

Local Workshops briefing: Fostering CSO engagement and Connecting Local Issues to the Parliament

October – November 2023

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INTRODUCTION

The level and intensity of civic engagement in the public space are crucial for a sustainable democracy. It is not only important to establish an institutional and legal framework that facilitates civic engagement in decision-making, but also to actively utilize such mechanisms by the public. In this context, during October until November 2023, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) organized eight workshops in Tirana, Shkoder, Malesia e Madhe, Diber, Kukes, Lezhe, Durres, Elbasan, Kamza focused on empowering local stakeholders and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to advocate for concerns and issues in Parliament.

The workshops gathered about 160 civil society organizations, activists, formal and informal interest groups in who aimed to address relevant concerns in their areas or for affected groups. The workshops were led by an experienced facilitator that provided the participants with knowledge and skills related to parliamentary processes, citizen engagement mechanisms with Parliament, advocacy, and specific mechanisms and templates that such as the drafting of petitions and civic legal initiatives to effectively shape the Parliament's agenda. Also, renown local public personalities were invited to provide insights and motivation to pursue local concerns in an institutional way to the Albanian Parliament.

The workshops underscored the multifaceted challenges faced by the local stakeholders and communities, ranging from environmental concerns and infrastructure issues to the effectiveness of civic engagement mechanisms. The participants advocated for a more accountable and responsive parliamentary representation that actively addresses local issues and engages with citizens in a meaningful way.

Following this workshop, IDM, in collaboration with CSOs and other stakeholders in targeted areas will continue to provide necessary assistance and expertise to address these issues to the Parliament.

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Below is a summary of the main issues addressed during the workshops.

1. Durrës – October 27, 2023

The key note speech by a renowned lecturer from the University of Durrës emphasized the significance of MPs' profiles and training, underscoring the need for their training and good articulation. He pointed out that MPs often fail to hold regular meetings with citizens to address their problems, stressing the importance of open lists to enhance MPs' accountability. The lecturer highlighted those local issues, such as regulations for building administration or the rise in scoliosis cases due to heavy school bags, should be brought to the attention of the parliament.

A psychologist and representative of an organization reflected on the challenges, stating, "the doors of the municipality are closed, while in meetings with MPs, everything is said and nothing is done." Institutionalized forms of advocacy, especially regarding parliamentary advocacy, were not effectively pursued by organizations. Despite protests in front of the municipality, there was no change regarding disability-related issues.

A resident of Manza municipality expressed concerns about limited drinking water supply, indiscriminate deforestation, and the lack of protection for forests. The resident suggested a legal prohibition on cutting forests for several years to allow for regeneration. Additionally, the limited opening hours of MPs' local offices or party offices during the election period were noted.

Another CSO representative highlighted the issue of stray dogs as problematic for the city. A local coordinator of the "Strong Municipalities" project suggested passing local problems to the "small parliament" of the city before escalating them to other levels.

A CSO operating in Shkozë proposed focusing on advocating in parliament for bicycle lanes and appropriate signage to facilitate urban mobility. The representative emphasized that urban mobility issues are seldom discussed by MPs and are problems shared by all cities in Albania. Another CSO representative drew attention to the waste water drainage channels of the city of Durrës, stressing their need for attention in parliament. The representative expressed frustration about not receiving notifications about parliament meetings, despite being part of the register, and the lack of timely availability of consultation materials.

Participants acknowledged the essential reconstruction process after the Durrës earthquake but pointed out a crucial issue that needed parliament's attention. Many newly constructed buildings lacked functional elevators, posing challenges for residents, especially those with mobility issues. The suspension of the rental bonus for affected individuals and the lack of response to audit concerns were raised by participants.

Another participant criticized the functionality of mechanisms of interaction with citizens and organizations, both at the municipality and parliamentary levels. A local Roma organization emphasized problems with notifications and access to information from public institutions. They pointed out issues with social housing, limiting benefits to those who do not need it, and the restricted application of the rent bonus for Roma and Egyptians due to their lack of formalization in the labor market.

A representative of a youth organization highlighted the decrease in voter numbers, suggesting a lack of support for current politicians. A journalist shared a positive note about mechanisms at the municipality level, citing the successful reporting by engaged citizens. However, the lack of control over concessions and their negative effects on the community and the environment were noted, calling for MPs' attention.

A local organization raised concerns about the integration of young people in the labor market, bullying in schools, and the lack of road signs. They suggested monitoring the implementation of the law on the promotion of employment for persons with disabilities. Another participant stressed the importance of timely sharing of information for public hearings and decision-making, calling for greater awareness at the local level. Participants requested increased presence of MPs in the community and a review of the criteria for citizens' legal initiatives, considering the challenging task of gathering 20,000 signatures, which is not proportionate to the votes needed for an MP's election.

The workshop began with a speech by a renowned university lecturer emphasizing the importance of MPs' profiles and training, stressing the need for better articulation and increased engagement with citizens to address local problems. The open lists were advocated to enhance MPs' accountability to citizens. He added that many local problems might be addressed to the parliament such as the regulations for the administration of buildings or the increase in cases of children with scoliosis as a result of heavy school bags.

A psychologist and representative of an organization expressed frustration about the lack of action following discussions with MPs, emphasizing the need for more effective advocacy. Issues such as limited drinking water supply, deforestation, and inadequate protection measures were raised by a resident of Manza municipality, underscoring the urgency of addressing environmental concerns.

Various representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs) brought attention to diverse issues, including stray dogs, waste water drainage, bicycle lanes, and signage for urban mobility. The need for MPs to focus on such matters in parliament was highlighted, emphasizing the broader impact on all cities in Albania.

The reconstruction process after the Durrës earthquake was acknowledged as essential, but concerns were raised about newly constructed buildings lacking functional elevators, affecting residents, especially those

with mobility issues. Additionally, the suspension of the rental bonus for affected individuals prompted a call for parliamentary attention and action.

Participants expressed mixed views on the effectiveness of mechanisms for interaction between citizens, municipalities, and the parliament. Positive examples included citizens successfully influencing the construction of the Porto Romano port to mitigate environmental damage. However, challenges such as the lack of control over strategic concessions areas and negative community impacts persisted.

The workshop also addressed issues of public awareness, access to information, and citizen engagement at both local and Parliament level. A local coordinator of the “Strong Municipalities” project stated that the Municipal Council has available its regulations and mechanisms for petitions, requests, etc. She suggested that the local problems should be passed once to the "small parliament" of the city and then passed to other levels.

Concerns about housing for vulnerable groups such as Roma and Egyptian minorities, youth integration in the labor market, bullying in schools, and the lack of road signs were emphasized. The problem of housing for vulnerable groups, because social housing does not benefit the community but those who do not need it. The benefit of the rent bonus is limited for Roma and Egyptians as these groups are not formalized in the labor market. Additionally, the need for monitoring the implementation of laws, such as employment promotion for persons with disabilities, was highlighted.

The importance of timely sharing of information for public hearings and decision-making processes was stressed, with a call for increased awareness at the local level. Participants requested a greater presence of MPs in the community and suggested a review of the criteria for citizens' legal initiatives, as gathering 20,000 signatures was deemed challenging and disproportionate to the votes needed for an MP's election.

2. Elbasan - October 30, 2023

In the keynote speech, a high representative of the University of Elbasan emphasized the institution's willingness to cooperate with civil society and other stakeholders, including institutional partnerships. She highlighted an occasion when, as part of breast cancer awareness, 2 MPs were invited to talk and discuss with the students. Two proposals were presented to the deputies, focusing on education from an early age about the risks and control of breast cancer, as well as the placement of moving mammograms. The experience with the University of Elbasan demonstrated the potential for healthy cooperation between local actors and the parliament, and it could be set in motion with the right will.

The subsequent discussions revealed concerns about interaction and transparency issues within local institutions. One participant highlighted the problem of not publicly disclosing all requests for information and their responses, citing instances of selectivity by certain public institutions, such as the Elbasan Prefecture.

Concerns were raised about the late notification of interest groups within the framework of participation in public consultations, particularly in the case of the Municipality. A journalist pointed out a lack of motivation for the public and civil society to engage in decision-making processes within institutions.

A high school teacher noted that civil society in Elbasan is one of the most active in Albania. However, it was stressed that the energies of civil society should be strongly invested in City Council meetings, representing the first step. The absence of civil society representatives in municipal council meetings was highlighted as problematic. Additionally, the suggestion was made to hold meetings on weekends to allow for broader public and interest group participation.

It was observed that there is no established culture of civil society integration. Participation often depends on whether civil society can aid the political cause or not. It was recommended that civil society should be a default part of formal political discussions and consultations.

A representative of a women's organization emphasized that the power and impact of civil society's work are only achievable through the union of civil society. Cases were cited where the merger of organizations led to results that would not have been realized otherwise.

Instances were noted where formal cooperation with institutions fails. In cases with a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the line ministry, subordinate institutions often do not recognize and deny cooperation, paralyzing the entire process from the outset.

Recommendations included introducing legal education and projects on policy operation issues in schools to instill democratic instincts from an early age. It was suggested that the strategy already in place needs concrete steps and should be incorporated into the curriculum.

A representative of a women's organization highlighted that petitions have gained more attention in recent years. The establishment of infrastructure supporting electronic petitions was considered essential for achieving mass support for issues.

Concerns were raised about the potential discriminatory nature of the local citizen petitions procedure, where communities with insufficient numbers face greater difficulty in bringing their concerns forward.

Finally, it was recommended to intensify MPs' familiarity with the code of ethics, particularly in the language they use.

3. Shkodra - November 2, 2023

In the workshop in Shkodra, the Red Cross representative primarily addressed issues related to health, transport, and natural disaster management. Despite having good laws in place, the enforcement was found to be weak. The Red Cross representative experienced situations where laws were changed independently in relevant parliamentary committees, despite being a preliminary partner or being assured of consultation. The electoral system, where parties decide MPs elections, was identified as a problem.

The representative of a local environmentalist organization highlighted that although meetings were held in the parliament, the impact was often non-existent, especially as they were mere observers during plenary sessions. Physical proximity to Tirana and the institutions was deemed necessary for any impact. Recommendations made during the consultation of a draft law were disregarded, prompting a proposal to actively involve interest groups and the general public in comprehensive issues.

Representatives of various organizations expressed challenges in their interaction with the Municipality, emphasizing the need to apply the project format at the local level. It was noted that civil society's relationship with the municipal council is crucial. In Shkodra, there was a sentiment that "*Tirana and the parliament are and feel very far away*," underscoring the importance of initiating work at the local government level.

Another participant raised concerns about citizen mediation and suggested maintaining sustained interest and pressure to prevent participation decline after project completion. The need to expand the project, including involvement with young people in high school, was proposed.

A representative of an artisan's organization in Vau i Dejes noted the exclusion of women from public hearings in rural areas, citing a lack of trust in MPs who only appear when promoting their agenda.

A high school teacher advocated for sharing legal education materials with younger students in a practical manner. Another participant emphasized the uncertainty of recommendations' consideration in the citizen consultation platform and suggested the necessity of having local and national referendums.

The importance of promoting success stories to restore trust in the community was highlighted and participants recommended that the parliament highlight cases of successful advocacy and citizen participation.

A local organization raised its concern with the selection mechanism of MPs based on the electoral code. An interpellation was proposed to discuss the balance of power between the central and local government, advocating for increased power at the local level for a more tangible citizen-government relationship.

Further recommendations included simplifying the process for citizen legislative initiatives, considering the current requirement of 20,000 firms as too many. An online signature collection mechanism was suggested for increased efficiency.

4. Malesi e Madhe – November 6, 2023

A teacher in Kelmend area identified the most urgent problem in the area as the departure of young people and depopulation. This led to collective classes, poor teaching quality, and a declining number of graduates each year. The teacher emphasized the need for career counseling, designing children's lives, and addressing the rise in drug and alcohol consumption, which correlates with increased criminality. Additionally, the lack of investment in agriculture and animal husbandry was noted. The teacher attributed these problems to the lack of representation of the local community in the parliament. The absence of a common voice in the parliament hindered the solution of these fundamental problems. The example of collecting sage in this area, rejected due to market inadequacy, and women working informally "in the gray economy" in the sage business.

The "Shepherd's House" organization identified the need for schools, a strong organization for the Great Highlands, and the resolution of land ownership issues, especially in mountainous areas. It was highlighted the urgent problem of pastoralism, emphasizing the inadequacy of subsidies for herdsmen. The decline of pastoralism led to the loss of identity and bio-products in the area. A resident added concerns about small subsidies, depreciated stables, and insufficient infrastructure.

In this regard, a representative of a women's organization pointed out the challenges in funds and projects reaching shepherds, emphasizing the importance of stimulating the livestock sector to retain youth. A local resident expressed problems related to camps, economic aid, and physical security, citing difficulty accessing health services.

A business representative noted that a lot of sage product is produced which was previously delivered as a raw product to large processors who then distribute it abroad for export. The MP who helped promote the sale of the product in international markets has left. Now things have changed as it is no longer exported due to the lack of political support from government institutions. They don't see the MP at all since they voted for him. Politically, 'overproduction' has been trumpeted, but meanwhile it is a very informal sector that is suffering as a result of the lack of markets. Also, the loss of tobacco production and waning interest in medicinal plants were noted, with high land-holding costs. Parliament's role through the Competition Authority in controlling prices for farmers was emphasized.

A representative of a women's organization highlighted captured local institutions by the ruling party, hindering the courage to demand rights. She shared that she had previously requested information, highlighting that a significant part of the municipality's administration is unaware that information is a formal right for everyone. Lack of public transport and dependence on private cars, along with the financial

burden on students going to Shkodra, were noted. The dangers of children walking through mountains to reach school were emphasized.

The "Shepherd's House" organization mentioned a petition against a hydroelectric plant, noting challenges in funding the legal assistance needed. A risk of reversing the jubilate file was raised, demanding digitization for preservation, with no response from the Ministry of Culture.

Also, there is a risk that the "xhubleta" file in UNESCO will be reversed. The digitization of "xhubleta" knowledge was requested by one participant. Knowledge must be digitized to be passed down to future generations especially in this area. There was no response from the Ministry of Culture on this regard.

5. Tirana - November 10, 2023

A representative of an organization pointed out that in cases where slightly more controversial information is required, the institutions become a fortress, and use phrases like 'we don't have the competence, it's not up to us to give it as information'. This defensive stance created obstacles for individuals seeking information. Participants noted the asymmetry in the process of requesting specific documentation, emphasizing that interested parties were not obligated to identify the documents they sought.

Most of participants revealed a localized focus, emphasizing limited engagement with central institutions or the parliament and a concentration on municipal and local issues.

Teachers voiced a sentiment shared by many, expressing a loss of trust in the institution of the parliament. This erosion of trust was seen as a significant reason for the public's reluctance to participate in Assembly activities. Issues in education surfaced as a common concern. A teacher in a suburban high school in Tirana highlighted declining enrollment, varying textbooks causing preparation challenges, and the importance of unifying educational materials. A student from the "Ibrahim Rugova" School shed light on challenges arising from a high student concentration, specifically the inefficiency of two-shift teaching. In another instance, a reconstructed school lacked basic materials, and issues like the deteriorating library compounded the problems. A high school teacher in Tirana suburbs underscored the importance of informing young people about legal aspects beyond formal citizenship education.

One organisation shared its experience of participating in parliamentary activities but typically within the framework of initiatives led by other organizations or projects. However, the organization emphasized that with determination and effort, direct engagement with parliamentary activities was feasible.

Another organization primarily focused on education and voting processes, detailed its efforts to connect with MPs and interest groups. Despite initial communication challenges, the organization strove to establish a link between activists and parliament, emphasizing the importance of active MP participation.

A representative of an organization for education actively participated in past parliamentary committees, stressing the importance of translating opinions into tangible changes through draft laws.

An activist from Kamëz sought information on how to address a local issue related to the Kamëz-airport road directly to parliament, highlighting the need for clear communication channels.

One participant shared their struggle in addressing environmental concerns in Parliament, facing negative responses from other institutions and a lack of engagement from the parliamentary side.

Another participant, focusing on budget oversight activities, noted citizens' lack of awareness about their opportunities to interact with Parliament and suggested the instinct to approach local government rather than making a direct reference to Parliament.

In this regard, one organisation challenges with short notice for budget hearings, emphasizing the need for sufficient preparation time to address problems as an interested stakeholder. Issues in accessibility and the absence of dedicated jobs for people with disabilities were also brought to light.

A representative of a community organization suggested organizing more meetings outside Tirana to enhance contact with Parliament, particularly for communities located farther from the center.

Also, it was pointed out the absence of online petitions and their legal regulation, considering it a hindrance to past effective advocacy efforts.

6. Kukës - November 13, 2023

The participants in Kukes workshop highlighted some examples of success of the impact of citizens in addressing local concerns to public institutions. A teacher in the city high school mentioned the case of the high school students in Kukes drafted a petition for the reconstruction of Kukes High School. However, it was not possible to completely reconstruct the school as planned. Other examples of success include the initiative of a group of citizens from affected communities to stop the construction of Hydropower Plants (HPPs) in protected areas, as well as the reduction of tolls on the nation's road toll.

The representative of the local office of the People's Advocate argued that "large infrastructure projects often bypass the process of notification and consultation with residents and affected areas. A current project that was proposed consisted of "building a poorly designed bridge and road," prompting the need for a rethink. However, "with the lack of support from the citizens, it is difficult." Even though "the Municipality was against this project," escalating complaints resulted in "conflicting interests and the more counter-responses from higher level of government structures," similar to what occurred with the nation's road toll.

Another participant noted that "public hearings are quite formal," primarily conducted "for legal obligation and to justify that the procedure has been carried out."

A representative of an organization highlighted "the limited role of the Local Youth Council in Kukes." Although established as "a consultative body to the mayor," it lacks "a budget." The Youth Directorate also lacks funding, and there was "no meeting of this council with the mayor in the last mandate." It is proposed that, "as a body, it should be under the municipal council, and not under the mayor." Their presence and voice depend on "the will of the chairman and when the latter asks for a meeting and opinion."

A representative of another organization pointed out the huge difference between the border municipality of Prizren and that of Kukes, within the operational budget that each has. Life in Kukes is more oriented across the border with Prizren for entertainment, health care, etc., compared to Tirana. The unequal distribution of revenues, particularly from "the central institutions receive through the mines and HPPs of Kukes district," creates "strong inequalities in the socio-economic development of the areas and dependence on central government funds." It is proposed to find ways to keep the income in the area and finance the local government. A 'social pact' is proposed where "electricity is free and profits from Fierza are invested in local infrastructure." "Kukes has never had a voice in the parliament to overcome this problem, they have no contact with the deputies at all. Even when they tried to negotiate on the national toll fee issue, no one agreed to meet them" said one of the participants. MPs do not emerge from the grassroots or the community, but are there as a result of political appointments.

Typically, "political representatives are present in the area before the elections." Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) propose "setting the hydro rent and for the municipality to be a shareholder in these HPPs, in order to solve the economic problem." Meanwhile, local MPs have their own offices in the city and are supposed to host people at least one day a week. Not enough has been done "to promote the MPs that represent

the region and to familiarize them with their role and work." The presence of MPs should be "the result of the will of the latter, and not the result of legal obligation."

A representative of an organization highlighted "the need to establish community structures in Kukes as provided by the relevant law." To facilitate the establishment of local community structures, participants requested assistance on this regard through a pilot project.

Another participant noted that "many procedures in communication with the Municipality have gone online, so complaints and various proposals can be made online." At the moment of the workshop, there are "4 registered initiatives in the space found on the portal of the municipal council." The fact that "the process is online means that a trail can be left, and some obligation will be felt to address it."

Land property issues in this region pose barriers to access to different support schemes for farmers, women, and other community members. Migration of the population has also negatively affected the area. The British embassy's program in the area has created "great expectations that are fading as aid and grant benefit schemes have certain procedures." Even the values of the grants are relatively small to enable the establishment of the business was added by one participant.

7. Diber – November 20, 2023

Participants highlighted the difficulty for organizations or groups to contest certain municipal decision-making without strong support. Opportunities to secure funding and access to institutions can be reduced, leading to limitations when perceived as the "black sheep."

The municipality conducted public consultations for the budget in each administrative unit or village of the area. However, these meetings were generally formal. There was a case when a request for information was sent to the municipality, and even though the 10-day response period had passed, the case was not referred to the Commissioner for the right to information. The issue was resolved through informal communication due to the cautious nature of organizations in dealing with the small-town municipality.

A representative from a women's organization shared their experience supporting a citizen legislative initiative, finding it challenging to gather the required number of signatures. The situation became complex considering population movements and demographic characteristics. It was suggested that the law should be revised to address this challenge.

Many CSOs are formal and hinder other organizations with a sound mission and objectives. These formal organizations absorb funds that could be more efficiently utilized elsewhere. CSOs should be separated from self-interest to enhance citizens' trust, and mechanisms should evaluate their efficiency in relation to the funds they receive.

A representative of an organization stated the need to go to parliament to amend the law for NGOs, freeing them from certain taxes or economic burdens. Additionally, it was emphasized that MPs should have previous experience with activism or working in communities. A participant mentioned that an MP of the area used to meet citizens often and was accessible for communication. The local organization communicated with him following an official request.

The representative of an informal group on the issue of Skavica pointed out that land ownership is a problem in Dibër. The changes that the Hydropower Plant (HPP) might bring could affect lands with contested ownership.

In this regard, a local organization emphasized the need for a law on local referendums. The mechanism to approach the municipality with a local referendum is missing. The participant noted that a petition is a weak tool compared to a referendum, and in the absence of the latter, other methods need to be explored.

8. Lezha – November 23, 2023

A representative of a women's organization noted that no initiatives had ever been directed towards the parliament; instead, the focus had mainly been on local-level efforts. One such initiative involved encouraging women to participate in public consultations at the local level. The capacity of organizations in Lezha to interact with the central level is limited, leading them to remain predominantly at the local level. Additionally, organizations face challenges in identifying and overcoming mechanisms, and when their work was referred to the municipal council, they received a very "rude" response. The reactions from institutions have left active individuals demoralized.

In a specific case, the community, with legal assistance from Adriatik Lapaj, gathered to halt the construction of a Hydro Power Plant (HPP). This incident emphasized the importance of providing specialized legal assistance during such actions.

A representative from a youth organization shared a positive case where advocacy for the reconstruction of a historical bridge in Laç resulted in the Ministry of Culture and the Prime Minister hearing the call. The initiative, which began with a petition gathering around 3,000 signatures, led to the opening of a tender for the bridge's reconstruction. However, protests arose in another case involving a bridge in Lezha, where surrounding areas objected to its potential impact on the space in front of their houses.

Another representative highlighted a problem concerning a school across the river, and women from the community mobilized with a petition to the municipality for infrastructure improvements. The initiative underscored the need for proactive individuals to take the lead. Despite the presence of organizations in the city, their level of activity is limited.

A representative from a youth organization pointed out that Members of Parliament (MPs) rarely meet citizens, appearing only during elections. While the municipality organizes public consultations, participants often lack relevant documents for preparation. Civil society has space for participation, but recent public consultations in Lezha were disrupted by an unrelated incident. Consultation meetings for the local budget were held, but transparency issues persisted, with hearings not targeting different interest groups.

Another participant shared an experience where they were denied entry to a municipal council meeting due to 'procedure.' Accessibility to council meetings is challenging, and ways of citizen and interest group participation lack transparency. The distribution of information about legal acts has begun, but participants feel unprepared to contribute to parliamentary consultative processes.

A women's organization representative noted that rural women faced challenges despite efforts to provide legal guidance. Initiatives gained momentum only when organizations and projects took the lead, emphasizing the impact of organized efforts. The representative stressed the importance of focusing on the council as the central parliament seemed too distant.

One participant expressed concern about powerful political parties compromising everything. The fear of family members working in public institutions facing repercussions due to activism further deterred individuals from engaging.

A high school teacher highlighted the lack of voice among individuals, especially in education. Apathy is prevalent, and speaking up is not instinctual for teachers. Lack of awareness among pedagogical staff and fear of directors and politics contribute to this issue. In terms of support from parents, it is nonexistent, as problems are not effectively communicated by teachers, who fear repercussions. The teacher faced challenges in securing support for music classes and suitable facilities within the school.

The youth organization held a protest seeking information about immigrant camps set to be established in the Lezha area under an agreement with Italy. Lack of communication from local institutions and limited citizen support were evident.

The youth organization emphasized the negative effects of politicization on youth movements. They try to secure financing through foreign funds to avoid political influence. Another issue highlighted was the lack of solidarity between new and established organizations. Civic space for new organizations or critical movements is limited, particularly when challenging local decision-making.

