Solidarity Playbook

Vuka!

Building an international coalition to coordinate and enable civil society's response to closing space

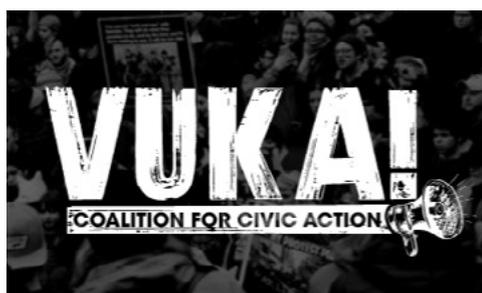International
Civil Society Centre

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Vuka! is a broad coalition of approximately 160 international, regional and national civil society organisations (CSOs), working to incubate new forms of resistance and organisation.

Its Secretariat is housed within CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation – an international alliance dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world) and maintains a 19-member Steering Group. Civil society groups have played a pivotal role in cementing the global discourse that public freedoms are facing unprecedented challenges. However, there is a pressing need to coalesce around harmonised strategies and actions to regain civic space. With its large membership, multiple action teams and multi-country focus, Vuka! is something of a 'meta-coalition'. This study will focus on one aspect of Vuka's work, namely, its **Country Coordination Calls**, in order to draw out learning on how ICSOs can support country-level responses to closing space.

What launched the coalition?

In 2016, the narrative of 'closing space for civil society' was thoroughly cemented, with well-documented restrictions and challenges in countries across every region. However, there was not yet a consensus on how the international civil society community could or should respond to those challenges. So in 2016 and 2017 CIVICUS staff and partners conducted interviews with 250 civil society leaders, and held 2 in-person consultations with leaders of regional and international organisations. Interviewees were CIVICUS members, partners and peers who have a global or regional mandate and who were concerned about civic space. The process was not prescriptive and did not set out with a coalition or formal structure in mind. Rather, participants were asked what was missing from the way that the community was responding, and what they thought the solutions could be.

Through this process 3 key priorities were identified:

- **Information sharing, coordination and joint action** were needed to increase effectiveness, and to bridge silos.

- **The identification, development and incubating of creative approaches** to advocacy, new forms of resistance and organising were needed in order to combat the increasing sophistication with which dissent was being suppressed.

- **Improving public support and action for civil society** by creating public awareness that positively frames what civil society is, what it does and how it contributes to wider society.

The final consultation meeting was held in South Africa in early 2017 where it was formerly agreed to launch Vuka!. Funding was later secured to support the coalition going forward.

Who are the members?

CIVICUS sought to reach out to its diverse membership and beyond when setting up the coalition, in order to build more solidarity across different types of organisations which were all experiencing closing space. Civic space issues are no longer just the concern of traditional human rights organisations. Humanitarian, environmental, development and various other forms of organisations are all working in this field, and are affected by its challenges.

It was very important therefore to ensure that a diverse range of sectors is represented due to the important approaches and experience that they all contribute.

Vuka's Allies (members) support a diverse spectrum of international, regional and national CSOs, including women's groups, social movements, labour organisers, humanitarian groups, human rights defender coalitions and so on, and includes actors such as Greenpeace International, Amnesty International, Oxfam International, Access Now, Tactical Tech, Frontline Defenders, and CSOs across Africa, Asia and Latin America.

How does it work?

The Vuka! Coalition Secretariat, made up of two full-time staff, is housed within CIVICUS. There are approximately 160 member allies, and a steering group of 19 diverse organisational representatives. All organisation allies have equal agency to determine the priorities of the network.

Each action team is made up of approximately 50-70 Vuka! allies, with 2 co-chairs for each team. Each team identifies and deploys its own strategy to select its co-chairs. Co-chairs are Vuka! allies who have technical expertise in the area in question, and who are already looking at these issues. There are over-arching criteria to follow in terms of country selection, but each team then has discretion to decide their work-flow and process.

Teams convene via email, calls and using the Vuka! Better Coordination Platform with meetings taking place quarterly, and informal conversation taking place in the interim depending on the trajectory of the work. The Secretariat staff members are included in all communications for every team, so that they have a holistic view of the work, opportunities and gaps, and can coordinate and connect as appropriate.

The decision was made early on to ensure that all of the initiatives be focused at the country level, and so there is a country-specific focus across all of Vuka's action teams.

Vuka! action teams

The coalition is organised via **six action teams**, which are:

1. **Research**
2. **Rapid Response**
3. **Positive Counter Narratives**
4. **Technology**
5. **Strategic Litigation**
6. **Catalytic Initiatives** – sometimes intractable issues need a high level of coordination and support; this team is empowered to think through the different elements that contribute to the suppression of civil society, and respond in a holistic fashion.

Vuka!

Mechanism in focus: Country Calls

One of the tools used by the Rapid Response team to respond to emerging restrictions or openings at the national level are **'Country Coordination Calls'**. This process has three tiers:

1. Advocacy or Solidarity Call
Any Vuka! ally can propose an action for the Rapid Response team to take forward. The co-chairs of the Team assess the extent to which the request complies with their criteria and objectives. If the request is approved, a letter will be circulated among all Vuka! allies, and the network is mobilised to support an open letter or advocacy statement about the issue.

2. Country Call
If a letter or advocacy campaign has been initiated, the Team's co-chairs will then look at the extent to which a group call would be helpful for Vuka! allies. There are typically between 20 – 30 allies on each call, which follow this format:

- 'National focal points' i.e. CSOs based in the country in question, will be invited to join and present an update on the national context.

- Allies on the call will share and clarify what they plan to do in-country, so that overlaps and points of synergy can be identified (via written exercises).

- When possible, representatives from the UN, or regional bodies such as the Inter-American Commission, are invited to join the calls to give an update on their activities in the country.

- Finally, a discussion takes place on how the Vuka! community can work together to support civil society in the country, and civic space more generally.

The calls take place over a group call platform, but there is also a tailor-made, secure online platform where written materials are uploaded and written exercises are conducted during the call.

3. Outputs and Actions
Following the call, based on an analysis of the situation, the information shared, and whether or not there is a natural entry point for joint work, an initiative can be transferred to another Vuka! team with the resources to enable it. The suggestion will go to the Steering Group who will determine if it can be placed with another action team, and if it can be funded.

In practice: A Country Call leads to a funded initiative in Tanzania

In March 2019 it was clear that civic space in Tanzania was rapidly deteriorating, and there was an appreciable lack of coordination to the civil society response. Tanzania had been viewed as a relatively democratic environment within the region, and so didn't receive the requisite attention when the crackdown first began. A Vuka! ally requested that a country call takes place, to look at how to advance coordination and provide a better understanding of the situation on the ground.

A country call took place and it was clear from the discussion that the profile of Tanzania needed to be raised internationally. There had been very little attention among civil society, the UN and other stakeholders thus far.

The Rapid Response team coordinated the production of, and advocacy around three letters over the course of six months. Two letters were sent to the UN Human Rights Council, and one to the Tanzanian government. As a result of related, coordinated media campaigns the EU raised the issue of Tanzania and civic space at the Council, the government of Tanzania responded directly to one of the letters in Parliament, and there was substantial pick-up due to the collective effort to disseminate the information online. The Rapid Response team coordinated campaigns whereby different allies worked on different elements, according to their skill-set, capacity and networks.

The Catalytic Initiatives Team sought proposals from focal points in Tanzania (national CSOs) and other focus countries, on how to address civil society restrictions. The team's allies voted on the proposals, against an available budget, and a proposal from Tanzania was selected. This proposal was then further developed, shared with the Vuka! Steering Committee, and approved for funding.

The initiative, proposed by a Tanzanian CSO, is focused on documenting restrictions on civic space in the run up to elections, so that civil society is better informed on the context and better able to develop strategies to push back.

Tweet *Highlighting advocacy letter sent to UN*

CIVICUS
@CIVICUSalliance

30 civil society groups call on the #UN Human Rights Council to address the crackdown on human rights defenders and press in #Tanzania - #HRC39 tinyurl.com/y8cw4lxu

♡ 32   11:36 AM - Aug 16, 2018

Once an issue or project has been picked up by the Catalytic Team other teams and allies remain integrated, as the work will have components of research, narrative building or other team focuses. The Secretariat ensures different teams and allies are involved where appropriate, to provide support and technical expertise for implementation and sustainability.

Outcomes

✔ **Because of the diversity of Vuka's membership, allies with different expertise and networks can push information out to different stakeholders.** The advocacy statements and campaigns have greater reach because members disseminate the information to their constituents and key influencers.

✔ In closed settings, avenues for dissent are restricted and opportunities to engage with international or regional bodies are limited. So, **including the UN or other Commissions on the calls to enable their engagement with national organisations has proved very helpful.**

✔ As well as the initiatives that have been formally spun out to other Vuka! action teams, many organic, bi-lateral connections and projects have been initiated thanks to these calls. **The calls have acted as a platform for bridge-building between civil society actors who otherwise might not have worked together.**

✔ **The secure, tailor-made platform that is used alongside the calls has allowed members to feel more confident** in candidly sharing sensitive information about their strategies and activities, meaning that international civil society responses in national contexts can be mapped and analysed, in order to find gaps or opportunities for joint action.

CHALLENGES

Opening civic space
Coordinated action to respond to an opening rather than a narrowing of civic space, have proved more difficult to carry out. Among ICSOs, there is rarely a coordinated response to 'opening space'. Civil society is skilled and experienced at fighting restrictions, but when there is sudden access to resources and space, what should support from ICSOs look like? It's proven more challenging to determine what actions can be agreed upon on 'opening' country calls.

Tension between depth and breadth
Coalitions often struggle with a natural tension between depth and breadth. Should the network dedicate their time to fewer countries and do deeper work there, or respond to a larger number of countries what would benefit from increased coordination?

LESSONS LEARNED

Trust
When asking people to dedicate time to information sharing and collective discussion, you must first build trust and prove the value of engaging. Part of that is about not dominating the conversation, and making rather than taking space. Those stewarding or coordinating a coalition shouldn't be in competition with members. The secure platform developed for Vuka! has been invaluable in helping to create that trust.

Coordinator role is key
Someone needs to be able to synthesise the information shared in order to properly identify potential next steps.

Resources and mechanisms
The collating of information and identifying of solutions needs to be backed up by resources and mechanisms to enable those ideas to reach fruition.

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Sarah Pugh and Deborah Doane

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International Civil Society Centre