The Value of Strategic Thinking in Restricted Communities

By
Charles Kojo Vandyck

WACSeries Op-Ed | No.1 Feb 2023
CHARLES Kojo VanDyck is a social justice activist and thought leader with expertise in strengthening civil society resilience, sustainability, and leadership. Charles serves as a member of the Knowledge Network of the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser to Africa. Charles is also a Founding Member of the International Consortium on Closing Civic Space (iCon), an initiative of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He currently serves as a member of the Governing Board of Africans Rising, a Pan-African movement of people and organisations working for justice, peace, and dignity. He also serves as a Trustee of INTRAC based in Oxford, UK and an Advisory Board Member of Disrupt Development based in Amsterdam, Netherlands. He is a Core Team Member, of the Reimagining INGOs (Ringo) systems change initiative. Charles also serves as the Head, Capacity Development Unit at the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI). He is a member of the Development Studies Association, United Kingdom, a certified Change the Game Academy Master Trainer and an IFC- Learning and Performance Institute Trainer.

Editorial Team
Jimm Chick Fomunjong – Head, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI
Nancy Kankam Kusi – Programme Officer, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI
Shu Mabel Lum - Programme Assistant, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI

About WACSI
The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region. WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience sharing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

About WACSeries
WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.

The WACSeries Op-Eds are thought provoking and intellectually engaging write-ups that provide critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society and development in West Africa.

Objectives of WACSeries
• To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
• To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
• To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
• To provide recommendations to policy makers
The Value of Strategic Thinking in Restricted Communities

© WACSI 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this report may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the Institute except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The Institute requests the use of information in this report be registered with them for impact assessment purposes.

Disclaimer:
WACSI accepts no responsibility for suitability of any materials submitted by the contributor of this publication. WACSI assumes no responsibility or liability for errors or inaccuracies. The contributor accepts all responsibilities for opinions expressed. Use of this research report constitutes acceptance and understanding of these disclaimers.

For more information, write to:
West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) No. 9 Bamboo Street, East Legon P.O. Box AT 1956, Achimota Accra, Ghana
Email: research@wacsi.org Tel: +233 (0) 302 550 224

Cite as:
Charles, K.V. (2023) The Value of Strategic Thinking in Restricted Communities, WACSeries, Op-Ed N°1, West Africa Civil Society Institute, Accra, Ghana.
Strategic thinking focuses on finding and developing unique opportunities to create value within an operating environment. It is a way of approaching the fundamental drivers of a specific context while challenging conventional thinking. It is a process that integrates several factors and variables, considers goals and objectives, and then enables clear plans of action. For many civil society organisations (CSOs), strategic thinking is at the center of their capability and capacity to develop a strategy or a plan to achieve their influencing efforts and social change agenda. However, in many African countries, CSOs are under immense pressure. Collective citizens’ efforts, especially when they have political undertones, seem to be regarded with increasing suspicion and are actively countered. Anti-CSO laws, administrative regulations, arbitrary inspections, harassment, and criminalisation are all products of an increasingly restricted civic space. This is confirmed in findings from a report by Spaces for Change. The findings hold that governments are increasingly repressing civil society by leveraging anti-terrorism laws. They do this by restricting access to funds by these organisations.

This affirms the evidence of a significant trend of democratic backsliding. Various experts and academics continue to examine the probable causes of this shrinking or closing civic space, and how the phenomenon is manifesting and evolving. This challenge threatens the effectiveness of civil society, which often plays a critical role in both promoting democratisation and bringing authoritarian rule to an end. More recently, the phenomenon has been explicitly cast as a potential threat to international development. Campaigners have highlighted how closing civic space limits the operational effectiveness of CSOs, constrains their geographic reach and heightens security risks. This piece seeks to interrogate the value of strategic thinking and its applicability for CSOs working in restricted environments.

Conventional Thinking is not Enough

Within the context of closing civic spaces, conventional thinking offers limited opportunities as improvements are mostly incremental or in most cases almost non-existent. Conventional thinking tends to lead to conforming to cultural norms in behaviour and thinking. Based on the volatile nature of the environment, it has become apparent that what is needed is something more creative and transformational in terms of how we think and create solutions. This is where the concept of strategic thinking becomes essential. According to the Center for Management and Organisation Effectiveness, “Strategic thinking is simply an intentional and rational thought process that focuses on the analysis of critical factors and variables that will influence the long-term success of a business, a team, or an individual”. This type of thinking does not just solve immediate problems, it expands one’s possibilities and has the potential for more breakthrough solutions especially in difficult operational contexts. It requires a thorough analytical thinking, a deep sense of innovation, an exploration of the issue, the boldness to take risk and explore new boundaries as some of the tactical avenues to put strategic thinking into practice. Due to its nature, strategic thinking is applicable when tackling more complex and challenging problems.
Shrinking civic space at the national and continental level blocks opportunities for civil society to advocate for social change on issues such as health and human rights, monitor access to services, claim redress for rights violations or reach those left behind with health and legal support services. Strategic thinking can be used as a tool for developing strategies to respond to these challenges. Its benefits in a restricted governance setting where decisions need to be made in a timely and effective manner are obvious because of its applicability in solving complex and fluid development challenges.

Strategic thinking is also a process that enables civil society to navigate a challenging context to represent the concerns of the marginalised and disempowered. It is essential to push back on closing spaces through amplifying counter narratives that can mobilise public opinion; addressing the root causes of a crackdown; using information and communication technology to increase visibility of the phenomenon; establishing platforms to exchange ways in which the phenomenon is manifesting itself; and radically reimagining the ways CSOs operate. Strategic thinking forces organisations and groups to step out of the box and bring fresh perspectives.

Overcoming the Limitations of a Restrictive Environment

In restricted operating environments, CSOs can leverage the following four actions to think strategically and find solutions to the challenges that communities face:

**Define the civic space issue:** Civic space is a set of legal conditions experienced in a lived environment that enables people whether alone or with others, physically or online to be active in their communities, to speak out, to organise, to gather in protest or to help one another, and to participate in the governance of their community, area, or country. Infractions on civic space can be characterised by restrictive laws, surveillance, intimidation, stigmatisation, and attacks. At its most extreme, this includes jailing, torturing, and killing activists. Under these conditions, activists may find it difficult to gather, organise, act, or share information and opinions without facing threats or repercussions. The significance of this initial step is to determine a clear definition of the civic space problem and any other constraints that stand in the way of the effectiveness of civil society. This involves expressing the problem clearly and obtaining a consensus from all stakeholders on the definition of the civic space problem within the operating context of the specific CSO.

**Map the civic space ecosystem:** After the civic space issue has been defined, the next step is to map out its ecosystem. The ecosystem is a complex system organised around diverse and interdependent actors. The ecosystem outlines the factors that constrain civil society action. The ecosystem is the community in which the problem lives and may include the CSOs internal structure and systems and its external partners. In case of programmes and projects, these may include stakeholders, users, external project partners, or internal departments. The thrust of this action is the capability of the CSO to define the civic space issue in much more detail by including a detailed map or model of the problem’s ecosystem that includes other players in the problem domain.

**Think critically:** The third step in trying to find a strategic solution to a civic space problem is to think critically. Critical thinking would enable CSOs to question, analyse, interpret, evaluate and make judgement about the knowledge they acquire, hear, say, or write. Good critical thinking is about making reliable judgements based on reliable information. Applying critical thinking does not mean being negative or focusing on challenges. It requires expanding mental boundaries, acquiring new information, and then connecting the dots through analytical skills, leveraging tools such as SWOT analysis, benchmarking, surveys, among others. Once a CSO goes through this step, it will result in creative new insights and lessons, along with a list of potential options and solutions.
The Value of Strategic Thinking in Restricted Communities

Make strategic decisions: The next step in this process is about making decisions. This step should result in final recommendations and ultimate decisions based on a careful examination of the practicality and benefits of the options. Oftentimes, decision making varies along control and performance. The first dimension considers the extent to which CSOs can influence the terms of the decision and the outcome. It also takes into consideration whether a CSO can choose among options or shape those options. It may also be important for the CSO to reflect on whether it should make a one-time judgment, unable to change what happens after the fact. The second dimension addresses the way CSOs could measure success.

Unlearn and Relearn: It is important that through this process a CSO develops mechanisms for unlearning and relearning. Learning is a process that does not stop. But beyond learning, there are two important processes that a CSO needs to be aware of and practice consciously - unlearning and relearning. In a restrictive environment, a CSO must be able to practice letting go of outdated ideas and practices. It is essential that unlearning is embedded in the way of doing things, which means the willingness of a CSO to let go of existing practices in favour of more resilient strategies. This means a CSO or grouping anticipates material changes to its operating environment, systematically develops and tests strategic plans in the context of such changes and allocates resources and creates value in a way that enables community impact. Resilient CSOs should be better prepared to leverage strategic advantage and contribute to the realisation of thriving communities.

Conclusion

Unpredictable and frequently unfavorable environments represent major challenges to diverse CSOs that are emerging in the sector. CSOs are challenged to thrive within contexts of political and economic instability and upheavals brought about by crisis and conflict. In this context, CSOs would need to figure out how to provide critical interventions amid a fluid and restrictive operating environment. Strategic thinking becomes an essential tool that enables CSOs to rethink their programmes and operating models. This process also helps CSOs to adapt to new bodies of knowledge and development targets, whether this is gender mainstreaming, meaningful participation, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The strategic thinking process provides CSOs with the right balance in their support for different and often competing types of community needs in these turbulent times.