



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
of the Czech Republic



CIVIC SPACE COHORT

Advancing International Support for Nonviolent Collective Action

COUNTRY LEAD: UNITED STATES, COORDINATED BY USAID TOGETHER WITH THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW (ICNL) AND INTERNATIONAL CENTER ON NONVIOLENT CONFLICT (ICNC)

SUPPORTED BY: DENMARK, ESTONIA, KOSOVO, MALTA, NORWAY, SPAIN, SWEDEN, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

Nonviolent collective action is a form of civic participation important for democracies to develop, deliver, and remain resilient through downturns and authoritarian encroachment. As nonviolent collective action occurs within and across borders, questions of how international solidarity occurs are increasingly important to address.

An established body of research finds that popular nonviolent movements have democracy over the last century. They have also fostered democratic resilience—promoting inclusion and effective governance, and countering democratic backsliding. From local grassroots action to national social movements, citizens continue to use nonviolent collective action to demand greater rights, justice, and inclusive development, for example by calling on governments to enact policies that combat corruption, end child marriage, increase services for indigenous peoples, protect lands from exploitation and defending democratic institutions against illiberal erosion.

A nonviolent social movement is defined as a widespread, voluntary, civilian-led, collective effort to bring about consequential change in a social, economic, or political order using a diverse repertoire of tactics such as protests, boycotts, and sit-ins. Social movement and nonviolent movement are used interchangeably. The term “movement” is used as shorthand for both. Movements may undertake one or more campaigns. A campaign is defined as a series of observable, continuous, purposive mass tactics or events in pursuit of a political objective.¹

¹ (Naimark-Rowse, Benjamin. “Dollars and Dissent: Donor Support for Grassroots Organizing and Nonviolent Movements.” Washington: ICNC Press, 2022.)

In the face of a rising global wave of a clamp down on universal human rights and increased authoritarianism, there is an urgent need to find new and innovative ways to enable and support communities waging nonviolent collective action to advance human rights and democracy. Between 2000 and 2017, nonviolent collective action created space for democratic transitions in 10 autocracies and prompted democratic elections in a further 19 authoritarian regimes, with women and youth leading many of these movements. However, the early 21st century has presented serious deliberate and incidental challenges to nonviolent collective action. Authoritarian actors deliberately seize on increasingly sophisticated tactics to maintain an un-democratic status quo and to erode respect for human rights as well as democratic institutions, laws, and norms. They also coordinate with each other to effectively use disinformation, surveillance and infiltration to undermine civic actors, and weaponize legislation to attack and restrict civic actors including human rights defenders. Historic currents such as the rise of social media and prevalence of technology create opportunities for quick action, but also pose challenges to sustained and strategic nonviolent collective action.

We have developed the following call to action:

1. Build a community of learning to unpack the value, effectiveness, and needs of movement actors as well as to share relevant lessons from various government partners, multilateral organizations, and civil society organizations.
2. Elaborate a multilateral toolkit, within the OECD-DAC Community of Practice that reinforces the OECD DAC recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance by focusing specifically on engagement with and support for nonviolent social movements.