

Solidarity Playbook



Hivos

In solidarity with content
creators: The role of art
in the resistance against
shrinking civic space



International
Civil Society Centre

solidarityaction.network

Hivos is an international development organisation guided by humanist values that works in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America on civic rights, gender equality, diversity and inclusion, and climate justice.

For more than 20 years Hivos has supported the arts and cultural sector, because they believe that **art has the power to question the dominant powerful structures in society**, create alternative narratives, imagine new realities, and bring about progressive social change.

As part of their response to the growing trend of the **shrinking of space for free expression**, Hivos developed the Resource of Open Minds (R.O.O.M.) Program to support artists, culture and media producers, to create critical work and freely express their views on social issues and injustice, and share this content in different contexts. They are voices of freedom offering critical and sometimes provocative narratives through art forms like music, film, photography, graffiti, gaming and virtual reality.

Overview

Hivos sees freedom of expression as a basic requirement for maintaining democracy and open societies where citizens stay informed, express opinions and participate actively in public life. Through the R.O.O.M. Program, Hivos aims to **diversify dialogue and debate in society** through thought-provoking and critical audio-visual productions that question harmful practices, stereotypes and injustices. The R.O.O.M. Program works with critical makers who “strive for openness and **lead the resistance against the shrinking civic space**”.





Organisation takes action

Trigger

Civic space has been shrinking in multiple countries where Hivos programs are situated – in the Middle East and North Africa, Eastern Africa and Southern Africa. Hivos has witnessed the growing demonization of certain groups and activists in these regions, and an increasing crackdown on freedom of expression in particular. Indeed, censorship has been reported as a major violation experienced across the African region ([CIVICUS Monitor 2020: Africa](#)).

Traditional civil society organisations (CSOs), activists and human rights defenders (HRDs) have been under attack, but young creatives are also at risk because their work depends on visibly engaging people in the public realm. Government prosecutions of musicians, artists and other content creators have increased in countries including Kenya, Uganda, Egypt and Zimbabwe, as those in power use anti-terrorism legislation and other restrictions to curb free expression.

Despite these developments, alternative forms of expression are occupying offline and **online spaces**, and a new generation of young artists and makers are creating content that highlights social issues and questions dominant structures in society. Young content creators have harnessed their access to the internet to **expand free and critical expression** – through the publication of independent African content. This ‘artivism’ helps to open up space for critical debate, and also counters the more damaging aspects of increasing internet access such as disinformation and clickbait.

Because Hivos has a history of looking beyond traditional CSOs and supporting ‘unusual suspects’ who can reach larger sections of society, and shift norms and narratives, they were keen to develop new strategies and approaches to **not only respond to the closing of civic space and defend it, but to increase and even celebrate civic space, and build its resilience**.

Hivos saw that interventions were needed to support young creatives to express themselves freely, and to build their resilience to remain critical and independent, in order to build solidarity and help to challenge damaging narratives and shrinking civic space. They therefore saw critical content creators as a crucial group who champion free expression, and who can change public perceptions and envision different futures.

Thus, in 2017, Hivos created the R.O.O.M Program, a six-year initiative funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) that aims to expand civic space in a new way. The program supports those young makers who use art, music, and film to open up space to enable constructive dissent, and **enables cross-fertilisation** between these actors and other groups.

Response in practice

The R.O.O.M Program has provided different levels of support and solidarity to young content creators, such as:

- **Financial support**

Grants are awarded to organisations and individuals to create audio-visual productions. This financial support ensures that creators are able to produce the content that they value as most critical. By ensuring some level of independence, Hivos supports their ability to practice free expression. The topics covered by partners thus far have included confronting censorship, advocating for digital rights, diversifying narratives from marginalised communities, social inclusion and political participation, promoting transparency and accountability in the use of public resources, redefining gender norms, and fighting police corruption. Proposals are co-created by Hivos staff and the young makers, so that critical ideas are embedded in the work on the issues the makers plan to tackle and the audience they hope to reach with their content.

Grants have also been made to collectives, in order to build up a solid infrastructure of new creative hubs including community spaces, studios, cultural cafes, production houses and makerspaces across marginalised regions of Africa, as these spaces foster civic engagement.

Many of the program's partners have sought to tackle specific social and policy issues that link to closing civic space. Examples include Bustop TV which sought to spark commentary on political and social issues in Zimbabwe (see below), and the Women's History Museum in Zambia, which highlighted the role of historical women in society through multi-media approaches, such as 2D animation and podcasting.

Bustop TV

R.O.O.M partner **Bustop TV** is a media house based in Harare that produces popular satirical skits, in order to provide commentary on political and social issues that affect Zimbabwean society. Following the 2017 coup, Bustop TV sought to educate and encourage citizens to engage and participate in civic processes, to better hold the new government to account. They did this through news coverage that provided alternative viewpoints to those of the mainstream media, and by releasing satirical skits focused on the rights of individuals and minorities in order to promote civic education and freedom of information (example available [here](#)). The media house now enjoys a video reach of over 80,000 people.

Leading Ladies

R.O.O.M. partner, the Women's History Museum in Zambia, created a 2D animation and documentary podcast series – **Leading Ladies** – exploring historical women leaders and their influence on Zambia's development. They saw that there was a lack of information about inspirational women from Zambia's past, and so documented stories that could provide examples and empower women trying to carve out their own roles in a modern, patriarchal society. The podcast features stories of indigenous women who were heads of states, generals or diplomats, elevating the role of women in history and countering the usual narrative that represents women as passive characters. The Museum used social media platforms, such as Facebook, that are often toxic spaces for many women, and disseminated content that shows women as assertive, confident leaders. In this way, they **opened up space for others to question damaging social norms** that limit civic space for specific groups, in this case women.

Women's History Museum Zambia
presents:

Leading Ladies



- **Capacity-building and convening**

Beyond financial support, Hivos also provides capacity-building support to its R.O.O.M partners. This includes workshops on financial independence to help the creative sector to become more financially resilient, so that creators can maintain their artistic freedom. Other tailor-made workshops are offered to partners depending on their needs and context, e.g. training on intellectual property, gender equality and inclusion, digital security, audience development and more. Hivos has also hosted broader gatherings of partners, such as their [2019 Makers' Summit](#), where partners discussed critical content creation in the Southern African region. Discussions there focused on online activism, the safety and security of makers (connected to the arrests of activists during that time), and how to create content with substance that runs counter to prevailing narratives.

- **Knowledge sharing and cross-fertilisations**

As well as supporting creators with financial support and capacity-building, Hivos has sought to nurture cross-sector and Pan-African solidarity around freedom of expression and civic space by linking different groups and fostering cross-collaboration in order to draw out the potential of art as a tool for social change. They have done this through collaboration grants that support partnerships between advocacy or activist organisations and creatives, and through their annual [African Crossroads](#) event. This festival brings R.O.O.M partners together with other groups and activists from across the continent over several days, so that they can share their expressions and productions, discuss common themes and issues, and re-imagine the Pan-African dream using art as a tool. Created in 2018, the African Crossroads network now has an active community of more than 250 delegates from more than 35 African countries, and has **created a physical and virtual space** for collective intelligence, action and inspiration.

Organisational learnings

Outcomes

✓ **Makers become more self-sufficient** – With financial support and capacity-building around finance, management and professional organisational skills, content creators are better positioned to apply to other funders and therefore maintain their independence. Hivos is often a seed-funder or an early-stage supporter, supporting makers to become less reliant on commercial assignments. In this sense, the R.O.O.M Program acts as an **incubator** for small and emerging initiatives, thanks to its holistic, tailored support.

✓ **Makers create more critical cultural and media productions** – As the R.O.O.M program enables makers to better balance and distinguish commercial work from editorially independent, critical content, makers have been free to produce documentaries, feature films, podcast series, artworks, animations, music pieces and books, covering topics such as:

- Confronting censorship
- Promoting feminism
- Tackling neoliberalism
- Questioning national identity and tribalism
- Supporting the political participation of youth
- Opposing discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS
- Advocating for LGBTI+ rights
- Questioning colonial legacy
- Fighting police corruption

Through these productions, content creators have been able to challenge repressive social norms and **tackle specific areas of civic space that have come under threat**, by leveraging online space for dialogue, debate and dissent. Capacity-building support and networking opportunities facilitated by R.O.O.M. have helped partners **reach wider and more diverse audiences** with their productions.

✓ **Makers have access to safe, well-resourced spaces** – Hubs and studios supported by R.O.O.M are able to [facilitate the productions of more makers](#), because of increased capacity, new tools and services, and more inclusive community-building. This capacity is developed with support from Hivos, for example, via the [Creative hub leader's toolkit](#) (produced by Hivos, Nesta and the British Council). As well as providing services such as internet access and workspace, these hubs represent physical **safe spaces** where young creators can feel safe from harassment, and feel a sense of community and support that directly affects their creative process. These spaces also act as platforms and knowledge-generators for key issues affecting all young content creators, such as surveillance capitalism, or '[who owns the Internet](#)' across Africa?

CHALLENGES

Balancing scale and creativity

Given their size or model, content creators and creative hubs cannot cope with large grants or burdensome policies and procedures. In order to support these actors, Hivos staff have had to learn how to operate like an incubator, developing alternative, lean procedures to suit the nature of their partners and balancing growth and sustainability with the makers' needs to be fast-moving and creative. This is more akin to supporting social movements than traditional CSOs, and the capacity-building strategies employed by the R.O.O.M Program are fundamentally different to those Hivos uses when engaging with other organisations. This form of solidarity and support requires a tailored approach depending on the needs of each partner, and rather than focusing on stability and procedures, it looks at independence, content and criticality (i.e. how makers can create art not just for art's sake, or for commercial purposes alone, but instead art that is geared towards creating change).

Bringing makers together

Many creators have chosen commercial routes for their content, as that is where the money is, and it can be difficult to untangle the narrative of entrepreneurship and innovation, and encourage thinking around critical content that seeks to spark dialogue and debate. There is also natural competition amongst makers, and so solidarity is not always easy to nurture.

Gender divide

How can you actively encourage young women to enter the fray around freedom of expression and critical content creation in spaces dominated by men with a culture of exhibitionism of the female body, i.e. online platforms and social media? It is hard to tackle this issue given the nature of algorithms, however the R.O.O.M Initiative is trying to support more women by giving grants and building capacity to women makers, and by including gender training in workshops for creative hubs.

LESSONS LEARNED

Be patient

Changing narratives and norms is not measurable in the short-term, and these initiatives will not always have an immediate impact. However, the mid- to long-term future will show the effects of a new tech-aware generation of content creators.

Class divide

As well as an unsurprising rural/urban dichotomy around internet access, Hivos has noted a divide between different urban neighbourhoods. Existing creative hubs tend to be situated in more central areas, and are not necessarily accessible to poorer young people from other areas of cities. Hivos has therefore tried to support hubs and spaces in poorer neighbourhoods, in close proximity to artists from marginalised communities, in order to create access and community for more young makers.

Different way of working

Hivos has had to learn how to frame the R.O.O.M Program in an appropriate way, so that makers feel able to apply for support, and are not put off by traditional CSO language or frameworks. It has also been very important to communicate that makers are not being invited to create something in service of INGOs, driven by a foreign agenda, but are being invited to create what they value as critical content, with independence and with freedom.

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In partnership with

