## Civic Space Cohort of the Summit for Democracy

### **Nonviolent Collective Action - Proposed Workstream**

Country lead: United States

Draft Donor Principles for Cross-Border Support for Nonviolent Collective Action

Ben Naimark-Rowse, USAID - DRG Center

Over the course of the 20th century, nonviolent collective action, or “people power,” became widely known around the globe. From South Africa, to India, the Philippines, Ukraine, Georgia, Chile, and the United States, democratic freedoms expanded thanks to nonviolent collective action. Today, people around the world are participating in civic life through social movements, grassroots organizing, and other forms of nonviolent collective action more so than ever before in recorded history.[[1]](#footnote-0) In some contexts, nonviolent collective action entails grassroots organizing to build political power at a local level - for example, to improve public services like education or healthcare. In other contexts, it entails mass mobilization at a national level - for example, to demand an end to corruption or surging inflation. The effects of nonviolent collective action reverberate from Tunisia to Chile to Sudan, and have ushered in democratic reform and curtailed corruption on multiple continents.

Nonviolent collective action is not only widespread, it has demonstrated its effectiveness in helping democracies develop and remain resilient. It often involves communities that have been historically excluded from power (i) building political power in their society, and (ii) using that power to change policy, cultural norms, and attitudes. It is also a core strategy of civic participation that is often complementary to the work of formal civil society organizations. Yet, nonviolent collective action functions differently than most formal civil society organizations (CSOs) even when the goals are shared.[[2]](#footnote-1) The entities leading nonviolent collective action often are broad-based and decentralized, have fluid institutional forms, may not be registered, or have no 501(c)(3) equivalency status.

Scholarship finds that nonviolent collective action - in the form of a social movement - has been twice as effective as violence at achieving its stated goals.[[3]](#footnote-2) And political transitions initiated through nonviolent collective action have been three times as likely to lead to democracy as political transitions initiated through all other means.[[4]](#footnote-3) Further, nonviolent movements in which women participated extensively on the frontlines have been much more likely to succeed and to lead to more egalitarian democracy than campaigns that marginalized or excluded women.[[5]](#footnote-4)

Despite its effectiveness and its widespread use around the world, from 2011 to 2019, public charities and private foundations gave only 3 percent of their total human rights funding to support grassroots organizing and nonviolent collective action.[[6]](#footnote-5) Additionally, succeeding at nonviolent collective action is not easy. Repression is almost certain.[[7]](#footnote-6) And progress rarely occurs in a linear fashion. Yet some forms of cross-border support, for example, in the form of training has improved the chances that nonviolent collective action succeeds.[[8]](#footnote-7)

These draft principles guide donors in navigating the many challenges and opportunities they face when considering whether, where, when, and how to support the powerful work of grassroots organizers and nonviolent movements. These principles are intended to complement donor principles for supporting civil society and locally-led development.

1. **Do no harm**

The requirements and restrictions funders impose can often be as problematic for nonviolent movements as the absence of money. Donors can avoid imposing, amongst other things, monitoring and evaluation requirements that shift accountability of movement leaders from local constituents (whose participation is central to movement success) to foreign capitals.

1. **Support should foster nonviolent movements’ resiliency and legitimacy in the eyes of their own constituents**

Nonviolent movements win primarily because of what they do within their country, not because of the support they get from outside their country. Cross-border support can be designed to strengthen movement organizations’ agency and autonomous resourcing.

1. **Defer to organizers’ and movement leaders’ expertise in deciding whether, when, where, and how to support their work**

Homegrown leaders have the most direct understanding of the needs, challenges, and opportunities that movements face in their respective communities. Leaders’ goals, risk assessments, and theories of change are likely to have the most legitimacy and credibility amongst the communities whose participation is required for movements to win.

1. **Consider offering not only flexible, core support, but also non-financial, indirect support**

The individuals and organizations that comprise a nonviolent movement may benefit from flexible and predictable support especially via intermediaries as well as indirect support via trainings in nonviolent discipline or democratic decision making, educational materials, as well as diplomatic accompaniment and other efforts to mitigate the effects of online and offline repression.

1. **Be transparent about preferences, expectations, biases, and bureaucratic timelines**

The changing needs and opportunities of movement organizations often do not align with donor requirements and timelines. Often donors and movements unintentionally make assumptions about the other’s intentions, preferences, and biases. Transparency between donors and movement leaders reduces misperceptions and unrealistic expectations on both sides of the donor-movement relationship.

1. **Coordinate support with other bilateral, multilateral, and private/foundation donors**

A lack of donor coordination can cause collective action problems. This is particularly harmful for movements because collective action is what drives their success. Donor coordination in-country and in capitals can mitigate resource competition, avoid creating fissures within a movement, and prevent funding at cross-purposes.

1. **Practice courageous learning and adaptation**

Movements exist in an ecosystem of formal and informal organizations. Their success is not linear, and their goals as well as their institutional forms often shift due to changing circumstances. Donors that learn and adapt alongside movements are best able to help them withstand repression, overcome failures, and take advantage of political opportunities. Donor adaptation includes being open to movements and movement organizations having a unique institutional form. Seeing movements as expressions of local agency instead of as organizations with predetermined institutional forms helps donors avoid “false negatives” (i.e., not noticing a movement) and “false positives” (i.e., identifying a movement but having misplaced expectations for how it will behave).

1. **Support legal and normative efforts to protect civic space and the right to access cross-border support**

The ability to seek, receive, and use resources is inherent to the right to freedom of association and essential to the existence and effective operation of civic associations. This principle is already enshrined in a number of international human rights standards and norms.[[9]](#footnote-8)

1. Chenoweth, Erica. “The Future of Nonviolent Resistance.” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no 3. July (2020): 69-84. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-future-of-nonviolent-resistance-2/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Naimark-Rowse, Benjamin. 2022. “Dollars and Dissent: Donor Support for Grassroots Organizing and Nonviolent Movements.” Washington: ICNC Press. <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/webinar-dollars-and-dissent/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. 2011. Why Civil Resistance Works The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Pinckney, Jonathan C. From Dissent to Democracy: The Promise and Perils of Civil Resistance Transitions. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Chenoweth, Erica and Zoe Marks. "Revenge of the Patriarchs Why Autocrats Fear Women." Foreign Affairs. March/April 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-02-08/women-rights-revenge-patriarchs>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Naimark-Rowse, Benjamin. 2022. “Dollars and Dissent: Donor Support for Grassroots Organizing and Nonviolent Movements.” Washington: ICNC Press. [https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/webinar-dollars-and-dissent](https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/webinar-dollars-and-dissent/)/. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Erica, Chenoweth, Evan Perkoski, and Sooyeon Kang. 2017. "State Repression and Nonviolent Resistance." *Journal of Conflict Resolution.* Vol. 61(9) 1950-1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?. Washington: ICNC Press. <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/external-support-for-nonviolent-campaigns/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. "Protecting civic space and the right to access resources" A Community of Democracies project funded by Sweden. Available online: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/GeneralPrinciplesProtectingCivicSpace.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)