Collaborating for Effective Social Activism in West Africa:
Experiences, Enabling Factors and Challenges
ABOUT PARTNERS

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The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was set up by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) in 2005 to strengthen the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in West Africa based on critical needs assessments and consultations with key civil society constituents and policy makers.

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**Mission**

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Acknowledgements

The gains of development in West Africa cannot be acknowledged without recognising key players within the civil society sector who champion efforts to ensure that civil society has a conducive environment to operate in, while citizens enjoy an open society. To this end, civil society organisations that specifically work to promote social justice (referred to as traditional social justice organisations [TSJOs] in the report), social movements and activists have played significant roles to promote civic freedoms and open up civic space.

Acknowledging the considerable role these actors have played, it is however important to understand the factors that can enable them to do more, and ensure that these factors are harnessed. To date, a key factor is collaboration. Recognising this raises the dire need to understand the extent to which TSJOs, social movements and activists have collaborated over the years to open up civic space in the region.

As an Institute, WACSI has over the years, recognised the indispensable role effective collaboration plays to ensure civic freedoms are respected in West Africa. And to ensure that such an enabling sector-led factor is sustained among sector players, WACSI identified the critical need to study how well TSJOs, activists and social movements in the region have collaborated in their independent and collective efforts to promote civic freedoms. This idea birthed this research.

Special thanks go to my colleagues Jimm Chick Fomunjong, Christian Elongue, Charles Vandyck, and Jennifer Donkoh, who facilitated the realisation of this study. I also want to sincerely thank Dr. Emmanuel Kumi, Dr. Albert Abraham Arhin and Mr Victor Essel for collaborating with the Institute to carry out this research.

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This research would not have been possible without the commendable support of The Fund for Global Human Rights, a trusted partner and friend of WACSI who is working closely with the Institute to ensure that, together, we contribute to have an enabling environment for civic actors in the region. I must commend James Savage and John Kabia of The Fund for Global Human Rights for their invaluable insights that contributed to harness the quality of this study. We duly recognise your invaluable support and partnership and remain grateful for that. I hope that this study and the findings here in will serve as a catalyst for our collective efforts to protect civic freedoms in West Africa and I hope it will serve as a foundation for more innovative actions by diverse players in the sector to steer collaborative efforts that will guarantee citizens’ and civil society’s freedom to operate fearlessly for a prosperous and stable West Africa.

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Executive Director
WACSI
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9.1 Recommendations for strengthening collaborations among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists.

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In a nutshell

Data for this paper were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in Ghana between September and November 2019.

The paper identified the following enabling factors that aid forging of collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists:

- Shared interests in promoting social justice
- The need for a unified voice to address the closing space phenomenon
- Visibility and recognition
- Complementarity, learning and capacity building opportunity
- Availability of resources and good leadership styles

The following challenges were identified:

- Lack of perceived accountability
- Ideological differences and incompatibility of goals
- Leadership styles and mistrust
- Movement capture and power dynamics
- Bureaucratic standards of traditional social justice organisations

The paper concludes by making the following recommendations:

- Build strong partnerships
- Devise innovative strategies and tactics
- Traditional social justice organisations should be open and transparent
- Stakeholders should learn from each other
- Enhance mutual trust
- Adapt to build robust and sustained engagements
- All stakeholders should promote sustainable collaborations
- Stakeholders should document their experiences and challenges
- Enhance communication to build cross-country (regional) collaboration and solidarity
Abstract

In many countries, civil society organisations (CSOs) are under constant pressure and operating in a closing civic space. This has spurred new forms of collaborations between social activists (SAs) and social movements (SMs) that are different from traditional social justice organisations (TSJOs) in responding to the closing civic space phenomenon. This report explores how cross-sector collaboration could be used as a mechanism for countering shrinking civic space. Specifically, the paper presents empirical evidence on the experiences, enabling factors and challenges for cross-actor collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in West Africa—a context where the civic space is closing at varying degrees and levels.

The paper is informed by a qualitative research methodology in understanding collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists in West Africa. Data were gathered through literature review, focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews from 55 representatives from traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists across 14 West African countries. The paper advances four main arguments.

First, governments across the West African sub-region are using various formal and informal tactics including criminalisation, intimidation, prosecution, imprisonment, discrimination and restrictive legislations such as anti-non-governmental organisation and social media bills at varying levels to restrict the space to which diverse civil society actors operate. The research further found that in contrast to the scanty literature, traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social actors are collaborating for public campaigns, protests, advocacy for withdrawal of obnoxious legislations, citizen participation through mobilisation to promote social justice in the face of the shrinking civic space.

Second, stakeholders are generally willing to collaborate with each other. Participants cited increased voice and impact due to strength in numbers, enhanced visibility, readability and legitimacy; resource provision and knowledge sharing and synergy creation and complementarity of efforts in advocacy campaigns as some of the benefits derived from such collaborative works. Nevertheless, the study found weak cross-country collaboration among stakeholders at the regional level.
Third, collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social actors are enabled by multiple and complex factors. Five of such factors identified include: i) shared interests in promoting social justice; ii) the need for a unified voice to counteract the threats to closing down of civic space; iii) the need for enhanced visibility, recognition and complementarity; iv) opportunities for learning and capacity building; and v) availability of resources and good leadership styles.

Fourth, collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists to promote social justice has not been all rosy. As such efforts are potentially undermined by unaccountable leadership, loss of trust, perceived loss of autonomy, ideological differences and incompatibility of goals and movement capture by traditional social justice organisations. Movement capture occurred due in part to traditional social justice organisations’ access and control over financial and non-financial resources in their engagement with social movements and social activists.

This resulted in traditional social justice organisations coming into collaborative engagements with pre-defined goals which resulted traditional social justice organisations setting the decision-making agenda or having upper hand in decision-making. The resultant effect is the promotion of asymmetrical power relations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists. Top-down decision making runs the risk of undermining the participation of social movements and social activists in decision making. Based on the findings, the paper offers recommendations for deepening collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists.
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<td>CBOs</td>
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1. Introduction and Overview

In many countries, civil society organisations (CSOs) are operating in a closing civic space (e.g. Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014; Hossain et al., 2018; CIVICUS, 2019a). In response to the increasing restrictions on civic space across the world, there has been a surge in new forms of civic activism and social movements (SMs) that are different from traditional social justice organisations (TSJOs) especially in terms of their flexible organisational structure, membership structures and ability to work on multiple and diverse local problems with emerging technologies (Zihnioglu, 2019:289). Despite the increasing emphasis on the significance of cross-sector partnership in opening up civic space in restrictive environments (see for example, Glasius and Ishkanian, 2015; Youngs, 2017; Silberman, 2020), the experiences and nature of collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists, the challenges and enabling factors associated with such collaborations remain poorly understood, with little or no empirical studies on the topic.
This report explores how cross-sector collaboration could be used as a mechanism for countering closing civic space. Specifically, the paper presents empirical evidence on the experiences, prospects, perils and enabling factors for cross-actor collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in West Africa—a context where the civic space is closing at varying degrees and levels.

In doing so, this report is guided by the following questions: What is the nature and experience of the relationship among traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists especially in the context of shrinking civic space in West Africa? What prospects and value can collaborations among traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists (SAs) offer for promotion of social justice in the context of shrinking civic space in West Africa? What perils or challenges undermine collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists to promote social justice? And what are the enabling factors for forging a stronger collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in West Africa?

This study attempts to provide answers to these questions by drawing on interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and insights from two workshops with traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in West Africa between September and November 2019. Empirical evidence of the study is analysed by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of participants on the nature, challenges and enabling factors for effective collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists. This study also draws insights from traditional review of scholarly literature on partnership or collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements, social activists specifically through journal articles, reports, books and working papers.

The remaining sections of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the study within the broader debate on closing civic spaces for CSOs. Section 3 discusses the research methodology. Next, the study integrates secondary literature and the participants’ perspective in providing a conceptual understanding of traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists. This is followed by an overview of civic space in West Africa in Section 4. Section 5 presents the research findings which shows the nature of collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements, social activists, enabling factors and challenges confronting such collaborations. The last section concludes by discussing the implications of the findings and directions for future research.

According to Gershman and Allen (2006) and Carothers and Brechenmacher (2014), closing civic space is not a new phenomenon. However, it became prominent during the middle years of the last decade when there emerged resistance to democracy especially those that sought to empower civil society, promote free media and strengthen political parties. Gershman and Allen (2006) attributed the backlash to the rise of hybrid regimes in what they characterise as the third wave of democracy. Similarly, Hossain et al. (2019) have argued that the ‘War on Terror’ in the early 2000s led to the introduction of restrictive laws on CSOs' financing and on civic and political freedoms. Other issues that resulted in closing civic space include the expansion of public space with the internet, WikiLeaks exposé and the rise of Islamic States. For instance, since 2012, governments across the world have enacted over 100 laws restricting the registration, operations and funding of CSOs (Christensen and Weinstein, 2013). In the case of West Africa, it is difficult delineating a specific time for the emergence of closing civic space. However, events from some West African countries suggest that the phenomenon of closing civic space is not new. Closing civic space became prominent in the early 2000s when governments introduced restrictive legislations and policies aimed at curtailing the rights of citizens and civic freedoms (Smidt, 2018). The nature of restrictive laws keeps changing and in recent years, many West African countries like Nigeria have enacted laws such as anti-social media laws to curtail civic space. For this reason, it is important to mention that closing civic space is not uniform across the West African sub-region.
2. CIVIL SOCIETY IN A SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE: AN OVERVIEW

Civil society occupies an important position in the global efforts of promoting just and fairer society. In this paper, we conceptualise civil society from an associational perspective and define it as a “dense network of voluntary associations and citizens organisations that help to sustain community relations in a way that generates trust and cooperation between citizens and a high level of civic engagement and participation” (Newton, 2001, p. 201). Civil society represents a site of political, social action and contestation. They create the conditions for social integration, public awareness and action, and democratic stability (Newton, 2001). Civil society is a field that includes institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of collective action. Based on this conceptualisation, we distinguish between two main forms of civil society on the basis of their degree of formality, institutionalisation and operational strategies. These are (i) organised/institutionalised civil society and (ii) organic civil society (See Figure 1 for a simple illustration).

Organised/ institutionalised civic society focuses on the traditional social justice organisations. Traditional social justice organisations typically include non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (e.g. human rights organisations), community-based organisations (CBOs), media houses, professional and trade unions as well as philanthropic institutions. On the other hand, organic civil society is usually formed outside formalised structures. These typically include social movements and social activists. Section 4 elaborates on these concepts.

While the role of civil society in promoting social justice is well recognised (Gready and Robins, 2017; Clément, 2019; Stoner Jr, 2019), the space
occupied by CSOs is increasingly becoming restricted and closing (see for example Hossain et al., 2018; CIVICUS, 2019a). The understanding of civic space in this study follows Malena (2015, p. 14) and it is defined as “the set of conditions that determine the extent to which all members of society, both as individuals and in informal or organised groups, are able to freely, effectively and without discrimination exercise their basic civil rights”. This understanding identifies five main elements of civic space: (a) freedoms of information and expressions (e.g. media freedom, internet freedom); b) rights of assembly and association (e.g. CSOs’ autonomy and funding; c) citizen participation (e.g. citizens participation and advocacy); d) non-discrimination or inclusion and; e) human rights (Malena, 2015).

According to the CIVICUS Monitor tracking tool for civic space, “196 countries are categorised as either closed, repressed, obstructed, narrowed or open” in 2019 (see Figure 1). This has resulted in about 27% and 40% of the global population living in countries that have closed and repressed civic space, respectively. Only 3% of global population lived in countries with an open civic space (CIVICUS, 2020). According to CIVICUS Monitor, civic space landscape in majority of West African countries is obstructed with the exception of Ghana which is narrowed and Cape Verde (see Figure 2) which is open (CIVICUS, 2020)

While the phenomenon of closing civic space is not new in West Africa, the Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) has led to new dynamics that is accelerating and heightening existing threats to closing civic space in the sub-region. This will be explored in detail in Section 5.2. Scholars have reported cases of restricting space in West African countries as Nigeria, Togo, Guinea, Ghana, Benin and Cote d’ Ivoire (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017; CIVICUS 2019; Amnesty International, 2019). For example, in Nigeria, restrictive laws such as the NGO Regulatory Commission Bill, 2016 has been found to be a means to restrict civic space (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017). Similarly, in Gambia, the passage of the Public Order Act in 2017 restrict civic space by banning protests and demonstrations (Amnesty International, 2018). Other restrictive laws that focus on cyberspace tend to hinder freedom of expression. For instance, the organiser of the #RevolutionNow protests in Nigeria was charged with cybercrime under the Cybercrime Act and Terrorism (Prevention)(amendment) Act 2013 (CIVICUS, 2019b).

The increasing restrictions on civic space are fuelled by a number of underlying factors ranging from dependence on external donor funding (Christensen and Weinstein, 2013; Tysiachniouk et al., 2018), perceived threats to national sovereignty (Gill, 2017; Moser and Skripchenko, 2018), CSOs’ association with perceived terrorists organisations (e.g. the Nigerian government accused Action Against Hunger of aiding and abetting Boko Haram), maintaining national security in the midst of the ‘war on terror’ and ensuring CSOs’ transparency and accountability through regulations (Wood, 2016; Matejova et al., 2018). In addition, many authoritarian regimes, or governments, some of which are in West Africa, have low tolerance for dissent and public criticism. Examples include Benin and Togo. This has resulted in the use of violence in repressing and criminalising dissent or organisations perceived as threat to their political survival and national sovereignty (Christensen and Weinstein, 2013; Dupuy et al., 2016). Aside from governments, non-state actors such as corporate organisations and terrorist groups use violence and intimidation with impunity against especially activists and civic groups. For example, corporate interests over land

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1 https://monitor.civicus.org/

results in violence against land and environmental defenders (Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014; Global Witness, 2016).

According to Van der Borgh and Terwindt (2014:42), five main sets of policies, laws and measures are employed in closing civic space. These include: a) physical harassment and intimidation (e.g. threats, injuries, killings, impunity and lack of protection); b) criminalisation, prosecution and investigation (e.g. terrorism list and terrorist task force); c) administrative restrictions (e.g. restrictive NGO bills and burdensome registration process; ad hoc measures by government); d) stigmatisation and negative labelling (e.g. criminal and social stigmatisation) and; e) participation under pressure (e.g. co-optation and closure of newly created space).

Looking specifically at administrative restrictions, the instruments used by governments include the imposition of CSO and anti-protest laws, de-registration and counterterrorism laws and policies and restriction of access to foreign funding. For instance, regulatory laws aimed at ‘streamlining’ CSOs’ access to foreign funding and their activities have been passed especially in many low and middle-income countries (Christensen and Weinstein, 2013; Dupuy et al., 2016). As documented by Dupuy et al. (2016), 39 low- and middle-income countries introduced laws that limit CSOs’ access to foreign funding between 2003 and 2012. Similarly, Christensen and Weinstein (2013) also maintained that of the 98 countries they studied, foreign funding was restricted and prohibited in 39 and 12 countries, respectively. The regulatory financial laws and policies seek to determine among many other things like the mechanism through which CSOs may access and use foreign funds. Aside from financial laws, other restrictive laws focus on their administration, communication, movement, and activities (Matejova et al., 2018). Administrative laws are aimed at discouraging CSOs from undertaking their activities and takes the form of burdensome registration and reporting processes. On the other hand, communication laws restrict CSOs’ freedom of expression through mechanisms such as criminalising dissenting voices and their access to internet. For instance, in Benin, the government introduced the social media tax in 2018. This led to the formation of the #Taxepamesmo (Don’t tax my megabytes) campaign on Facebook and Twitter requests 3. On the other hand, the movement laws target staff of CSOs from travelling abroad and also deporting foreigners (Matejova et al., 2018). The instruments, policies and practices used by governments include formal and informal strategies. The formal instruments focus on regulatory, administrative and legal issues while the informal strategies include de-legitimisation and stigmatisation, threats, violence and impunity for civic actors (Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014).

The implication of such restrictive laws, policies and practices is that they shift power from civic to political actors as they tend often result in delegitimisation, selective application of rules and the increasing use of impunity on civic actors such as NGOs, social movements, human rights defenders and activists. In addition, restrictive laws and policies are aimed at preserving, increasing government’s power and pushing against the perceived authority and influence of CSOs (Poppe and Wolff 2017). More importantly, shrinking civic space has the potential of affecting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and inclusive national development (Hossain et al., 2018; Nazneen and Thapa, 2019). For example, restriction of civic space leads to the denial of human and civil rights, less government accountability, silencing of citizen’s voice and the sapping of civic energy (Malena, 2015). This in turn negatively influences and shapes the existence of CSOs as well as their advocacy and watchdog roles which helps in promoting inclusive development and society.

3 https://internetwithoutborders.org/campaign-to-cancel-facebook-tax-benin/
3- RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is informed by a qualitative research methodology in understanding collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in West Africa. Data for this paper were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in Ghana between September and November 2019. The use of qualitative research was informed by the need to getting a deeper understanding and critical insights into the dynamics of civic space and collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists.

As part of data collection methods, two FGDs were conducted with 21 traditional social justice organisations and social movements and 34 social activists in Accra, Ghana as part of workshops (i.e. strengthening stakeholder collaboration to expand civic space in West Africa and non-violent mobilisation for social activists in West Africa and training on nonviolent strategising for activists in west Africa respectively) organised by the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI). The participants for the first FGD comprised of 21 representatives of traditional social justice organisations and social movements from 14 countries (i.e. Burkina Faso, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo). The FGDs were open-ended, guided by a set of questions related to how participants understood and defined traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements as well as their perceptions and experiences on prospects, value addition,
challenges and lessons learnt on collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements. The FGDs lasted for nearly one and half hours.

The second FGD comprised of social activists from 6 West African countries (i.e. Cameroon, Togo, Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, The Gambia and Guinea) and one workshop facilitator from Burkina Faso. In total, 34 social activists participated in the FGDs which lasted for about two hours. The discussions focused on participants’ understanding of issues around civic space, value addition, challenges and prospects of collaborations with traditional social justice organisations and social movements.

Aside from FGDs, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists that were purposively selected due to their experience on civic space and collaborations. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions which gave the participants the opportunity for expressing their opinions in details. The semi-structured interviews focused on exploring participants’ perceptions and experiences of closing civic space, relationship with government, strategies employed in countering closing civic space, underlying reasons and challenges associated with collaborations between traditional social justice organisations and social movements. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 traditional social justice organisations representatives from Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, and Gambia and 10 social activists from Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Togo, Cameroon, The Gambia and Ghana. The interviews were conducted in English and French and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

The FGDs and interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. These were later transcribed and coded using NVivo 12 (i.e. a qualitative data analysis software). Thematic and discourse analysis were employed in analysing the data. Thematic analysis helped in identifying emergent themes and patterns in the data. On the other hand, discourse analysis was used in understanding how participant made meanings, framed their experiences of closing civic space and understood the nature, value addition and associated challenges facing cross-sector collaborations. It also provided insights into understanding differences or variations in participant’s perceptions on closing civic space cross-sector collaborations.

Data collection was complemented with secondary literature. In particularly, academic, and non-academic literature on closing civic space and cross-sector collaborations were used. In doing so, the focus was mainly on country research from English-speaking and French-speaking West African countries. The literature was sourced from electronic databases such as CAIRN, Scopus, Elsevier, Google Scholar, Taylor, and Francis and SpringerLink. The non-academic literature including organisational reports and policy briefs from institutions including CIVICUS, Human Rights Funders Network, Human Rights Watch, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, Rights Co-Lab and Open Global Rights. It also reviewed publications from government agencies on legal frameworks and the state of civic space and civil society sector across both English-speaking and French-speaking countries in the sub-region. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used in screening the literature4. Primary and secondary literature were combined in the final analysis.

To validate the research findings, an earlier version of this report was first shared with two civil society actors, one of them was a participant in the first FGD and the other is a practitioner with considerable experience on civil society sector. The rationale for sharing the report was to get their feedback with the view to identifying potential misrepresentations and also ensure that the findings have context relevance, they are action oriented and responded appropriately to the underlying problem that necessitated the study.

4 The criteria are: i) the study must be academic, policy oriented or practitioner focused; ii) it must contain empirical evidence on social activists, traditional social justice organisations and social movements with particular focus on West Africa; and iii) it must focus on civic space with specific emphasis on collaboration, networking and alliance building between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists.
4- DISCOURSES ON TRADITIONAL SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANISATIONS, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

This study focused on exploring the value and experiences of cross-sector collaboration between traditional social justice organisations on one hand, social movements, and social activists on the other hand to promote social justice. Rather than providing a neat and pre-existing definition of these concepts, the research allowed participants to discuss and differentiate among these different concepts and identities. This section reports on how participants self-identified themselves and understood the key categorisations that were the focus of the study based on series of group and plenary discussions (See Table 1 for summary).
4.1 Social Activists

The narratives around these stakeholders showed that the starting point for discussing the various identities of civil society stakeholders rest with social activists, which is "someone who is personally involved in a cause and thus by essence is passionate about an issue". Interviewees emphasised that the goal of activist(s) is to bring about social change in society through their participation and involvement in campaigns and protests. As one participant succinctly put it: "all that a social activist wants to see is that his goal has been achieved whether he works independently or in an organisation". Discussions among participants further established that the typical characteristics of activists include commitment to their vision, independence and objectivity in their approach to issues. Activists can work within traditional social justice organisations and social movements structures or outside these structures as individuals to bring about social change. As one participant explains:

"I see myself as an activist at the individual level, but I also work with a TSJO. So, within every TSJOS lies countless number of activists".

Yet, social activists were seen by participants to be more independent and flexible in the strategies and approaches that are adopted to effect change. Examples of activists in West Africa identified during the research include online activists, political activists, environmental activists and social activists.

4.2 Traditional Social Justice Organisations

Interviews further showed that traditional social justice organisations are typically "more formalised organisations" guided by a legal requirement to register. According to interviewees, a distinctive characteristic of traditional social justice organisations relates to their governance and organisational structures. They explained that traditional social justice organisations have more formalised organisational structures and are recognised officially by state institutions because they make use of legal frameworks. They also focus on the implementation of development projects by working with grant giving donors and government institutions—and maybe required to submit audited accounts. More importantly, they may have a broader sphere of influence and use such influence in forming stakeholder collaborations. Traditional social justice organisations typically include local and international NGOs (e.g. human rights organisations), development agencies (e.g. United Nations Agencies), community-based organisations (CBOs), media houses, professional associations, and trade unions. Examples of traditional social justice organisations in West Africa identified as part of this research include Human Rights Priority (Benin), Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (Cameroon), Defence for Children International Sierra Leone (DCI-SL- Sierra Leone), Network Movement for Justice and Development (Sierra Leone), Ghana Integrity Initiative (Ghana), Spaces for Change (Nigeria) and Youth Coalition for Education in Liberia (Liberia).
4.3 Social Movements

Interviewees defined social movements as a “group of people who come together spontaneously to work on an issue and most times disappear or re-invent themselves after their objectives are achieved”9. According to some interviewees, in defining social movements, consideration should be given to the context within which it is used. For example, interviewees from Cote d’Ivoire understood social movements as:

“an informal network between NGOs and isolated actors that is built on common values and uses different forms of protests such as mass demonstrations and civil resistance”10.

Some interviewees from other countries understood social movements in their context as “an action-oriented groups working together with a specific social, economic or political cause”11. Despite the diversity in understanding, the consensus among interviewees was that social movements were highly spontaneous in nature and involved informal networks of people with shared identity and interests. Their aim is to challenge and sometimes support existing power structures, social norms, values, and institutional arrangements through advocacy. In doing so, they work to advocate for a particular social change with their actions premised on shared interests and identity. However, social movements can also organise to oppose or resist social change by maintaining the status quo in society. A defining feature of social movements in West Africa is the spontaneity of activities and the fluidity of their organisational structures (i.e. formal and informal).

Other characteristics of social movements include: i) diverse nature of their stakeholders; ii) they are dynamic and often focus on addressing pressing and sometimes immediate social challenges; iii) they are largely the outcome of organised activism such as protests and demonstrations; iv) they have collective identities, goals, strategies and focus on achieving specific cause or action; and v) they are relatively more responsive to social justice issues. Social movements use new forms of protests and activism such as hacktivism, hashtag-activism and tweet-activism among others to develop counter-discourses that challenge and resist dominant ideologies. Examples of social movements identified as part of the research in West Africa include: Y’en a Marre (Senegal), Balai Citoyen (Burkina Faso), Mouvement 23 Juin (“June 23 Movement”) (Senegal), Occupy Ghana and Activista Ghana (Ghana) and Initiative de Résurgence du movement Abolitionniste (Mauritania).

9 FGD, 18th September 2019
10 Interview, 6th November 2019
11 FGD, 20th September 2019
Table 1: Summary of key characteristics of traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists\textsuperscript{12}.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key characteristics</th>
<th>Social movements</th>
<th>Social activists</th>
<th>Traditional social justice organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal requirements for</td>
<td>Because it emerges spontaneously, social movements do not typically concern</td>
<td>Registrations to gain recognition is not a pre-condition for their activities.</td>
<td>Typically required to register or fit activities within an existing legal and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>registrations</td>
<td>themselves with registrations etc for recognition.</td>
<td></td>
<td>regulatory framework for recognition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure and governance</td>
<td>▪ Informal groups with both structured and unstructured governance systems. Due</td>
<td>▪ Contains elements of informal governance structures.</td>
<td>▪ They have formalised and professional governance structures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to their informal nature, mobilisation is often spontaneous.</td>
<td>▪ Often acts as collective groups or individuals.</td>
<td>▪ The use of informal groups and networks is largely limited due to their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Modes and methods of engagement revolve around informal organisations,</td>
<td></td>
<td>professionalised nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>participative networks and direct actions which comprises disruptive techniques</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>such as protests.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilisation and</td>
<td>▪ Have little focus on service provision.</td>
<td>▪ Focuses on service provision, facilitation or advocacy for change.</td>
<td>▪ Adopts both traditional and digital forms of activism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>operational strategies</td>
<td>▪ Reliance on both digital activism and disruptive techniques like traditional</td>
<td>▪ High reliance on digital activism and traditional protests and campaigns.</td>
<td>▪ However, most traditional social justice organisations rely heavily on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>protests, rallies and mass mobilisation. However, the extent of internet-based</td>
<td></td>
<td>traditional forms of activism such as protests and mass mobilisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>activism is context-specific and issue-based.</td>
<td></td>
<td>This notwithstanding, they also rely on stakeholder mobilisation and engage-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Internet has enabled social movements to operate globally.</td>
<td></td>
<td>ment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{12} It is worth mentioning that in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, some social activists, social movements, and traditional social justice organisations have adopted the characteristics of the other. For example, some social movements and social activists have been involved in service provision while some traditional social justice organisations have also engaged directly with informal networks in advocating and reaching out to vulnerable communities and the less privilege in society. For this reason, a clear delineation of their characteristics is difficult due to the continuous cross-over and blurred relationships between social movements, activists and traditional society justice organisations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Representativeness</strong></th>
<th><strong>Autonomy</strong></th>
<th><strong>Sustenance of campaigns and activities</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- They have ability to mobilise their constituents against powerful elites and dominant ideologies. This is largely due to their emphasis on collective actions, identities, goals and strategies.</td>
<td>- High levels of flexibility and independence due to their informal nature.</td>
<td>- Difficulty in growing and sustaining their campaigns and activities due to ideological differences, elite capture and loss of autonomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- They tend to focus on participative networks and direct actions comprising of disruptive techniques including protests.</td>
<td>- Loss of autonomy due to political and economic pressures which leads to professionalisation, co-optation, elite capture and alternative dependency which threatens their legitimacy and credibility.</td>
<td>- Inability to create stable ties which affects the sustainability of their campaigns and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Their constituents are not limited to specific geographical location due to their issue-based nature of their activities.</td>
<td>- The influence of professionalisation and bureaucratisation associated with their engagement with for example NGOs and government agencies leads to external inference and potential loss of autonomy and independence.</td>
<td>- Power imbalances and ideological differences often creates challenges for sustaining their interventions in the long-term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Operate globally, regionally and nationally through collective actions and identities.</td>
<td>- Autonomy and independence are often diluted because of their resource dependence. This makes them to follow the priorities and demands of their ‘masters’ or donors rather than the needs of their intended beneficiaries.</td>
<td>- High potential of sustaining their campaigns and interventions. However, dependence on external donor funding and the absence of grassroots connections threatens their sustainability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5- IS THE CIVIC SPACE IN WEST AFRICA CLOSING OR OPENING UP?

As indicated in Section 2, evidence from the CIVICUS Monitor indicates that with the exception of Ghana which has a narrow civic space and Cape Verde with an open civic space, twelve out of sixteen West African countries have obstructed civic space, while civic space in Nigeria and Mauritania is repressed (See fig. 2). Findings from this study pointed to the fact that the civic space in many West African countries is closing.

5.1 Predominant Forms of Civic Space Restrictions in West Africa

Many participants of the research (social activists and representatives from both traditional social justice organisations and social movements) reported that they were increasingly facing repressive environments and attacks on their legitimacy, credibility, and operations. As one participant from a francophone West African country explained:

“the civic space in my country is closing more and more, because initially it was the well-seasoned activists who were attacked, but now even younger activists are being attacked by the government at the least criticism”\textsuperscript{13}.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview, 18th September 2019.
Another participant further narrated that: “the current government in my country has become narcissistic, so the moment anybody criticises him they get arrested. He is very unpopular, and he knows the people don’t like him and because of that any small thing or criticism that somebody raises, the person is thrown in jail”.14

The instruments and strategies used by governments to perpetrate social injustices are both formal and informal. The formal instruments focus on regulatory, administrative, and legal issues while the informal strategies include de-legitimisation and stigmatisation, threats, violence and lack of protection for civic actors (Smidt, 2018; Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014; USAID, 2018). In tandem with the observations of Van der Borgh and Terwindt (2014:42), the study identified five main sets of policies, laws and measures that are employed by West African governments to shrink civil space across the sub-region. These include:

5.1.1 Physical harassment and intimidation

Across the sub-region, governments, private sector organisations, political parties and terrorist groups are increasingly using threats and curtailment of media freedom, injuries, killings, impunity, and lack of protection to shrink the civic space. In Ghana for instance, an investigative journalist, Anas Aremeyaw Anas received series of threats and intimidations from a Member of Parliament (Kennedy Agyapong) after his investigation into corruption in football in Africa. The threats and intimidation were extended to a member of his team, Ahmed Hussein-Suale who was subsequently shot and killed by two assailants in January 201915. In the case of Burkina Faso, the Secretary General of the Collectif Contre l’Impunité et la Stigmatisation des Communautés (Collective Against the Impunity and Stigmatisation of Communities) received death threats16. The Media Foundation for West Africa (2019) has also consistently provided reports of increasing crackdown on anti-government protesters and the shutting of internet access in Guinea and Mauritania.

In Guinea for example, police officers kept storming and arresting members of the A’Moulanfé pressure group following their protests against President Conde’s seeking of a third-term re-election. In addition, security forces violently cracked down on protesters and dissenting voices during the constitutional referendum and legislative elections which led to the killing of more than 30 people between October 2019 and January 202017. Between February and March 2020, security forces violently arrested about 40 protesters and 6 opposition leaders. Similarly, security forces have been reported to fire assault weapons, broken up and arrested demonstrators at protests organised by the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution18.

Similar incidences of police arresting, violently dispersing activists and protests have been recorded in Mauritania19 and Senegal20. In Benin, the government clamped down or prevented student unions for engaging in strikes following the announcement of the introduction of tuition fees21. According to Spaces for Change (2019), there were 150 cases of government agencies using their power to restrict civic space in Nigeria between May 2015 and January 2019. These incidences involve harassments and attacks on journalists, public protesters, activists, critics of the governments, labour union leaders, and religious organisations. Amnesty International (2019) reports that between January and September 2019, 19 journalists in Nigeria were attacked by security forces through physical attacks, verbal assaults, and death threats. For instance, one journalist, Precious Owolabi died of his injuries sustained by live ammunition during his coverage...

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14 Interview, 18th September 2019.
15 https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2019/02/07/journalist-killed-deteriorating-climate-safety-journalists/
18 https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/19/guinea-fear-further-crackdown-constitutional-al-poll-nears
of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN)\textsuperscript{22}. As part of the protest, 11 protesters were also killed by security forces. In addition, the police assaulted journalists covering the #RevolutionNow protests\textsuperscript{23}. Broad application of laws such as the Cybercrime Act 2015 has been used in silencing critics and activists on social media in Nigeria. The police and Department of State Services are known to harass activists working on campaigns including #BringBackOurGirls and #OurMumuDonDo (USAID, 2018). The increasing use of government powers has led to a wave of silence among some activists for fear of being harassed. For example, CIVICUS (2019) reports of harassment involving the use of civil lawsuits against activists and journalists in Liberia by the Minister of State for Presidential Affairs, Nathaniel McGill. In Sierra Leone, land rights activists in Sahn Malen Chiefdom are also faced with increasing levels of harassments by government officials\textsuperscript{24}. In Gambia, at least 137 protesters were arrested in March 2020 during protest by the Three Years Jotna Movement which sought to urge President Adama Barrow to step down. The Three Years Jotna movement has subsequently been banned because the government considers it as a “subversive, violent and illegal movement”\textsuperscript{25}.

\subsection*{5.1.2 Criminalisation, prosecution, and investigation}

Prosecution is increasingly becoming a mechanism used by government officials to suppress dissenting voices. For example, in January 2020, the government of Benin sentenced an investigative journalist, Ignace Sossou to 18 months in prison with a fine of 200,000 CFA francs for posting “fake news” in violation of the Digital Code\textsuperscript{26}. Amnesty International (2019) further reports that at least 17 opposition leaders and bloggers have been arrested and prosecuted since the passing of the Digital Code\textsuperscript{27}. The Digital Code has also been used as the basis for arresting journalists (e.g. Aristide Fassinou Hounkpevi) and cyberactivists accused of “harassment by means of electronic communication”\textsuperscript{28}.

In Côte d’Ivoire, a human rights defender, Konan Yao Hubert has been sentenced to five years in prison and a fine of three million CFA francs in March 2020 for organising protests against a gold mine. He was charged with incitement and disturbance of public order and assaulting security officers. In addition, ten members of the Tournons la Page- Côte d’Ivoire were detained for protesting against the constitutional amendments. Similarly, the police arrested and fined several journalists (e.g. Cissé Sindou, Marc Dossa, Yamara Coulibaly, Yacouba Gbande, Barthelemy Tehin, Paul Koffi etc.) with amounts ranging between 2.5 million and five million CFA francs\textsuperscript{29}.

In Togo, the government sentenced the president of Regroupement des Jeunes Africains pour la Démocratie et le Développement (REJADD) to 18 months imprisonment for several charges including the ‘spread of false news’ and insulting government officials. Another journalist Assiba Johnson was arrested in April 2018 on charges of publishing on the repression of protesters by government forces (CIVICUS, 2019).

In Nigeria, several journalists (e.g. Dipo Awojobi, Gidado Yushau Joe Ogbodu, Abiri Jones, Kofi Bartels, Samuel Ogundipe etc.) have been arrested for exposing corruption, social media activism, participating in protests, election coverage and they have been charged with defamation, treason, disturbance of public peace and terrorism etc. Social activists such as Maryam Awaisu of the #ArewaMeToo movement have also been detained by security forces\textsuperscript{30}. In Niger, the police arrested and detained at least 15 members including social activists of the Tournons la Page Niger protest in March 2020. They have been prosecuted for organising an illegal protest\textsuperscript{31}.

Aside from prosecution, some West African governments have resorted to accusing activists and protesters as terrorists or belonging to terrorist...
groups. For example, in Nigeria, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) separatist groups are labelled as a terrorist group by the government. Again, the government closed down the offices of the international humanitarian group, Action Against Hunger in Borno and Yobe States. The NGO was accused of “aiding and abetting” Boko Haram.

In the case of Burkina Faso, the government has used the ‘war on terror’ as an excuse for the restriction of freedom of expression. In their fight against terrorism, the publication of “information, images, or sounds” of a kind to “compromise an operation or an intervention” of security forces is considered a criminal act which is punishable by one to five years in prison and a maximum fine of 10 million CFA. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that in some cases, journalists in Burkina Faso are also threatened by terrorist groups which limits press freedom. In Cameroon, some journalists (e.g. Ahmed Abba) have been accused of supporting Boko Haram Islamist militants (Amnesty International, 2016).

5.1.3 Administrative restrictions

These involve restrictive NGO bills and burdensome registration process, ad hoc measures by government. For example, the passing of the Public Order Act in 2017 by the Gambian government resulted in the denial of permission for the Occupy Westfield activist group to protest against poor electricity supplies. In Nigeria, proposed NGO Regulatory Commission Bill has been found to represent a means to restrict civic space. Ibezim-Ohaeri (2017) argues the Bill’s real intention is seen in its focus on regulating “CSOs on matters relating to their funding, foreign affiliation and national security, and...to check any likelihood of CSOs being illegally sponsored against the interest of Nigeria.” (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017, p.131). According to USAID (2018), some Nigerian CSOs were not registered by the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) because they perceived them as political entities given their involvement in governance and democracy issues. Again, while no case of internet access shutdown has been reported in Nigeria, there are instances of internet censorship where expressions are policed by government officials as part of efforts to criminalise cybercrime. For instance, the introduction of the Cyber Crimes Act has led to the shrinking of civic space. There are also attempts to pass the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation and other Related Offences Bill which seeks to regulate online freedom of expression. As part of restrictive legislations, some LGBTI organisations in Liberia were denied registration because their activities were considered as ‘outside Liberian laws’ (USAID, 2018).

In Senegal, the government authorities withdrew the license of an NGO Lead Afrique francophone on the grounds of illegal financing because they supported Y’en a Marre. In the same vein, a representative from Guinea explained how government used the registration process to restrict some traditional social justice organisations they perceive as a threat from operating. The interviewee stated that: “there is also systematic control of the registration process at civil society level. When the period of activity they are registered for expired, you are to renew it but the government is always refusing our registration renewal“.

5.1.4 Stigmatisation and negative labelling

This is used by governments to tag traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists as actors who are not working in the interest of the state, hence, criminals. In Nigeria, for example, Ibezim-Ohaeri (2017) argues that the main concerns of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which is on social justice, has been ignored by the government. Instead, IPOB has been labelled as a terrorist organisation, hence they are constantly facing harassment and...
abuse by security forces. Similarly, Revolution Now protest is accused of engaging in terrorism acts and the leader was arrested and charged with treasonable felony⁴⁰.

5.1.5 Participation under pressure

Co-optation occurs when CSOs are made to align their priorities with government agencies coercively. By doing so, the aim of governments is to sow divisions among political actors with the view of rewarding co-opted civic actors (Brechenmacher, 2017). However, it is important to mention that co-optation takes several forms. First, CSOs can be persuaded or lured by government for material gains. Second, the government can use coercion such as threats and intimidation to co-opt CSOs (Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014). In the case of Benin, during the FGDs, some participants explained that there are a number of individuals who were once vocal against the government. However, these individuals have been co-opted by the government, hence they are less likely to use dissenting voices or speak against the government. For instance, a participant stated that:

“people have moved from traditional social justice organisations to work for the government. So those who were once vocal have been bought by the government”⁴¹.

For this reason, many activists questioned the closeness of traditional social justice organisations with the government which in turn affects their credibility and legitimacy. It was also mentioned that co-optation involved the biased facilitation of access to public funds to traditional social justice organisations which restricts their ability to criticise the government. This was largely on the basis that some traditional social justice organisations refrain themselves or are less reluctant to criticise the government for fear of losing their funding.

5.2 Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) Pandemic and Closing Civic Space in West Africa

In many West African countries, the COVID-19 pandemic is increasing existing threats to closing civic space due to its potential of undermining human rights. In January 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak of the COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and a pandemic on 11th March 2020⁴². As part of the measures for controlling the pandemic, some governments have taken actions that have the potential or continue to shrink civic space. Emerging evidence shows that some governments in the West African sub-region have used the crisis to suspend constitutional guarantees including freedom of expression, movement and association (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2020)⁴³.

For instance, the International Centre for Non-Profit Law (ICNL) COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker reports the imposition of restrictive measures such as the invocation of state of emergency, banning of protests, demonstrations and mass gathering in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in many West African countries. For instance, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone have instituted measures (e.g. banning public gatherings including protests) that negatively affect civic space.

While some countries are implementing administrative and legislative restrictions which are permitted under international human rights law for reasons of public health or national emergency, others have gone beyond these limited restrictions to enact overly broad laws, policies and regulations which endanger civic freedom⁴⁴ (ICNL, 2020). In particular, the imposition of lockdowns, mandatory quarantine and restrictions on travels has the potential of affecting civic space and operations of traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists. Given that social activists and social movements engage in popular protests

⁴¹ FGD, 17th September 2019
⁴² The COVID-19 pandemic (COVID‑19) is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS‑CoV‑2). As of 4th May 2020, more than 3.32 million cases of COVID-19 and 248,000 deaths have been reported in 187 countries and territories.
⁴⁴ https://www.icnl.org/covid-tracker/
and demonstrations on the street, their space to organise and express themselves have been affected by COVID-19 related legislations. For example, in Benin, the imposition of temporary quarantine and non-essential gathering laws meant that the gathering of ten or more people was prohibited. Similarly, in Mali, the government introduced a decree that banned all social, political, cultural gatherings of more than 50 people. In Guinea, a state of emergency and series of measures to fight the pandemic was announced by the president which banned large gatherings including protests and campaigns. Such emergency measures limits freedom of assembly. Faced with the challenge of movement, some social activists have resorted to digital activism. However, in some countries like Nigeria, for example, the Governors’ Forum in partnership with MTN-Nigeria sought to use subscriber data to combat the pandemic. However, the use of such intrusive surveillance measure has the potential of undermining the privacy of citizens and curtailing freedom of expression.

It is important to mention that at the time of writing this paper, no comprehensive study existed on the impact of COVID-19 on CSOs and civic space in West Africa. However, reports suggest that in Burkina Faso, the operations of CSOs have been restricted due to travels bans to and from towns and cities with confirmed COVID-19 cases. In Ghana, the Government introduced the Imposition of Restriction Acts 2020 in an attempt to curb the pandemic. However, the imposition of partial lockdown and the practice of social distance has resulted in significant operational challenges as many CSOs are unable to undertake their operations in communities. Similarly, in Nigeria, the government in using Section 45 of the Nigerian 1999 Constitution, introduced restrictive measures to fight against the pandemic. In doing so, concerns have been raised about the potential of state governors to use the pandemic to further clampdown on civic freedoms. In addition, some media houses have also been barred from covering presidential initiatives to combat the pandemic (Spaces for Change, 2020). Ibezim-Ohaeri (2020) identifies three key trends in relation to COVID-19 pandemic and closing civic space. First, is the excessive use of force by security agencies in enforcing lockdown rules. For instance, in Abia State a police officer shot and killed a civilian in an attempt to enforce lockdown directives. In Osun State, police officers tortured a woman when enforcing lockdown measures. Other instances of police brutality during the COVID-19 curfew have been reported in countries like Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Cote d’Ivoire. Second, state executives are increasingly overreaching their constitutional powers such as closing waterways and prohibiting domestic travels. Third, is the use of legal and regulatory frameworks in legitimising restriction of human rights by the federal and state governments as part of their COVID-19 emergency response. Next, we discuss briefly how civic actors are responding and adapting to the closing civic space in West Africa.

5.3 Responses and strategies to reclaiming closing civic space in West Africa

Faced with the challenge of closing civic space, several initiatives and strategies have been developed by traditional social justice organisations, activists, social movements, donor agencies and international organisations. For instance, international donors (bilateral and multilateral, philanthropic organisations) have adopted strategies like review of funding approaches, knowledge sharing, operating remotely from restricted countries, providing financial resources (i.e. core, flexible and long-term funding), international donors developing ties with local funders and helping local CSOs to mobilise domestic resources (Hetz and Poppe, 2018). On the other hand, traditional social justice
organisations, activists and social movements are devising diverse tactics and strategies to reclaim civic space. It is also important to clarify that these strategies are often applied simultaneously depending on prevailing circumstances. The responses include:

5.3.1 Mobilisation of external and internal support

Many traditional social justice organisations have adopted externally focused strategies aimed at altering their political and institutional environment where they mobilise the support of transnational allies including international human rights organisations and media. In Nigeria, Ibezim-Ohaeri (2017) documents how traditional social justice organisations turned to the European Center for Non-Profit Law to seek support and capacity to fight off the NGO Regulatory Commission of Nigeria (NGORCN), proposed by the government to regulate the activities of CSOs. In other West African countries, traditional social justice organisations mobilise international human rights groups such as Amnesty International, Just Security, CIVICUS, and Human Rights Watch and media outlets as part of efforts to give the situation an international coverage. For instance, Amnesty International documents human rights violations in many West African countries54. In doing so, they put pressure on governments from outside. This in turn helps traditional social justice organisations to politicise their issues at the international level through the boomerang effect where traditional social justice organisations like international NGOs name and shame governments that violates the rights of citizens (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Aside from international support, traditional social justice organisations have also mobilised themselves in addressing the negative effects of closing civic space on their operations. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, CSOs in Nigeria came together to put pressure on the government from passing the Control of Infectious Diseases Bill 2020 because its potential of infringing the rights of citizens55. Similarly, organisations like the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD) worked together to resist the introduction Interception of Postal Packets and Telecoms Messages Bill, 2016. In Cote d’Ivoire, protests and condemnation from media houses led to the withdrawal of the New Media Bill in May 2017. Vigorous advocacy campaign by civic actors has also led to the release of some journalists (e.g. Dan Opeli and Yves Kuyo) who were arrested by the government56.

5.3.2 Compliance with existing regulations, rebranding and restructuring

In responding to closing civic space, some traditional social justice organisations tend to rebrand and restructure their governance and operational structures to meet new rules set by governments to regulate their activities. By doing so, some traditional social justice organisations present a desired image of themselves to government officials in order to be legitimate organisations. Other traditional social justice organisations rebranded themselves by abandoning and restructuring their activities in human rights into other thematic areas that were deemed less contentious (e.g. environmental protection, leadership and social inclusion) (Dupuy et al., 2015). As part of their restructuring strategies, many activists such as AFRICTIVISTS, ABLOGUI, and La Coalition des Indignés have resorted to digital activism in documenting and advocating for open civic space (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017). Next, we discuss the criticality of collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements in countering closing civic space in West Africa.

6. THE CRITICALITY OF COLLABORATION AS A RESPONSE TO THE CLOSING CIVIC SPACE IN WEST AFRICA

Collaboration involves joint efforts between organisations with shared goals and mutual interests. Collaborations occur between organisations operating within or in different countries and sectors which add a layer of complexity to their engagement (Bryson et al., 2006). While the literature lacks a common definition of collaboration, Agranoff and McGuire (2001) defined collaboration “as the process of facilitating and operating in multi-organisational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by single organisations”. Similarly, Snavely and Tracy (2000) argue that collaboration involves commitment by organisations to work closely given an overlap in their missions. The aim is to combine resources to promote improved efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. More importantly, collaboration revolves around working together to address societal problems through joint decision making, resource sharing and ownership (Guo and Acar, 2005).
Findings from the research have shown that collaboration is becoming an important tool for traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists to respond to the shrinking civic space in West Africa. From the research, three key trends are observed around the experiences and nature of collaboration that exist among traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists. First, there is growing collaborative works among different stakeholders in navigating the shrinking civic space. Second, there are positive perceptions on the role and added value of collaboration as a mechanism to respond to the shrinking civic space. traditional social justice organisations social movements and social activists. Third, cross-country collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists are weak.

6.1 Growing Experiences of Collaboration between Traditional Social Justice Organisations, Social Movements and Social Activists

The literature review that preceded this research revealed very little experiences of collaborations that exist between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists at country levels. However, findings from the empirical research showed that there is a growing number of experiences of collaborations among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists, than it is reported, as stakeholders navigate through the closing civic space to promote social justice. Traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists are collaborating for public campaigns, protests, advocacy for withdrawal of obnoxious legislations, citizen participation through mobilisation to promote social justice in the face of the shrinking civic space. These include both intra-stakeholder collaborations and cross-sector collaborations.

Many interviewees from Benin, Sierra Leone, Togo, The Gambia, Ghana and Nigeria reported and shared experiences of collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists. For example, in Cameroon, participants shared experiences on how the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA)—which is at the forefront of seeking change in the context of the “anglophone crisis”—has been collaborating with grassroots social movements, online activists, Kah Walla’s civic movement and the Coffin Revolution to stand against the violation of the rights of journalists, lawyers and diverse strategies being used by the government to shrink the civic space. CHRDA has also been collaborating with the Open Society Initiative in West Africa (OSIWA) for example to build its capacity and to advance issues relating to closing civic space.

In Senegal, participants shared experiences of how the Y’en a Marre Movement, which started with a group of young activists has been collaborating with some traditional social justice organisations, first to stop the former President Abdoulaye Wade from overstaying his term and later to put the succeeding government on its toes to improve the socio-economic state of the country.

In Sierra Leone, a participant explained how an alliance formation between DCI-SL has been instrumental in building the capacity of grassroots social movements. Similarly, in The Gambia, some traditional social justice organisations due to their perceived organisational capacity were able to coordinate the activities of social movements and social activists during the Occupy Westfield movement. In doing so, they offered technical support and legal advice for social activists and social movements to petition the Gambian parliament and the Office of the Vice President.

More importantly, traditional social justice organisations play a crucial role in helping social movements and activists to self-organise through collective action. A case in point was the #IamToufah movement (i.e. Fatou Jallow sexual harassment). Speaking about his experience of collaboration among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists, the interviewee explained:
“When Fatou Jallow came out to talk about her rape case, we had a lot of activists, traditional social justice organisations like Think Like a Woman, Girls Agenda and other social movements who joined her campaign to achieve a particular cause”57.

Another interviewee suggested that traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements worked together during the protests that led to the removal of Yaya Jammeh. They also worked together in providing inputs for the Gambian National Youth Policy. In Ghana, an activist shared experience of successful collaborations with traditional social justice organisations like MFWA and CDD to resist the introduction of the ‘spying’ bill (i.e. Interception of Postal Packets and Telecoms Messages Bill, 2016). This collaborative effort led to the subsequent withdrawal of the Bill from the Parliament.

Activists from Benin also shared experiences of how they came together and worked with traditional social justice organisations with reputable brand and credibility to communicate on social media platforms during the Peace for Benin protest. In Nigeria, The #BringBackOurGirls Campaign for example involved collaborations between women led traditional social justice organisations, activists and online communities of bloggers. Similarly, in Guinea, there are documented evidence of traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements collaborating to protect civic space. For example, the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution (FNDC) (Le Front national pour la défense de la Constitution) which is a platform comprising of opposition parties, CSOs and trade unions organised protests and campaigns against the constitutional referendum and a possible third term for president Alpha Condé58. Again, as part of measures to protect civic space during the COVID-19 pandemic, the FNDC has used public protests in expressing frustrations about state of emergency orders introduced by the government to fight the pandemic59.

These examples and experiences support the observation by other scholars about the existence and emphasis of collaborative relationships (Carter-Olson, 2016; Nwangwu and Ezeibe, 2019) as operational environment becomes uncertain (Kumi, 2017). However, it must be mentioned that experiences of working with others have been varied and has ranged from one-off collaboration to continuous engagements. Section 8 provides a reflection on some of the challenges associated with the use of collaboration to promote social justice in a shrinking civic space, as shared by participants.

6.2 Positive Perceptions and Added Value of Collaborations Among Traditional Social Justice Organisations, Social Movements and Social Activists

Participants generally expressed positive views for intensifying collaborations among traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists at both country levels and at the sub-regional level. A participant from Niger summed this up as:

“I think it is important for TSJOs to work with other movements because there are some targets that you can’t achieve alone as a single organisation”60.

The research findings further showed that many interviewees explicitly acknowledged the significance of collaboration in opening up civic space. In particular, interviewees identified four main value additions of collaboration. These are: i) increased voice and impact due to strength in numbers; ii) enhanced credibility and visibility; iii) resource provision and knowledge sharing; and iv) synergy creation and complementarity of efforts in advocacy campaigns. These findings are discussed in details below.
6.2.1 Increased voice and impact due to strength in numbers

Interview data suggests that collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements is crucial in amplifying collaborators’ voices. More importantly, many activists argued that by working together with traditional social justice organisations, they were able to influence and persuade policy makers and political actors in making commitments to protecting human rights due to their numbers. An activist said:

Collaboration is very important because you cannot do everything alone. And if you need to make meaningful changes, you need to work as a team, you need to work with others and join your support because there is power in numbers.\(^61\)

Another activist added:

One of the biggest advantages we get is that we can collaborate with other organisations to create more voice and give it more influence. Sometimes, we work with organisations like [INGO 1]. So, for any cause, we work with them and they have the influence.\(^62\)

The above statements demonstrate the significance of collaboration in amplifying the voices of actors and also extend their influence in key debates and discussions. For example, an activist from Guinea argued that collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists resulted in the formation of the Voice of the People Campaign in the education sector in 2017 which subsequently led to the removal of the Minister of pre-university education (i.e. Ibrahima Kourouma). The interviewee mentioned that “one strong united voice” between these actors resulted in their ability to influence the government in abolishing the proposed educational reforms. The empirical evidence therefore shows how ‘strength in numbers’ compels governments or political actors to come to the discussion table. In this regard, traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists had greater impact when they collaborated. This was aptly captured as follows:

There is value addition because at the end of the day, we are supporting each other. So that will be a way to add some weight to the cause we’re all fighting to achieve. So, I think it’s necessary and it will have a great impact on whatever work that we will do.\(^63\)

The finding therefore supports existing studies that suggest that collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements created opportunities for dialogue with government officials. For instance, in Niger, due to the ability of the Fairness and Quality Coalition Against the High Cost of Living (i.e. the Coalition Equité Qualité Contre la Vie Chère au Niger) to speak with one bigger voice, this compelled the government to reduce taxes and distribute foods to the vulnerable in society (Maccatory et al., 2010). In the case of Nigeria, collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists during Occupy Nigeria resulted in the mobilisation of people and the instigation of pressure (e.g. threats and protests) on the government (Branch and Mampilly, 2015). Similar incidences of traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements working together to influence government policies has been reported in the literature (see O’ Brien et al., 2017; Glasius and Ishkania, 2015).

Overall, the research findings point out that collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists has the potential of influencing government policies due to their ‘united voice’. When advocacy coalitions speak with one voice, it enhances the legitimacy of their campaign (Noakes and Teets, 2017; Yanacopulos, 2005). Notwithstanding, we found that traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social

\(^61\) Interview, 18th September 2019.
\(^62\) Interview, 6th November 2019.
\(^63\) Interview, 8th November 2019.
activists were not homogenous and had divergent perspectives and approaches for influencing policy makers which sometimes resulted in collaborative challenges. This will be discussed in detail in Section 8.

6.2.2 Enhanced visibility, credibility and legitimacy

Another value addition of collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists was that it enhanced the visibility of protests and campaigns organised by traditional social justice organisations. This was attributed to the ability of activists to leverage on their broad social base and connections with the grassroots. In this regard, they are able to link different actors together. During interviews, some activist-bloggers and social movement activists suggested that their ability to engage with several followers on social media afford them the opportunity to increase the visibility and credibility of their programmes. Their use of social media contributed to their capacity to attract large protesters and public attention. Consequently, the activists and movements become very attractive for other traditional social justice organisations to work with them on especially campaign or advocacy initiatives. Some activist interviewees explained that due to their popularity, many traditional social justice organisations sought to collaborate with them to enhance the visibility of their advocacy programmes as stated by one activist:

“I think because I was known [popular], I started to work with them [TSJOs] and becoming involved in projects that were related to my cause [interest] such as transparency in elections”64.

These findings demonstrate how social activists use their visibility in promoting the work of traditional social justice organisations. What emerged from the research was that traditional social justice organisations due to their organised structure, capacity and relationship with political actors played a crucial role in giving some activists the needed visibility and credibility. Many TSJO representatives felt that activists and movements are ill-equipped to bring about policy changes due in part to their inability to develop strong relationship with policy makers and also sustain their programmes over a long-term. In this regard, collaboration with traditional social justice organisations who have knowledge and expertise and organised structures are able to sustain their interventions and work with government officials. Thus, traditional social justice organisations become transmission belts or intermediaries between government and activists. For example, some activists explained that their collaborations with traditional social justice organisations and international governmental organisations like UNICEF gave them recognition and credibility in the eyes of local stakeholders. This occurred largely because the traditional social justice organisations supported the activists to enhance their capacities on how to use facts or evidence in their advocacy work because:

“as social activist, you just don’t go on social media and make pronouncement about things that are not factual and you cannot verify”65.

The perceived inability of some activists to use facts has led to the assumption that “activists are negatively perceived by traditional media”66. For this reason, some activists claimed that they were not appreciated due to the lack of perceived credibility. However, working with some respected traditional social justice organisations brought ‘additional blessing’ as it helped in reducing the negative stigma or labels which enhances their credibility in the eyes of stakeholders. Additionally, working with traditional social justice organisations gave activists and movements exposure and access to global audiences as one interviewee emphasised:

“the hands they [TSJOs] lend us boosts our prowess in gaining audience on local, regional, and global scales”67.

This demonstrates that developing relationship with traditional social justice organisations helps

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64 Interview, 6th November 2019.
65 Interview, 7th November 2019.
67 Interview 8th November 2019.
activists to bring their advocacy programmes to the attention of global audiences. International solidarity is employed by traditional social justice organisations especially human rights defenders as it enhances their visibility in raising awareness about their advocacy programmes. Thus, collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists reflects the effect where local activists call on their international counterparts to put pressures on their governments, which is crucial in attempts to seek legitimacy and visibility (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

This notwithstanding, this research found that sometimes collaboration with traditional social justice organisations was detrimental to the legitimacy of social activists or social movements with the grassroots. This is because social activists and social movements perceived to be closer to traditional social justice organisations are accused of promoting their agendas rather than advocating for the causes and values that are in the interest of the grassroots. One SM activist lamented by saying:

“So there have been issues with some NGOs in Gambia and that causes credibility issues because a lot of people are saying these NGOs exist to finance homosexual lobbying and all that [...] So, the moment you work with these NGOs, it means you share in their ideals. So that’s where the credibility issue comes in”68.

Some traditional social justice organisations’ and activists raised concerns that collaborations with some activists perceived as ‘enemies of the government’ often resulted in the traditional social justice organisations being targeted by the government as one interviewee explained:

Our leader has already spent four weeks in jail. It is an organisation that incites other activists to take action. It has partnership with [INGO 1]. Because [INGO 1] supports our actions, the government wanted to close it down but they didn’t succeed69.

This statement suggests that collaboration with activists and movements despite its benefits exposes Traditional social justice organisations to risks which potentially affects their reputation. Many TSJO representatives mentioned being wary of collaborating with some activists and movements. They argued that this stems in part from incompatible institutional logics or ideologies and approaches. It was explained that the ideologies and approaches of many activists and movements were sometimes not compatible with that of traditional social justice organisations and their donors as one interviewee noted:

Sometimes, the problem is where donors do not allow you to do certain collaborations. There are always some restrictions by donors when you want to work with some groups [activists or movements] [...] So, donor influence is one of the threats to collaboration70.

This was because of differences in organisational structures where activists due to their flexible organisational structures are quick to react to situations through confrontational approaches like protests and demonstrations. However, for traditional social justice organisations and their donors, because of their apolitical and non-confrontational nature, they tend to restrict themselves from collaborating with activists engaging in contentious political issues.

Collaboration with activists has the potential of negatively affecting the brand and credibility of some traditional social justice organisations and donors. In addressing this, Silberman (2020) has suggested that traditional social justice organisations should prioritise the impact of their collaborations with activists over their maintaining their brand. However, such assertions are problematic in contexts like West Africa where traditional social justice organisations usually focus maintaining their relationship with donors and government as a way of ensuring their survival. In this regard, losing their donors in place of collaboration with activists and movements will be a difficult trade-off.
6.2.3 Resource provision and knowledge sharing

Activists and social movement representatives mentioned that collaborations with traditional social justice organisations brought access to financial resources which they need. They emphasised that on their own, they were unable to secure funding because donors prefer funding organisations with formalised or professionalised governance structures. Given the difficulty involved in securing funding, the interviewees argued that it negatively distracted their programmes and projects. However, collaboration with traditional social justice organisations gave them access to financial resources:

"We collaborate with TSJOs since we sometimes face challenges of limited resources. I think such partnerships have immensely contributed to our work because they tend to augment our limited resources."71.

Aside from the financial benefits, collaboration with traditional social justice organisations led to the provision of capacity strengthening support for activists. It was explained that advocacy programmes required social activists and social movements to have specialised knowledge and technical skills. However, they often need such skills and therefore depended on traditional social justice organisations to provide them the needed knowledge and trainings. Many activists acknowledged that

"TSJOs are more established than us and they use their resources to help us in order to enhance our work [...] They [TSJOs] have the knowledge and skills and show us the way things are done."72.

Similar accounts of traditional social justice organisations using the sufficient resources (e.g. material, human, social-organisational, moral and cultural) at the disposal to support the work of activists have been highlighted in the literature (Glasius and Ishkanian, 2015; Zihnioglu, 2019; Silberman, 2020).

Activists and social movements also shared knowledge and experiences as part of their collaborations. This was because of the mutual interdependencies that existed between activists and movements which led to the sharing of information on successful practices for engaging stakeholders as stated by an activist: "we invite other activists to share their experiences with us if their work inspires us"73. This clearly indicates activists make commitments to support each other in their advocacy work. Activists and movement representatives also mobilised their organisational, cultural resource and networks together. Findings from this study therefore support existing studies in countries like Burkina Faso and Senegal where activists and movements are known to share resources in advancing their advocacy agenda. In the case of Senegal for example, Mouvement 23 Juin and Y’en a Marre relied on cultural resources including hip-pop and rap in the absence of financial resources to sustain their protests (Engels, 2015; Demarest, 2016).

6.2.4 Synergy creation and complementarity of efforts in advocacy campaigns

We found that given the complex environment within which advocacy takes place, collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists create opportunities for the development of strategic direction, synergy and coordination among the stakeholders which could be impossible for one organisation to bring about structural change. A key concern raised by interviewees was that given the different interests of traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements, collaboration was crucial in bringing the complementary expertise of the actors together. This resulted in the creation of synergy which helped in amplifying their voices. This was succinctly captured by an interviewee who explained that:

71 Interview, 5th November 2019.
72 Interview, 7th November 2019.
73 Interview, 20th September 2019.
“We come with our own networks, connections and press coverage. Therefore, we need to build synergy […] if we do a press conference and 40 TSJOs or activists participated, it’s better than one or two individuals or organisations. The government will then understand that we have a crowd. It also prevents you from arbitrary arrest and detention because they understand that if you’re arrested, then all these other groupings will join together for your release.”

Interviewees contended that advocacy coalitions when they work together were able to achieve much success than individuals because of their ability to create synergy and solidarity. In doing so, collaboration among activists, movements and traditional social justice organisations of different experiences help them to have greater potential in achieving their common goals (i.e. opening up civic space). The research further found that individual traditional social justice organisations and activists have their unique comparative advantages and bring to the table their unique expertise. To this end, harnessing collectively the comparative advantages of organisations provided enormous benefits for partners.

Interviewees expressed the view that synergetic value creation produced new forms of change due to the combination of their unique skills and assets. This enhanced their effectiveness in advocacy campaigns. According to an activist, synergy creation in advocacy is crucial because “it will not make sense to go on the street as an activist on my own to speak for the passing of the Right to Information Bill. So, we had to come together […] For you to have a successful influence or impact as an activist, there’s always the need for synergy.” The empirical findings in this study therefore supports existing studies that highlight the synergetic advantages of cross-sector collaborations (Lasker, 2001; Chereni, 2017). Having discussed the value addition of collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements, the next section focuses on the enabling factors that promotes the forging of collaboration.

6.3 Weak Cross-country Collaborations Across the Sub-region

While in-country collaborations among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists appear to be growing, findings from this study noted a weak cross-country collaboration across the sub-region. Research participants emphasised the centrality of working with other stakeholders in other countries for solidarity purposes and for increasing reach and coverage of efforts to resist shrinking spaces in different countries. Yet, there has been little practical experiences in this direction. As one participant summarises the situation during group discussions:

“We have been busy battling issues in our countries but an area my organisation and those I have heard from have not done well relates to collaborations across countries. It will be great for us to move out and build strong friends across the sub-region. Friends that will be crucial for us to call upon when it gets tougher but also to even shape the decisions our regional policy makers make there.”

74 FGD, 20th September 2019.
75 Interview, 5th November 2019.
76 FGD, 18th September 2019.
7. REFLECTIONS ON ENABLING FACTORS THAT AID FORGING OF COLLABORATION AMONG TRADITIONAL SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANISATIONS, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

What drives some traditional social justice organisations to work with social movements and activists and vice versa? While we acknowledge factors such as the existence of infrastructure, databases (e.g. West Africa Civil Society E-Directory), frameworks and platforms that traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements could leverage for cross-sector collaboration, we focus specifically on the responses by participants on the enabling factors for collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements. In doing so, the
empirical findings gathered in this study revealed at least five main enabling factors that favour cross-sector collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists to promote social justice. These are: i) shared interests in promoting social justice; ii) the need for a unified voice to address the closing space phenomenon; iii) visibility and recognition; iv) complementarity, learning and capacity building opportunity; and v) availability of resources and good leadership styles. These factors are highlighted hereunder.

7.1 Shared Interests in Promoting Social Justice

Shared interest is one of the most enabling factors for forging cross or vertical collaboration among diverse actors (Van Dyke, 2003; Shier and Handy, 2016; Steinman, 2019). This is directly related to the existence of social ties that connects individual activists and social movements. There is unanimity in the responses from participants that organisations tend to collaborate with others when there is alignment of goals and perspectives among partners. As a participant from Senegal emphasised, “We did not have any difficulty collaborating with them. This is because their goal to promote the well-being and quality of life for Senegalese is exactly what we have also set ourselves to do”.77 Thus, the need to push for organisations in advocating for a more just society represents an important pathway that could bring traditional social justice organisations, social activists and social movements together to work collaboratively.

7.2 The Need for a Unified Voice to Address the Closing Space Phenomenon

Participants further shared the view about the need for a unified voice in addressing the closing space phenomenon. This was captured in the following statement by a participant from Gambia who argued that “there is no better time for civil society actors to come together to forge a common war when the very space and the environment they work within are being threatened”78. Traditional social justice organisations are therefore motivated to collaborate with others (social activists and social movements) as a way of contributing to the protection of defenders and human rights activists from persecution. Thus, organisations are being motivated to collaborate, work together, form partnerships and network to protect their civic space.

7.3 Visibility and Recognition

Narratives from participants further established that opportunities for visibility and recognition provide an enabling environment for traditional social justice organisations to work with social movements and activists. Findings and discussions suggest that there is even more compelling interest for traditional social justice organisations to associate with social movements and activists with strong international backing. This mirrors Moser and Skripchenko’s (2018) report that some CSOs adopt the strategy of internationalisation by embedding themselves in global NGO networks. Access to wider international organisations enhances the social and political impact of CSOs facing restrictions. More importantly, international solidarity is known to be an effective strategy employed by human rights defenders as it enhances their visibility in raising awareness about their plights (Nah et al., 2013; Marland, 2015).

7.4 Complementarity, Learning and Capacity Building Opportunity

Interviews further shows that expectations on complementarity, learning and opportunities for capacity building drive traditional social justice organisations to collaborate with social movements and social activists to promote social justice. Here, the potential for a TSJO to collaborate with other stakeholders improves when the parties recognise how the skills, expertise, knowledge, credibility and resources will complement each other to bring a social justice.

77 FGD, 19th September, 2019.
78 Interview, 7th November 2019.
7.5 Availability of Resources and Good Leadership Styles

According to interviewees, cross-sector collaborations require resources (financial and technical capacity) for them to be effective in addressing the problem of closing civic space. It was explained that the availability of financial and non-resources especially by traditional social justice organisations created opportunities for collaborating with social movements and social activists. This was stated as follows:

“we might believe in a cause as activists or social movements but once we don’t have the resources, we can neither collaborate nor drive those changes [...]. But traditional social justice organisations are more established than activists. So, because they have the resources, it creates opportunities for working with them”79.

Directly related to this, interviewees emphasised the importance of good leadership in enabling collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists. In fact, interviewees expressed the view that leaders that understood the significance of collaboration often sought opportunities to work with other organisations. For instance, an activist when asked about the enabling factors for collaboration stated that: “well, I think the biggest factor is leadership. If you have a visionary leader who knows and understands the importance of collaboration, it becomes easier to work with such organisations”80. The research findings corroborate existing studies on the significance of leadership styles in enabling cross-sector collaboration (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; 2010).

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79 FGD, 7th November 2019.
80 Interview, 20th September 2019.
While research participants generally showed positive attitude toward collaboration with other stakeholders, several challenges and issues of concern also emerged from the study. Some of these issues are highlighted below:
8.1 Lack of Perceived Accountability

Group discussions revealed instances where traditional social justice organisations require accountability from the social movement but not the other way around, especially in cases where financial and material resources are passed to social movements. For this reason, many activists were of the view that traditional social justice organisations are increasingly becoming ineffective and failing to represent the intended beneficiaries whom they claim to support because they were not accountable in their engagements. During interviews, many social movement representatives and activists lamented about how traditional social justice organisations were ineffective and ‘too close to comfort’ by aligning their priorities to government’s rather than being accountable to the grassroots. An activist argued that:

“activists have more integrity than traditional social justice organisations because government can corrupt traditional social justice organisations but cannot corrupt activists. It is hard to find an activist being appointed into a position by the government than a TSJO manager to be appointed”81.

This statement raises questions about the legitimacy, credibility and independence of traditional social justice organisations which sometimes makes some activists reluctant to work with them. This finding corroborates the argument by Banks et al. (2015) that many CSOs practice upward accountability to their donors rather than downward accountability to beneficiaries. Similar accounts of traditional social justice organisations not being accountable to social movements or co-opted by government and donors has been reported in the literature (Kumar, 2020). This in turn has led citizens to question the political neutrality of many traditional social justice organisations especially as their ability to represent the interests of beneficiaries is hampered by financial sustainability challenges. +

8.2 Ideological Differences and Incompatibility of Goals

Another challenge associated with collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists is ideological differences and incompatibility of goals. During interviews, some participants explained that irreconcilable differences among Traditional social justice organisations and social movements often created tensions when collaborating. For instance, in explaining how incompatibility of goals affected their collaborations with traditional social justice organisations, one activist said that activists are vocal and tend to focus on politically sensitive issues. However, for some traditional social justice organisations, their dependence on government and donor funding do not allow them to engage in contentious politics or to be associated with politically sensitive issues. Therefore, traditional social justice organisations’ non-political nature makes it difficult engaging with activists and movements whose preoccupation is challenging existing social order through protests and demonstrations. An interviewee puts it this way:

“there has always been the challenge of ideological differences where you stand to push an agenda and another CSO, activists or movements might not necessarily share your views and approaches. There might be the will to collaborate but there is a difficulty in agreeing on our differences”82.

Some traditional social justice organisations also argued that collaborating with movements often introduces risks and/or negative media stories which can tarnish their images and brands, and possible loss of funding from donors (when their donors do not share the views and approaches/methods of the movements).

82 Interview, 20th September 2019.
8.3 Leadership Styles and Mistrust

Directly related to this was the issue of leadership challenges associated with collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists. It was emphasised that leadership clashes and differences in personalities and leadership styles often resulted in challenges when traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists collaborated. For instance, an interviewee said:

“I think the biggest challenge to me is the leadership issue [...] There are leadership conflicts, especially between the leader and the second in command”83.

The leadership challenges often stem from infightings and difficulty in deciding who to lead such collaborative efforts. This in turn affects trust, mutual respect and transparency among members. These findings support existing studies on how the leadership attitudes of some traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists hinder collaboration mainly because of mistrusts (Snavely and Tracy, 2002).

8.4 Movement Capture and Power Dynamics

A key concern raised by especially social movements representatives was the issue of movement capture and unequal power relationships between traditional social justice organisations and social movements. It was explained that although some traditional social justice organisations were useful in providing them logistical supports, however, some ended up dominating discussions rather than actively engaging activists in their day-to-day activities. In fact, many interviewees expressed the view that some traditional social justice organisations did not approach their collaborations with an open mind on what social movements and activists needed, but rather came with pre-defined goals. This in turn created unequal relationships mainly because decision-making was largely taken by traditional social justice organisations.

To this end, collaborations were mainly from an instrumental perspective where social movements and social activists were regarded as channels for resource efficiency. The instrumentalisation of the collaboration by traditional social justice organisations was because they had control over resources (e.g. connections with government officials, subject matter expertise, knowledge, finances etc.) which gave them more power over social movements in their engagements.

8.5 Bureaucratic Standards of Traditional Social Justice Organisations

Moreover, another issue raised was that in some instances, activists and movements are reluctant to collaborate with traditional social justice organisations because they perceived traditional social justice organisations as being bureaucratic and do not want to let go their autonomy and independence. An interviewee from Sierra Leone argued that given that most activists and movement representatives are not ‘elitists’, when working with traditional social justice organisations:

“they are often seen as not doing it the Sierra Leone way but more of European way of doing things”84.

For this reason, some participants narrated the perceived loss of organisational autonomy as a factor that hindered collaborations. They maintained that loss of autonomy was associated with reputational damage, lack of visibility and loss of control over activities. This resulted in creating unhealthy relations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists. The findings are consistent with existing research on how loss of independence affected collaboration (Guo and Acar, 2005; Tsasis, 2009).

83 Interview, 7th November 2019.
84 Interview, 18th September 2019.
9- CONCLUSION AND COMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING COLLABORATION AMONG TRADITIONAL SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANISATIONS, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

This research began with the view to examining how collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists could be used as a mechanism for opening up civic space in West Africa. Based on a qualitative study with traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists, this research demonstrates that in recent years, civic space in many West African countries is increasingly closing. This is caused by pressures from government regulations which seek to curtail the political space within which civil society operates, their influence, political space, and in doing so to undermine their legitimacy. In responding to the crackdown on civic space, there has been the galvanisation of a concerted response by social movements, social activists and traditional social justice organisations. However, competing interests and feeble collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists have
weakened the responses and strategies to counter closing civic space.

Findings from this research suggest that collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists is crucial for addressing the phenomenon of closing space. The findings demonstrate that intra-sectoral collaboration, is the dominant form of collaboration practised by traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists. This notwithstanding, evidence of cross-sector collaborations between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists do exist. However, such collaborations were ad hoc in nature and focused on short-term engagements rather than a deliberate attempt to forge long-lasting and transformative partnerships that have the potential of opening up civic space. The research also found that collaboration has an added value and a high potential in opening up civic space mainly because of its ability to help traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in influencing key policy debates and discussions; enhancing visibility, credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders; creating avenues for the sharing of resources (i.e. financial and non-financial); and promoting synergy in advocacy campaigns. It also found shared interests in promoting social justice, threats to closing down civic space and the need for visibility and credibility as some of the enabling factors for collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in West Africa.

The findings also draw attention to challenges that stand to negatively influence and shape collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists. In particular, the research shows that the perceived lack of accountability on the part of traditional social justice organisations, ideological differences and incompatibility of goals and approaches, power imbalance and potential loss of autonomy serve as constraining for collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists. The research has shown that despite these potential challenges, the added value of collaboration presents opportunities for traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists to work together by complementing each other’s and building on their strengths while seeking to minimise their weaknesses. In doing so, traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists need to actively reflect on ways of strengthening the added value of their collaboration in their attempt to counter their closing civic space.

9.1 Recommendations for Strengthening Collaborations Among Traditional Social Justice organisations, Social Movements and Social Activists.

Based on these research findings, the following recommendations are essential to strengthen collaborations among traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social activists to respond to the shrinking closing space.

9.1.1 Build strong partnerships

Firstly, traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists need to work as partners and recognise the work of each other while seeing themselves as important allies that can collaborate to make bigger impacts even as civic space shrinks. For example, many traditional social justice organisations have built effective media and communications machines, which can prove invaluable in amplifying movement messages, and helping to shift societal narratives and culture. Social and traditional social justice organisations should recognise each other’s strengths in advancing their causes. In particular, traditional social justice organisations should recognise and tap into the power of social activists in having local support base which will enable them build up their local legitimacy with constituents. In the spirit of partnership, traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists should take concerted action to protect each other so that they will be able to resist any oppression on activities of one or more members.
9.1.2 Devise innovative strategies and tactics

Secondly, civil society actors should continue to collectively explore new strategies and tactics that are effective within the closing and shifting spaces to contribute to transformative change. An important route here includes capacity of traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists to mobilise more transnational public support through social media and other outlets. To this end, traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists across the sub-region should also work together and prioritise the use of online platforms, social media, and petition platforms—alongside other physical engagements—as these present great opportunities for collective actions in the face of the closing space and challenges with high transportation costs (airlines) and low quality of mobility infrastructures.

9.1.3 Traditional social justice organisations should be open and transparent

Third, traditional social justice organisations should be open, transparent, and work with social movements in ways that avoid domination and co-optation. In particular, traditional social justice organisations, whether they are collaborating as partners or in solidarity with social movements and social activists should be willing to provide inputs and resources to support causes but only when asked by movement frontlines. This requires traditional social justice organisations to take a backseat and contribute what is realistically needed by organisers of social movements and ways they can use their knowledge, expertise, constituents to promote their shared interests.

9.1.4 Stakeholders should learn from each other

Fourth, both traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists collaborating for causes should be willing to learn from each other and improve their capacities in areas where they feel weak. For example, traditional social justice organisations can, in particular, learn from the mobilisation tactics and approaches from social movements and social activists whereas social movements and social activists could learn from traditional social justice organisations in the areas of packaging messages for advocacy purposes.

9.1.5 Enhance mutual trust

Moreover, as collaboration hinges greatly on trust, traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists should mutually develop frameworks and structures that enhance, rather than diminish, trust to deepen the nature of collaboration to promote social justice in the face of the shrinking civic space.

9.1.6 Connect with supporters’ base through domestic resource mobilisation

Sixth, a strong domestic supporters base from CSOs’ networks help to protect against political crackdowns or accusations of being externally driven. It can also reduce risks from declining donor funds and amplifies voices in advocacy and influencing. International NGO can play an important role in encouraging and accompanying domestic CSOs in constituency building. This network and constituency building should be beyond capital cities and urban settlements. More importantly, leveraging and encouraging domestic resource mobilisation for traditional social justice organisations, social movements and activists would help in addressing the challenge associated with donor dependency. In addition, domestic resources have the potential of reinforcing strong downward accountability which in turn enhances the legitimacy and credibility of traditional social justice organisations, social movements and activists.

9.1.7 Adapt to build robust and sustained engagements

Seven, traditional social justice organisations, social movements and activists need to be adaptive and adhere to principles of movement-building, which require increased capacities for managing internal differences including leadership conflicts. At the same time, solidarity among partners must go beyond just ad hoc programmes implementation
towards sustained engagement.

9.1.8 All stakeholders should promote sustainable collaborations

In addition, donors and leaders of traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists should prioritise sustainability of their collaboration, partnerships, and operations from the start of their engagements. We share in the suggestion from CIVICUS that established traditional social justice organisations—when requested should help sustain movement momentum by providing non-residential fellowships for movement leaders and organisers who are dedicating their lives to the cause without any regular income as a way to cover their time, so that they can continue to do what they do best. This also requires donors to be willing to provide incentives and funding that takes into account the different needs of traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists as part of their funding modalities.

The study further recommends that social movements, social activists and traditional social justice organisations should pursue and leverage on domestic or regional fundraising efforts to support their work to prevent the donor-dependent tendencies of CSOs which sometime depart from their original purposes because of donor requirements and directives. This requires traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists to be more transparent about their mission and operations and accountable to each other, their members and intended beneficiaries. This also means that leaders should be able to accept responsibility and be willing to take suggestions and constructive advice. It also means that leaders of traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists should be able to account for how material and financial resources mobilised are allocated and utilised.

9.1.9 Stakeholders should document their experiences and challenges

There is also the need for traditional social justice organisations, social movements, and social movements to document their experiences and challenges. This calls for creative thinking on knowledge creation and knowledge management systems. This is because traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists are constantly creating, using, and communicating knowledge and evidence to support their work. For this reason, it is important for these actors to deliberately prioritise knowledge management to document strategies, challenges, and successes in their engagements with duty bearers. This can provide important avenues for learning, adaptation and replication of successful actions while preserving knowledge for future generations. To this end, stakeholders could work with the WACSI Knowledge Management team to engage and have a one-stop-point to access information on collaborative activities, programmes and initiatives aimed at opening up civic space. More so, sharing information on opportunities and challenges associated with their work will inform interested stakeholders on how to be innovative in their attempt to address the challenges associated with closing civic space in West Africa.

9.1.10 Enhance communication to build cross-country (regional) collaboration and solidarity

Lastly, traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists need to engage in continuous communication and interactions to foster cross-country collaboration and solidarity. As the findings from this study suggest, cross-country collaboration between traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists is weak. For this reason, there is the need to leverage on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and digital media platforms such as the WACSI E-Directory in enhancing information sharing and communication among traditional social justice organisations, social movements and social activists in different West African countries.
REFERENCES


