

Solidarity Playbook

VSO Ethiopia

Advocating for policy reform in Ethiopia



International
Civil Society Centre

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Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) is an international development organisation with a vision for a fair world for everyone, and a mission to create lasting change through volunteering. VSO has been present in Ethiopia since 1995, contributing to the development of healthy communities and strengthening inclusive education systems.

Overview

The introduction of repressive legislation in 2009 led to a decade of severe crackdowns on human rights organisations, and a severely repressed environment for civil society in Ethiopia. Foreign funding was curbed, the legislation violated international standards related to the freedom of association, and VSO was struggling to deliver its programmes in a context of severely closed civic space.

VSO saw the need for collective action, and therefore took steps with partners to help found the [Ethiopian Charities and Societies Forum](#) (ECSF) in 2013 (now known as the Ethiopian Civil Society Organisations Forum), the main coalition advocating for civil society organisation (CSO) policy reforms in the country.

A new government in 2018 opened up the opportunity to build a new relationship between civil society and government, and as a result of successful advocacy, reform was achieved in 2019. This case study looks at VSO's role in providing leadership and strategic guidance, and mobilising and amplifying collaborative action for an enabling environment.





Organisation takes action

Trigger

The Proclamation to Provide for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies (CSP), 2009: *“The Proclamation restricted NGOs that receive more than 10% of their financing from foreign sources from engaging in essentially all human rights and advocacy activities. The then-UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Mr. Maina Kiai, commented on the CSP saying that, “The enforcement of these provisions has a devastating impact on individuals’ ability to form and operate associations effectively, and has been the subject of serious alarm expressed by several United Nations treaty bodies.”*

ICNL: [Civic Freedom Monitor](#)

Repressive legislation in the years preceding the 2018 revolution was affecting VSO’s ability to continue operating in the country. As an organisation that follows a rights-based approach, VSO’s aim is to empower communities to secure their own rights and be active in their own development issues. Under the previous regime, there was no space for this kind of approach.

There was a **survival issue** for the organisation, **but it was also an issue of principle** – whilst it was possible to deliver services following a simple needs-based approach, under a traditional view of ‘charity’, this went against the organisation’s guiding principles and its belief that a focus on immediate charitable needs alone cannot bring about sustainable development.

As the group could not operate fully within the restrictive policy environment, a solution had to be found. The decision was taken that the group must advocate for a better enabling environment **alongside their peers**.

Response in practice

1. Internal

VSO's global leadership team offered guidance and support to the country office team. Initial support was aimed at helping the team to cope with the existing situation and its **immediate challenges**, in terms of:

- **Meeting additional requirements** that resulted from the various restrictions, such as increasing administrative burdens.
- **Making changes to the strategic plan**, for example reframing areas of the strategy that had previously been presented within a rights-based approach, so that the organisation could renew its license and continue operating in the country.
- **Injecting some additional funds** into the budget for direct programme areas. There was a '70/30 rule' in place which required CSOs to allocate 70% of their budget to operational costs and 30% to administrative activities. Because of the way that administrative costs were defined in the legislation, it was difficult for VSO to meet the requirement. For example, all of their capacity-building activities which focus on the education and health sectors were categorised as an 'administrative cost', because the government policy only recognised services directly accessed by beneficiaries as 'programme costs'. Therefore additional funds were directed to the country office to be allocated to services directly accessed by beneficiaries to balance out the ratios.
- **Being flexible on reporting**, for example understanding that factors such as the integration of social inclusion or gender equality could not be included in progress reports, and that this was down to the context rather than it being a performance issue.

The country office also received advice and support from VSO's regional policy advisors on **longer-term strategies**. These advisors were able to draw on experience of policy frameworks and alternative advocacy strategies from other national settings.

2. External/National

• **Creation of a task force**

VSO Ethiopia is part of a national umbrella organisation, the CCRDA, whose purpose is to create an enabling environment for CSOs and to contribute to the country's development agenda. This umbrella group was receiving multiple requests from members voicing concerns over their inability to deliver programmes. Based on the formal and informal discussions taking place amongst the group, VSO staff initiated the formation of a Task Force on the issue, and channeled their advocacy efforts here in order to engage with the government's regulatory body, the Civil Society Agency.

However, engaging with the Civil Society Agency proved extremely challenging, and despite the formation of a Task Force, more was needed to mobilise a collective strategy and push for a more enabling environment for civil society.

• **Creation of a new coalition**

VSO Ethiopia supported the creation of a more formal group in order to mobilise resources and push the agenda forwards, and became a leading member and founder of the Ethiopian Charities and Societies Forum.

VSO volunteered to serve as one of the seven executive leadership committee members (representing other international civil society organisations) who played a key role in the creation and functioning of the Forum. It also volunteered to **host the Forum at its office**, and supported the development of a strategic plan. VSO and multiple CSOs contributed small amounts to a budget, and a coordinator was brought on board to facilitate the collaboration. Once strategic plans had been developed, further resources were needed in order to carry out the advocacy work effectively. The outreach to donors was conducted and resources were secured for the Forum's work, for example from ActionAid, the EU Civil Society Fund and the Civil Society Support Programme (**CSSP**). A legal advisor was hired to facilitate consultative meetings, categorise the various needs articulated, and translate these into an advocacy strategy. The advisor helped identify best practices from other countries and worked closely with the leadership in developing an alternative policy document.

An executive leadership committee was created which reached out to other CSOs, collecting agenda issues that were of concern to different types of organisations via **consultative workshops**. These issues were collated and categorised, and they formed the basis of a strategy for advocacy. It was important to identify the burning issues for all types of organisations, as the existing legislation affected groups in different ways depending on whether they were international CSOs, local CSOs, professional associations and so on.

Different technical working groups were set up to support the committee, and updates were fed back regularly to a General Assembly.

As well as continuing to try and engage with the Civil Society Agency, the Forum **lobbied other ministries and individuals**, such as those in the Ministry of Health or Education, who recognised the valuable role of civil society organisations.

Different government departments and leaders had different understandings of what the Forum represented. There was a belief amongst some that CSOs wanted to abuse resources mobilised from foreign sources to interfere in political activities. The Forum therefore had to conduct a careful **campaign to convince decision makers at multiple levels of the benefits of civil society organisations**, underlining that any country should be maximising the use of civil society to realise its development agenda.

The Forum carried out different **activities to demonstrate the value and relevance of CSOs**, and to show that they are not there just to confront the government, but rather, to contribute to the realisation of development and democracy-building agendas, amongst other things. The Forum therefore actively supported those government initiatives that it believed in.

Organisational learnings

Outcomes

- ✓ As a result of sustained pressure and successful advocacy, the CSO legislation was **amended**. The Charities and Societies Proclamation was introduced in January 2019 as part of new civic reforms, and the Law of Ethiopian Civil Society Organisations passed in February 2019. The new law has lifted restrictions on foreign funding, has allowed for the re-entry of international organisations to the country, and has updated the regulator to be a more robust 'critical friend' to civil society.
- ✓ These changes have resulted in **greater accountability and transparency**, meaning increased operational freedom for VSO and other civil society groups, and an increased legitimacy of CSOs and their activities. Specifically for VSO, compliance concerns have been eased, and interventions on issues such as gender equality and social inclusion and accountability can now legally be integrated into programming.
- ✓ The Forum has not since dissolved, and is now taking part in the transition period after the ratification of the new legislation. Forum members are developing a code of conduct for CSOs to support perceptions of legitimacy, and establishing a council to represent organisations and serve as a communications conduit between civil society and the regulatory body and different government sectors.

CHALLENGES

Problem-solving can overtake programmatic focus

Investing time and energy in Forum-related activities created an additional burden for VSO staff, and this was challenging at an organisational level. It meant that the country office could not focus on the growth of its programmes, as instead it was focused on problem-solving. However, given that the office had received a warning letter from the government concerning its programmes, this strategic engagement was a priority to ensure the organisation's ability to remain in Ethiopia.

Risk of hosting

Hosting the Forum was not straightforward. The Civil Society Agency believed that the Forum was working against the government and its policies, and so there were risks for VSO associated with this hosting function. VSO had to try and ensure that the Agency saw the work in a positive light, in order to mitigate the additional risk, which made for a difficult balancing act.

Overcoming misconceptions and mistrust

VSO and the Forum's leadership committee members had to work hard to develop trust amongst some civil society groups. As the Forum had to work closely with government officials in order to ease the tension and secure a safe and constructive working relationship, suspicions were raised that the Forum had been set up by the government, and was therefore not to be trusted. Consultations were undertaken to clarify the purpose of the Forum, as well as to collect input, to create broad, cross-sector buy-in. Trust gradually developed thanks to consistent and persistent communications and action from the Forum's leadership.

LESSONS LEARNED

Building a shared vision

It was vital to engage with a broader agenda, and not just focus on individual organisational problems. VSO's long-term goal was the existence of a vibrant civil society, able to advocate for the rights and needs of others. Engaging with that broader vision and agenda meant that VSO and the Forum were able to win the support of donors and other CSOs. It opened up the space for discussion across sectors, informing the more strategic advocacy that could address the issues of all civil society organisations. By working to ensure that everyone was behind a shared vision and agenda, contributing to and supporting the Forum, they were able to eventually bring about change.

Committing to building bridges

The government at the time was strong, and there was no flexibility on policies. A strong commitment was needed with a long-term view taken on how to build trust and bridges. For example, the Forum organised consultative workshops and invited representatives from the regulatory body, so that civil society could directly share concerns with those from the Agency. This approach, over time, positively affected the Agency's perception of CSOs, and meant that space opened up to move from the resolution of more immediate issues to the broader advocacy points for an enabling environment and reform. It would have been too simplistic and ultimately counterproductive to classify the government as 'the enemy', therefore constructive ways of working had to be found.

Multi-level advocacy is key

As an international organisation, VSO was able to engage in advocacy with donor partners and call for international advocacy on the issue, encouraging diplomatic approaches from different stakeholders to try and open up space. VSO was in a position to push the agenda from these multiple angles, and this was important in providing a sense of international solidarity and cover.

Note regarding the latest developments in Ethiopia (as of November 2020)

The overall political reform in Ethiopia is still ongoing, even after two and half years of the new Prime Minister's arrival, and almost a year after the passing of the new legislation. Building national consensus on sensitive political issues and the process of democratisation will not be easy, as reflected by the recent internal armed conflict in the northern part of the country. It remains to be seen what role civil societies will and can play to rebuild the nation and support the development of an active and influential society, and retain the opened civic space.



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In partnership with

