIAN BRASIL, 2016).

The relationship between civil society and the state changed from mutually supportive and constructive to hostile in 2016 when President Dilma Roussef was impeached, and a right-wing government led by Michel Temer took power. National councils were hollowed out by removing civil society members, or left inactive; indigenous civil society representatives were deterred from attending meetings (Sauer et al., 2019). This limited the scope for state-civil society to co-construct development policies and for civil society to monitor or hold government to account for their implementation. In one example, the Temer Government set up a National SDG Commission in 2016, but included only one organization of the rural poor (the council for small-scale resource harvester communities, CNS). The right-wing government reduced budgets of pro-poor programs and cancelled some outright, which had targeted the most vulnerable populations, including PCTs (Sauer et al., 2019). *Bolsa Família* reached 14 million households (many female-headed) in 2013. This dropped to 12.7 households million by July 2017 (Madeiro, 2016; MDS, 2018). From 2017, adjustments for inflation were minimized. The 2018 Draft Budget Law eliminated the budget allocation for *Bolsa Verde*, which had combined cash transfers with environmental conservation activities for families living in remote regions of Brazil, including the Amazon. The *Programa Brasil Quilombola* (PBQ), launched in 2004 with the objective of consolidating government policy for *quilombola* (Afro-Brazilian) people has in effect been defunct since 2016.

The events of 2016 also paved the way for right-wing forces in the National Congress to use institutional measures to curb formal civic space for indigenous land rights actors (Sauer et al., 2019). The rural caucus ('bancada ruralista') that represents agribusiness and other rural landowning interests in the National Congress secured a Parliamentary

Commission of Inquiry into two government bodies responsible for land and indigenous peoples in 2016. This resulted in the indictment of over a hundred prosecutors, anthropologists and indigenous leaders, for allegedly providing fraudulent evidence in support of indigenous land rights claims. However, it included no investigation of actual rights violations, and indicted no large landowners (Tubino, 2017). Bills have been proposed that make it easier for the police to use force to remove activists from occupied land and criminalize activist land occupations and to classify the struggles for land and housing rights as 'terrorist' activities. These bills threaten the Constitutional rights of indigenous and *quilombola* communities. There is growing impunity for violence against rights defenders and the rural poor, amid a sharp rise in rural violence in recent years, including the assassination of movement leaders, and massacres of peasants and indigenous people (CPT - Comissão Pastoral da Terra, 2018).

Along with the consequences of the economic crisis and rising unemployment, austerity has contributed to an increase in the number of people living in extreme poverty after years of steady reduction, rising from 13.34 million in 2016 in 2016 to 14.83 million in 2017 (see Figure 1; Villas Bôas, 2018). Progress on hunger has flatlined (see Figure 2), but since the economic crisis started in 2013 and not as a direct result of the rightward political shift or of the accompanying squeeze on civil society. Under the government of Jair Bolsonaro, progressive civil society actors lost any authority they had to influence budgets and policy agendas. In the words of one activist, especially marginalized groups get further marginalized:

> The coup has messed with this structure [participatory councils] and closed down spaces for dialogue. (. . .) Closing space involves closing out diversity – exclusion of women, black people, the poor, as a result of the dynamics that characterise highly unequal societies. (discussion group, Salvador, 13 March 2018, quoted in Sauer et al. (2019, p. 24))

The Brazil case illustrates how civic space impacts on poverty and hunger through the disappearance of formal policy spaces for civil society participation, and in the lack of protection against reprisals, which has licensed violence against indigenous and environmental rights activists. Brazil's democracy remains vibrant, if increasingly contentious, however, and mass advocacy and critique of government policies remains viable.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's political settlement had featured a dominant party state under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a ruling coalition presiding over an ethnically based federal structure, since the overthrow of the Derg regime in 1991. Ethiopia began to open up its institutions and economy, including civic space. International development donors thronged to invest in CSOs to promote liberal values of rights, equality and social justice (Reimann, 2006). CSO numbers grew from 70 in 1991 to 2300 by 2007

(Rahmato, 2008; Dupuy et al., 2015). However, civic space narrowed after the 2005 elections, when the EPRDF experienced significant electoral losses, and accused foreign-funded civil society of opposing it in foreign interests (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009). The Civil Society Proclamation required all CSOs to re-register with a new Federal Charities and Societies Agency, and made advocacy, campaigning and rights-based work illegal for any organization receiving more than 10 per cent of their income from foreign sources (Dupuy et al., 2015). CSOs were required to spend at least 70 per cent of their income on direct service delivery instead of human rights or awareness-raising work. The numbers of registered NGOs and CSOs dropped substantially. The 2008 Mass Media Proclamation and 2009 Terrorism Law led to mass arrests of journalists, activists and opposition politicians. The government enforced full and partial internet and social media lockdowns on multiple occasions, partly in response to the emergence of online cross-ethnic youth movements. In 2015 the EPRDF declared victory in the national elections with 99 per cent of votes. In subsequent years tens of thousands of protestors and suspected opposition activists were arrested, and reports of torture were widespread (Freedom House, 2017). A state of emergency was twice promulgated. These developments altered the 'fit' between civil society and the state, with the state condoning CSOs only as implementers of government policies.

The case of Ethiopia demonstrates that economic growth and poverty reduction are compatible with closed civic space. With strong elite commitment to poverty and hunger reduction it has achieved both rapid economic growth (World Bank, 2017) and relatively rapid progress on reducing poverty since 2000 (World Bank, 2015). Hunger levels dropped sharply, more than halving over a period of two decades (Tura, 2019). Inequality had been low in regional comparison (World Bank, 2017) but rose between 2005 and 2010 (World Bank, 2015). Agricultural sector growth largely drove poverty reduction, which was supported by investment in social services (World Bank, 2015). The government initiated a food aid and social protection scheme called the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in 2005. According to Lavers (2019), PSNP was driven by the 2002/3 food crisis, which the ruling coalition perceived as an existential crisis. PSNP is substantially donor-funded. It draws on governmental mass organizations and international NGOs and local civil society help deliver services. Critics argue that the PSNP has been used to benefit party loyalists and entrench EPRDF political control at the local level, noting that civil society actors do not have the space to check against corruption, or hold government accountable for errors and gaps in effectiveness (Roberts, 2019). Without free speech and an independent media to verify them, official poverty and hunger statistics are viewed with some skepticism (Mandefro, 2016).

Agricultural investments and the PSNP are acknowledged to have increased food security and helped protect the poor from drought (Cochrane and Tamiru, 2016). In 2015, a year of severe political repression rule, the EPRDF organized what was widely regarded as a highly effective emergency relief program to address widespread drought. No excess mortality was reported, and the price of food grains was kept stable (De Waal, 2018). None of the interviewees denied the progress that the Government had made on food security. However, while acknowledging the EPRDF's achievements in reducing poverty and tackling hunger, workshop participants and interviewees stated that the Government could have succeeded faster and farther had it partnered constructively with civil society in relation to marginalized and minority groups (see also Tura, 2019). Elaborating this claim, one interviewee argued that: 'Large Government-driven programmes are not flexible enough to tailor services to the most excluded. It's smaller, agile, CSOs with local knowledge and specialist skills that's better there' (cited in Roberts, 2019, p. 23). Funding restrictions meant NGOs could no longer afford to reach marginalized and remote populations. Representatives of women's development programs said that women's rights programs suffered in particular, and legal aid work stopped. Many adapted their programming to provide more services and do less rights-based work (Roberts, 2019).

Thus, restrictions on civil society appear to have had indirect and medium-term effects on development progress, reducing policy space, increasing exclusion, and curbing NGO activities in remote areas. The costs of adapting programs (after the 70 per cent rule) to the quality and scale of their provisioning went uncounted but are likely to have been substantial. The greatest loss has been to the responsiveness of public services to marginalized populations. The protest movement in the Oromo region which in 2018 succeeded in unseating the ruling group after violence and state repression illustrated the high cost of closed space, and the political consequences of failures to hear the voice of marginalized groups. After Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister in April 2018, the reforms and release of political prisoners indicated an opening of civic space (Fisher and Gebrewahd, 2019; Gebremariam, 2020). The implications for civic engagement with policy space and service delivery deserve to be tracked closely.

Pakistan

Pakistan has formally been a competitive democracy since 2008. Yet despite regular elections and political turnover, power continues to be exercised to mainly benefit the enduring alliance of military, economic and administrative elites (Akhtar, 2018), through 'dominance by an elite who does not support human capital investment in the masses' (Easterly, 2001, p. 3). But the politics of poverty and hunger shifted following the turmoil of the 2007 economic and political crisis that brought an end to direct military rule, and the official view underwent a paradigm shift towards recognizing the need for formal social protection programs (Gazdar, 2011). Almost two-thirds of the population was living with poverty in the early 2000s, but this proportion dropped to half by 2005, and continued to fall, to 24 per cent by 2015 (see Figure 1). Progress on hunger has been slow, and the proportion of undernourished Pakistanis stayed stable at just over 20 per cent since 2008 (see

Figure 2). In the 2000s, civil society played a role in democracy and anti-corruption struggles; it engaged in policy feedback loops by raising awareness of the effects of the economic crisis on the population; and provided humanitarian relief after disasters.

Under the present democratic system, governments have clamped down on civic groups in the name of security and national sovereignty since 2013, and scrutiny of international funds that may end up with terrorist groups. One INGO representative explained, 'the obscure thinking that foreign money comes with some covert agenda has made its way to the minds of policy makers' (cited in Mohmand, 2019, p. 21). Since 2013, a series of laws and regulations were introduced that imposed legal restrictions on freedom of expression (Freedom House, 2017). From 2016, national NGOs were required to submit extensive documentation for re-registering when receiving international funds. Legal measures on development actors were accompanied with violence targeting human rights defenders and liberal-democratic sections of civil society (Mohmand, 2019). In 2017, 30 organizations, including 18 INGOs like Action Aid, Plan International, International Alert and Safer World, were ordered to end operations within 90 days (Mohmand, 2019). The INGO actors implemented service delivery programs combined with advocacy. The affected NGOs operated in some of the most remote and under-served regions of Pakistan (Mohmand, 2019). Their interventions included tackling violence against women; providing health, family planning, and education services; microfinance and other livelihoods programs; and farming and agricultural support services. Hence the new law was likely to have impact on multiple development outcomes, not just poverty and hunger alone. The existing workplans of several of these organisations circulated in the international media, which had reported on this abrupt closure of civic space. This made it possible to estimate the likely effects on services and humanitarian relief programs. Aggregated data published by NGOs affected, suggested that millions of Pakistanis, and mostly women, would lose support from these interventions within a year (Mohmand, 2019).

While this is clear evidence of negative impact of closing civic space on direct service delivery (our second mechanism), the longer-term impacts through the 'policy influence' mechanism could not be measured, as this study was conducted in 2018. How civil society was silenced and stopped advocating for marginalized and poor populations and engage in policy influence and critical feedback will need to be assessed through more sustained analysis of civil society engagement in the policy process.

Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, political and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a political-military-business elite. In the past 20 years, the country has experienced successive economic shocks and food crises due to drought and gross economic mismanagement. These have worsened poverty and hunger levels in Zimbabwe (see Figures 1 and 2).

Civic space was severely restricted between 2000 and 2008, when the ruling ZANU-PF party faced political challenge from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which had emerged from an alliance of civic organizations and labour unions. In 2002, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) came into effect, further empowering the Zimbabwe police. Civic groups, priests and NGOs have been the major targets of POSA; hundreds of MDC rallies were banned, and MDC members and activists arrested for treason (Dorman, 2016). A highly restrictive Media Law and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act introduced in 2002 curtailed the independent media and foreign journalists (Ndlovu, 2015; Raftopoulos and Phimister, 2004; Sachikonye, 2002). The 2004 Non-Governmental Organizations Bill increased scrutiny of human rights groups and stopped them receiving foreign funds. Opposition leaders, journalists and human rights activists faced surveillance, harassment and repression. Political violence peaked in 2008, after which the Southern African Development Community helped broker a Government of National Unity (GNU, 2009–13). By then, hyperinflation and economic decline had caused acute economic crisis.

Between 2000 and 2008, severe food insecurity caused by successive droughts and the economic crisis forced the government to allow humanitarian organizations to operate (Chinyoka and Seekings, 2016). In 2003, the 'Policy on operations on non-governmental organizations in humanitarian and development assistance' set out stringent registration, clearance and reporting requirements. Humanitarian agencies interviewed reported challenges accessing the politically sensitive group of ex-farm workers, who had been displaced during the land reforms (Oosterom, 2019). In 2004, President Mugabe expelled WFP and humanitarian actors, very likely to prevent them from accessing rural areas during the 2005 election (Chinyoka and Seekings, 2016). After the elections, the Government allowed food aid to resume. By 2008 nearly 7 million people – over half the population – received donor-funded food aid (Chinyoka and Seekings, 2016). Undernourishment declined, but politics still interfered with humanitarian operations. Interviewees reported that some locations where people needed relief were inaccessible to INGOs, because they were known opposition areas (Oosterom, 2019). NGOs were allowed to deliver inputs or technical assistance, but not to speak of rights or attempt to hold government accountable.

The Government of National Unity period offered some opportunities for a closer fit between civil society and the state, especially in MDC-controlled ministries. Some of the most repressive elements of the POSA and AIPPA were revoked and some media restrictions lifted. Donors provided more than US$2 billion for assistance to education, water, sanitation, health, agriculture and food aid (Freeman, 2014; Muchadenyika, 2017). As conditions stabilized, food aid beneficiary numbers dropped to 1.8 million in 2010. A cash-for-work program and a new Harmonized Social Cash Transfer aimed at the poorest 10 per cent were introduced. Humanitarian actors and NGOs working on agriculture and food security found their access and collaboration with government

improved. Since donors limited civil society funding to humanitarian or good governance projects, CSOs were less well-resourced to focus on macroeconomic and development policy (Dorman, 2016). Workshop participants acknowledged few actors had the capacity to hold the government to account over its failure to manage macroeconomic shocks, currency crises and inflation. After the 2013 elections, which brought ZANU-PF back to power, economic growth fell from 2.3 per cent in 2015 to 0.5 per cent in 2016.

Interviewees recalled that after 2013, the ZANU-PF government resorted to bureaucratic measures rather than direct harassment or violence to limit the operations of civic actors. International donors distrusted the ZANU-PF government, and were reluctant to fund food aid. Humanitarian actors interviewed reported that district officials interfered with decisions about which areas should receive relief (Oosterom, 2019). One aid worker explained:

> Whilst the national government would have signed an MOU with the donor, when you go to the field level now, you have to deal with the chief and his own organogram and his councillors. They are the ones who decide who gets the food. (. . .) The [civil society] organisers can only do so much in terms of controlling the community processes otherwise you will have trouble working in those areas.(Interview, humanitarian actor, 26.03.2018, cited in Oosterom, 2019, pp. 21–22))

In some areas, ZANU-PF was in charge of the food distribution and channeled it to its supporters only. Interviewees noted that organizations had to withdraw from politically sensitive areas (Oosterom, 2019). Even under conditions when the government needed civic actors to help deliver food aid, its political interests prevented it from engineering a workable fit in its relations with civil society. Old and new restrictions on civil society combined to thwart efforts to influence policy and to provide much-needed basic services.

Conclusions

This article has traced how new rules, regulations, and other restrictions on civil society actors have affected action to address poverty and hunger. It moves beyond analysis of restrictions on civil society freedoms, to focus instead on how such restrictions affect the 'fit' between civil society and the state. This article argues that what matters is not only whether power is taken away from civil society actors, but how that power is used by governments, which in turn depends on how political power is maintained and exercised within a given political settlement.

The methodological strategy used here examined restrictions on civic space in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe, representing a range of types of political settlement and civil society-state relationships. Each had undergone discernible changes in civic space. We traced the impacts on civil society participation through restrictions on the mechanisms through which civil society can: (1) influence policy making; and (2) contribute to service delivery on issues of

poverty or hunger. The mechanisms selected enabled us to observe civil society both in a *complementary role* to the state (filling gaps with private action), and *in contention* with the state (raising demands on behalf of aggrieved groups, holding the government to account for its actions). As we would expect, civic action on hunger and poverty with regards to policy making suffered, but civic actors have also been prevented from *providing services* to the most marginalized groups in each society. Yet progress towards reducing poverty and hunger in the short- and medium-term depends on both kinds of activity, and on civil society actors attaining the kind of fit with the state that can make both possible.

The magnitude of the impacts on poverty and hunger, as well as their precise pathways, differed across the countries. The case studies indicate clearly that despite the great differences across settings, and the varieties of 'fit' between states and civil societies, restrictions on civic actors have the overall effect of excluding the most marginalized and disempowered from either participating in policies that affect their primary concerns, or from receiving services that they need. However, the adverse impacts in each context were concentrated on some of the most marginalized and disempowered groups: the rural poor, racialized, indigenous or minority groups. The groups being 'left behind' are likely to increase in number, and to face worsening conditions of poverty and hunger.

This study has also revealed the challenges of measuring 'costs' to civil society organisations to change approaches in when civic space reduces. Future research can aim to develop frameworks and methodological approaches to address sub-national variation, both in civic space restrictions and development outcomes, as oppositional actors or contending groups are often geographically defined.

Note

Data availability statement

The country case studies on which this paper draws are available as follows: Brazil: https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/the-implications-of-closing-civic-space-for-sustainable-development-in-brazil/; Ethiopia: https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/closing-civic-space-and-inclusive-development-in-ethiopia/; Pakistan: https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/the-implications-of-closing-civic-space-for-sustainable-development-in-pakistan/; Zimbabwe: https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/the-implications-of-closing-civic-space-for-sustainable-development-in-zimbabwe/.

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