

# Solidarity Playbook



# Bond UK

An umbrella body's  
response to closing  
civic space



International  
Civil Society Centre

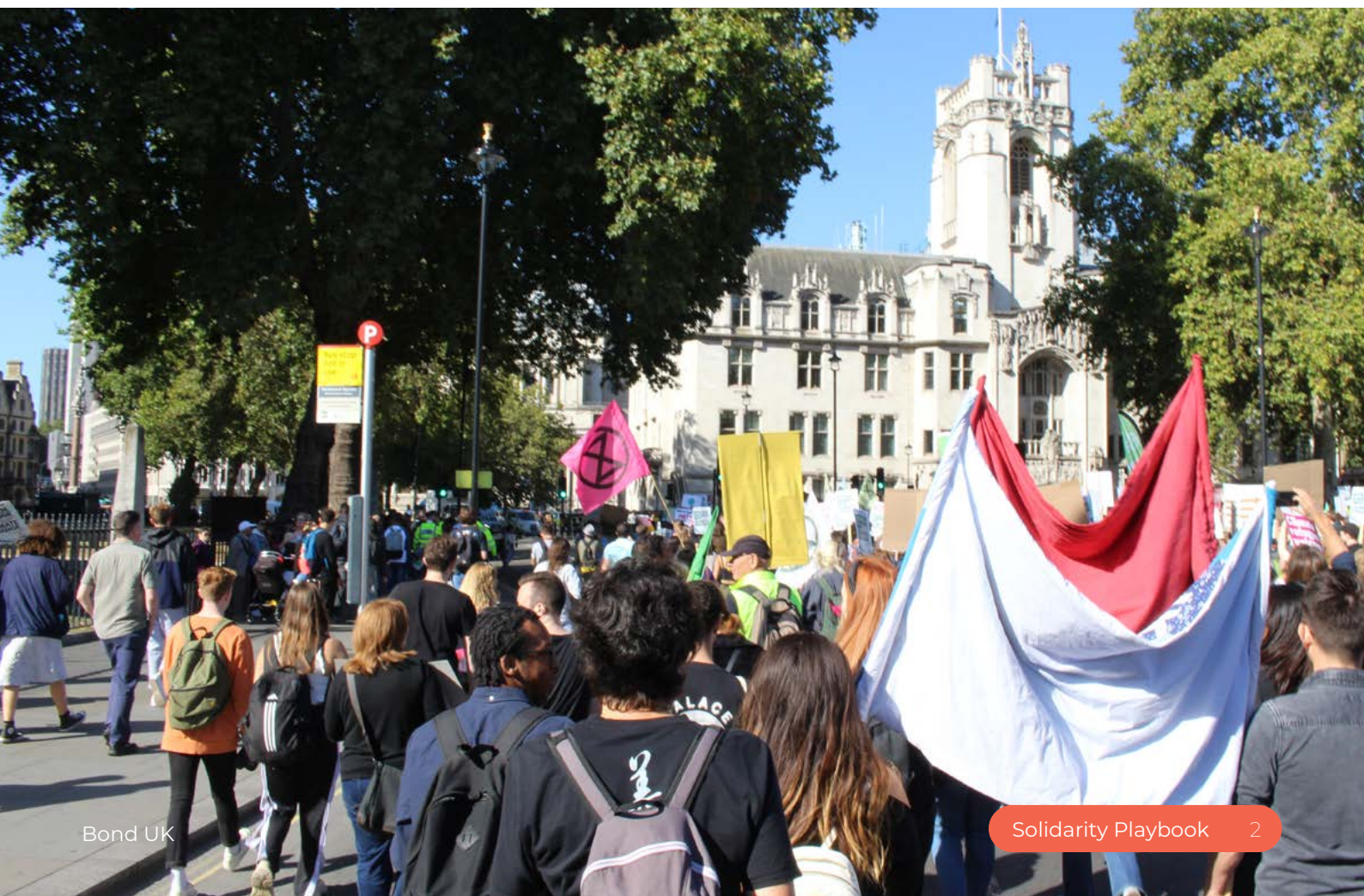
[solidarityaction.network](https://solidarityaction.network)

**Bond** is a membership body for UK-based organisations working in international development. It unites over 400 civil society organisations (CSOs) in pursuit of global change, with members ranging from small specialist charities to large international NGOs with a world-wide presence.

Bond connects those in the development, humanitarian and peacebuilding sectors to share expertise and develop skills. It also influences governments and policy-makers through collective advocacy, and it strengthens organisations to be more impactful through training, resources and support services.

## Overview

The UK has stated its commitment to the protection of civic space globally. However, **domestic** policy and legislation have not always reflected this commitment. Concerned by restrictions made to the enabling environment in the UK, and the **precedent that this could set internationally**, Bond has engaged in coalition activities on civic space issues, carrying out convening and coordination with its members and other civil society actors. This work has ranged from **campaigning for the voice of civil society organisations** within the UK, to advocacy efforts focused on influencing government policy on diplomacy and development.





## What launched the coalition?

In 2013 a draft bill seeking to tighten regulations on advocacy and campaigning, commonly referred to as the Lobbying Bill and later the Lobbying Act, was presented in parliament. The draft legislation sought to introduce new rules for individuals and organisations who run public-facing campaigns in the run up to national and devolved elections, including CSOs.

The proposed legislation was ambiguous and confusing. There had been no consultation, the drafting of the bill had been a rushed affair, and risked silencing campaigners by creating uncertainty. Bond and others feared that the **administrative burden placed on organisations** by the additional rules would result in reduced capacity to represent important issues and encourage public and political debate. There was also a concern that it would have a **chilling effect on CSOs** speaking out on politically sensitive issues, such as welfare or immigration, topics marred by political division.

Bond and others in the sector saw the Bill as an **existential threat** to the ability to speak truth to power and engage in advocacy, both for international development organisations and domestic CSOs. Many of Bond's member organisations had been experiencing and dealing with closing space for civil society for a long time **internationally**, and so when the Lobbying Bill was introduced, Bond

**recognised the early warning signs** of a threat to the enabling environment and chose to take an active, outspoken position. They were acutely aware of how civic space restrictions are replicated from state to state, and were concerned that if the UK introduced regressive measures, this would in turn enable other regimes to justify their own restrictions, especially given how the UK has presented itself as a beacon of transparency and democracy.

Bond felt that in order to support members facing closing civic space internationally, and be able to speak out on closing space elsewhere with legitimacy, they needed to ensure that 'their own house was in order' by resisting restrictions in the domestic sphere.

Collective advocacy efforts were initiated. A small group of organisations led by Friends of the Earth, and including Bond, coordinated the campaign to reform the draft bill as part of the Commission for Civil Society and Democratic Engagement. The initial advocacy met with some success – some of the more concerning elements of the draft bill were removed. Another significant win was the securing of a government commissioned review of the Act, published in 2016. Bond and its allies engaged heavily with this review process in the hopes of achieving further changes to the legislation.

## Death by a thousand cuts

Multiple, small measures and restrictions soon followed in the footsteps of the Lobbying Act, representing a cumulative and growing threat to the enabling environment for civil society in the UK. These measures included changes to judicial review processes (court cases where a judge or judges decide whether or not a public body has behaved lawfully), threats to the Human Rights Act, the introduction of anti-advocacy clauses in funding agreements, restrictions on public protest, the designation of legitimate campaigning groups as extremist organisations, regulations requiring charities to report overseas funding, concerning rhetoric from regulators which wrongly implied that charities should not engage in campaigning, and the stigmatisation of campaigners and other human rights actors such as lawyers and journalists.

## How does it work?

Building on initial collaboration and advocacy efforts triggered by the Lobbying Act, Bond, along with domestic umbrella bodies and a handful of larger charities, led on convening advocacy efforts around the **broader raft of restrictions** that were being introduced. Bond worked in partnership with the Quakers (a faith group committed to working for equality and peace) and together they established the **Civil Society Voice Network**, with Bond coordinating engagement with CSOs at the policy level, and the Quakers coordinating at the senior level.

This informal network of CSOs is united by the recognition that UK civic space is under threat.

- It acts as a space for **information sharing**, tracking restrictions and sharing updates amongst the membership.
- It also involves **informal collective action** on specific restrictions, creating a platform for solidarity, advice and the scaling up of advocacy.

*“Fear of non-compliance is making civil society cautious, when we should be bold... It makes charities quiet and compliant when we should be noisy and challenging. That’s not what our stakeholders want of us. **A weakened civil society voice weakens us all.**”*

(Quakers in Britain (2018): [Speaking truth to power: Quakers and the Lobbying Act](#))

## Who are the members?

The **cross-sectoral network** includes charities and campaign groups working on issues such as human rights, environment, nature and climate change, housing and homelessness, women’s rights, anti-racism and international development. Importantly, **many umbrella bodies have engaged** with the advocacy efforts as well. The UK has a number of umbrella bodies representing sections of civil society or particular areas of focus, such as small charities, funders, international development, fundraising, charity finance, campaigning and so on. This well-developed infrastructure has helped the conveners to **reach beyond the usual suspects**

and the more practiced campaigning groups, and enabled different types of organisations to stay connected to and inform the network and its work despite limited capacity at the organisational level.

Whilst many of Bond’s members, comprised of international development organisations, engaged in the initial, formal organising that sought to push back against the Lobbying Act, they have since stepped back from the network and its work around other restrictions and measures, leaving Bond to act on their behalf and keep them informed.

# Coalition in action

After initial efforts to seek legislative change around the Lobbying Act met with multiple barriers (including a change in government and the impacts of Brexit on government capacity), Bond and the network chose instead to focus on the Lobbying Act's regulator, the Electoral Commission, in order to **try and influence how the legislation would be implemented** and enforced.

Bond and others sought to **raise awareness** about the issues facing charities and non-partisan campaign groups, and about how these groups differ from other types of non-party campaigners such as trade unions and networks affiliated with political parties.

Bond partnered with other coalitions, including the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO), who are both members of the Civil Society Voice Network, in order to **draft a technical paper** that analysed each section of the Electoral Commission's guidance on the Act, explaining how each part

was problematic for charitable organisations, and **making recommendations** on how the guidance could be improved.

The network was sensitive to the challenges that CSOs were facing, as these issues had long been raised by members, and this informed the technical analysis. When developing recommendations that would be submitted to the Commission, they were able to sense-check suggestions with members, thereby ensuring that any updated guidance would be fit for purpose.

This very technical work resulted in the **publication of new guidance** by the Electoral Commission in 2019, just in time for a general election. Research following this election found that the updated guidance had a positive impact on campaigners. The **results of an annual survey of UK campaigners**, undertaken by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation, showed that the new guidance was an improvement and that it *"makes it clear charity campaigning is welcome and legitimate"*.

## Intrinsic link to the international context

The collaborative work focused on the domestic context is ongoing, and Bond continues to engage in the Civil Society Voice Network. However, given Bond's understanding that issues of civic space in the **domestic and international spheres are intrinsically linked**, they have established a **Working Group on Civic Space** with their members, working with the government to establish a dialogue on civic space issues overseas in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following a recent merger of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign Office (FCO), Bond

expects that one of the focus areas for the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) will be 'open societies', building on the UK's existing focus on media freedom and freedom of religious belief. Bond's Working Group on Civic Space is therefore planning ways to advocate for a clear strategy from the FCDO, setting out their approach to addressing civic space internationally. The working group is connecting with transparency and human rights organisations in order to **bridge beyond the development sector and create coordinated advocacy** on civic space.

# Outcomes

- ✓ Engagement with the UK Electoral Commission, and the resulting publishing of new guidance on the Lobbying Act, **helped CSOs to feel more confident about campaigning** in the run up to the general election in 2019. The collaborative actions of Bond and others helped to thaw the chilling effect that had silenced organisations in previous years.
- ✓ The collective action and networking that was developed in response to the Lobbying Act resulted in a **platform that was then well placed and poised to continue campaigning** as new restrictions or measures were introduced. Certain organisations or alliances might actively work on specific issues, such as the judicial review process, whilst the wider network has been able to **amplify messages and offer solidarity** when required.

Organisations who have viewed the growing package of restrictions as an existential threat – mostly environmental and human rights organisations who engage more in public campaigning – have advocated against the measures and lobbied for civil society’s voice to remain intact.

In drawing a connection between the international and domestic spheres, Bond saw the need to be more outspoken, and engaged in collaborative, multi-sector advocacy efforts to resist the closing of civic space in the UK. In doing so, they have highlighted the **key role that can be played by umbrella bodies** with the capacity to undertake the more technical work required, and the political will to campaign on behalf of their members. They have also underlined that **international solidarity must be underpinned by a commitment to civic space ‘at home’**: *“By ignoring these regulatory issues at home, we – civil society actors, funders, regulators – are complicit in closing space abroad: effectively saying to the world that these restrictions don’t matter and that they don’t cause harm. But they do.”* (Bond (2018): [Is the UK setting a bad example on civil society space?](#))



## CHALLENGES

### Technical nature

Individual measures and restrictions are very technical in nature, making it difficult to garner support for reform. They are too complicated for many CSOs to engage with, and it is challenging to secure support from politicians and the public on such complex issues.

### Existentialism vs. capacity

Many CSOs do not perceive these types of measures to be existential threats to their ability to continue operating and achieving their objectives. For example, international development organisations do not usually make use of mechanisms such as judicial reviews. Therefore, although there is a recognition that these measures do add up to a shrinking of civic space, many groups cannot justify dedicating capacity to the issue over and above their core work.

### New normal

Some organisations have become used to the restrictions and see them as the 'new normal', in terms of the environment in which they must operate. They are adapting to restrictions rather than speaking out against them. Bond's members work on international development – understandably, they prioritise their capacity on the core issues, i.e. their primary missions and the causes they were founded to address such as ending global poverty.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Diversity

It is important to have broad, diverse coalitions. Advocacy on these measures and restrictions has been most effective when it has been part of a collective effort involving both international actors and domestic groups from all backgrounds. The leadership of key players in the domestic sphere such as the Quakers and Friends of the Earth enabled connections with CSOs across the UK and across sectors.

### Expertise

Given the technical nature of the legislative or policy-based restrictions that are introduced, expertise is needed to enable sector-wide understanding and the development of strategies to push back. Deciding where this is housed and resourced within a coalition is important.

### Umbrellas

Given the reduced advocacy capacity amongst many organisations, and the natural disconnect between primary missions and technical restrictions, umbrella bodies are key actors in the resistance.

Solidarity Playbook

# Bond UK

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