

This brief describes the challenges for democracy in today's digital age, with the aim to create a shared understanding of the digital context and to make visible the work undertaken by Sida's partners.

The objective of Swedish development cooperation is to create opportunities for people living in poverty and under oppression to improve their living conditions. Sida's mission is, in addition, to reduce poverty from a rights perspective and with the integration of environment and climate, gender equality and conflict. The online space has relevance to all of these aspects of development cooperation.

The vantage point for this brief is the global trend of shrinking democratic space online, including challenges, counter-strategies and opportunities. The brief stresses the need for a nuanced, context-specific approach to these recent democratic challenges in the digital sphere, that takes into account both rights-holders and duty-bearers. It also frames development cooperation within the larger picture of changing global norms and practices.

Political and academic debates on the technical control over the Internet's core infrastructure of the late 00s and early 10s evolved into discussions of governance on the Internet during the mid-10s. Issues at the top of the agenda included, for instance, the application of national laws and international norms in the online space. The discussion concerned the influence of the "offline" world on the "online" world.

In the past few years, however, we have reached a point, where we are analysing the development of *democracy itself in the time of the Internet*. At the same time, the division between "online" and "offline" spheres is becoming less relevant. Information flows and institutions are moving online and the resulting shifts in power between institutions, groups and individual actors are felt far beyond our digital devices. The Internet has become an integral part of our societies and has already come to influence how our societies – and not least our democratic processes – function.

A SHRINKING DEMOCRATIC SPACE

Today, we see repressive measures against democratic actors at all levels; a *shrinking democratic space* offline as well as online.¹ Even though this tendency is not necessarily new, the magnitude and similarities in diverse settings make it relevant to talk about a global trend.² The online spaces, which often have provided freedom and opportunity to gather and share information, collaborate and organise, are now in many places increasingly circumscribed. These developments are seen in authoritarian, as well as in non-authoritarian, contexts.

At the same time, contextualization across and within nations is necessary. The shrinking democratic space online takes multiple forms, and the negative consequences are not limited to civil and political rights but also affect social, cultural and economic rights and broader development.

The online space – and the shrinking of this space – concerns all dimensions of poverty: Lack of *resources, opportunities and choice, power and voice and human security*.³

As we witness a shrinking democratic space in diverse contexts, we also see how digital technologies open up for new forms of mobilization for human rights. When available, these technologies have become indispensable for marginalised groups and communities, and for those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, for example on the basis of sex, age, gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity and religion or other beliefs.

Therefore, the online space must be taken into consideration when asking the overall questions that cut across all dimensions of poverty: *Who is poor, how and why*.⁴

- 1 See for example Carothers, Tomas (2015). *The Closing Space Challenge. How Are Funders Responding?* (<http://ceip.org/10t14RG>); Sida (2017) *Using development cooperation to counteract the shrinking space for civil society*. 17/000431
- 2 See for example CIVICUS' yearly *State of Civil Society Report*. <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/state-of-civil-society-report-2018>
- 3 Sida (2017) *Dimensions of Poverty, Sida's Conceptual Framework*. (<https://www.sida.se/contentassets/f3e30b6727e8450887950edb-891c05af/22161.pdf>)
- 4 Sida (2017) *Dimensions of Poverty, Sida's Conceptual Framework*. (<https://www.sida.se/contentassets/f3e30b6727e8450887950edb-891c05af/22161.pdf>)

THE INTERNET OF TODAY: A CONFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGY, HUMAN RIGHTS, WARFARE AND DEMOCRACY

Over the past decade, governments have developed their toolbox of digital repression and information control. The trend of closing democratic space which started after September 11, 2001, and continued with political protests in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 2000s, was interrupted by the opportunities offered by technology during the Arab Spring. However, governments quickly adapted, and their techniques are now well-known: internet shutdowns, blocking, surveillance, disinformation and defamation, harassment and restrictions on encryption and anonymity, to name a few. Often, these restrictive actions are responses to pressure from an increasingly well-informed population.

While there is much rightful concern about the way the Internet is distributing power, it is important, however, to remember the radical transformation brought by connectivity to those previously disconnected from the global flow of knowledge and ideas.

The democratizing effect of the Internet means that tools for dissemination of ideas, information and knowledge, which previously required both human and physical capital, are now readily available, also to people living in poverty.

Through improved access and more affordable mobile technology, many more can benefit from both access to knowledge and the economy, thereby increasing opportunities to take part in democratic conversations and broader development.

Conversely, recent years have also seen methods previously only used in inter-state information warfare becoming widespread. Tools that have helped human rights activist and civil society organisations to enact change in repressive environments are now fuelling the rise of anti-democratic movements. Moreover, movements hostile to human rights and democratic values are using the tools of the open society to undermine democracy. Criminals and extremist groups have appropriated advanced tools for attacks and surveillance. Human rights defenders, journalists, women's rights activists, marginalised communities and other pro-democracy activists are not only attacked by authoritarian governments, but increasingly also by extremist parties and groups, as well as by elected politicians in established democracies.

This development requires new thinking and cooperation between all concerned actors. As populists, political extremists, state intelligence agencies and terrorist groups use the free and open Internet to harass, spread disinformation and undermine democratic processes, there is an urgent need to formulate and mobilize support for a *rights-based*, free, open and secure Internet.

THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

The baseline issues in the digital sphere – conflicts between individuals, groups and states, lack of agency, divisive agendas and repression – are by no means new. Rather, they have been at the core of the work that Sida and its partners have been doing for decades.

International development cooperation has played a key role in supporting civil society organisations and human rights actors in the transition to the digital era. The support has covered a broad set of issues across many regions.

The work supported by Sida ranges from efforts to create secure communication for human rights defenders, providing training against online threats, building capacity in advocacy for democracy and human rights through new media channels, and building best practices for improving access to information and the Internet for those living in poverty.

While maintaining the role of a watchdog for repressive legislation and practices, civil society contributes to proactive and constructive solutions in the nexus of issues of information, rights, security and democracy.

The dialogue between civil society, policy makers and the private sector has never been more critical, not only for the future of the Internet but for that of democracy itself.

The digital sphere is still relatively unbound by global norms and regulations. Therefore, ensuring that development of the norms, institutions, legislation, standards and protocols adhere to human rights standards and take the interests of those living in poverty into account, is key. An integrated approach, where diplomatic efforts and international development cooperation act in tandem, is essential.⁵

⁵ Sida communication to government on 14 March 2017: *Using development cooperation to counteract the shrinking space for civil society.* (<https://www.sida.se/globalassets/sida/sve/om-oss/sa-styrs-vi/sidas-skrivelse-krympande-demokratiskt-utrymme.pdf>)

Given the negative trajectory in many contexts, sometimes the best achievable outcome is reduced deterioration or civil society organisations just surviving, rather than aiming for space to open up.⁶

A context-specific approach is just as crucial in the digital sphere as in other human rights and democracy work. For example, in some contexts, the space for online debate is limited due to repression from authoritarian governments, and the rights of women are being suppressed by hate speech. Elsewhere and in parallel, the possibilities for online journalism is curtailed through legislation and human rights groups are aggressively surveilled. Already existing and deep-rooted power dynamics risk particularly affecting women and other discriminated groups, also in the online environment.

Equally important to keep in mind is that in yet other contexts, there are positive changes that need to be protected: Stronger protection for personal data and online political debate where there previously was none, less censorship, increased access to information and fewer instances of government shutdowns.⁷

THREATS AND COUNTER-STRATEGIES

When the Internet was the remit of a smaller, connected elite, its effect on society in a broader sense remained limited. With vastly increased connectivity, however, it is causing a rewiring of many of the institutions that underpin democratic governance. The threats and counter-strategies are often specific to each area. What is clear, however, is that the shrinking space is resulting in a shifting space regarding responses: quick, adaptive, inclusive and coordinated counterstrategies are essential.

The future of journalism and factual information under threat

Disinformation is increasingly used as a tool for power and influence. The impact is often felt the most in low- and middle-income countries. False rumours, sometimes spread intentionally, have occasionally led to deaths and injury and are hindering humanitarian work and broader development.⁸ Without well-developed, objective and trusted journalism, censorship remains the most likely response. The power of disinformation and tendentious journalism to undermine democratic institutions, vilify opponents and sow distrust in society, has made it into a central tool in the toolbox of both authoritarian states and political extremists.

The development of counter-strategies and institutional responses within international human rights law is challenging, and civil society supported by development cooperation, plays a key role in constructively shaping this debate.

Online hate speech and threats

Governments, extremists and populist groups are using online hate speech to silence journalists, human rights activists and private individuals daily throughout the world. Women and LGBTI persons as individuals, as journalists and as human rights defenders, are often particularly targeted, facing gender-based violence based both on what they do and who they are.⁹

The mix of populist politics and algorithms that reward controversial content creates a polarized and toxic public debate. Human rights defenders often lack the capacity to deal with these increasingly sophisticated campaigns. Marginalised groups are particularly vulnerable.

Many of Sida's partners are working actively to support persons subjected to online harassment and violence.¹⁰

In Brazil, Costa Rica, Pakistan, Mexico, Uganda and Palestine, **Access Now** is supporting grassroots organisations working with survivors of online harassment and promoting freedom of speech. Access Now also runs a worldwide hotline, providing human rights defenders with emergency support in digital security.

Association for Progressive Communications (APC) has supported women's rights activists to use technology in the struggle against online violence and conducted research in several national contexts.¹¹

In Egypt, Kenya and the Philippines, the **Alliance for Affordable Internet** is conducting digital security trainings with gender rights activists, who increasingly find themselves on the frontline of confronting hate speech online.

Article 19 have catalogued how LGBTQ dating apps in the Middle East and North Africa were being used by governments to target, harass and repress LGBTQ individuals and communities.

6 Eldén, Åsa & Levin, Paul T. (2018) *Swedish Aid in the Era of Shrinking Space – the Case of Turkey* EBA-report 2018: 6. (<https://eba.se/rapporter/swedish-aid-in-the-era-of-shrinking-democratic-space-the-case-of-turkey/8657/>)

7 V-dem *Regional Trend Comparison*, 2008-2018 (<https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/regional/>); UNESCO *World Trend Report* 2017/2018. (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000261065>)

8 Examples include the ongoing Ebola crisis in Congo (<https://observers.france24.com/en/20190513-congo-ebola-local-campaigns-fight-fake-rumours>) and rumours leading to lynchings in India (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-44897714>)

9 Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition: *Our Right to Safety: Women Human Rights Defenders' Holistic approach to Protection* (http://defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Our-Right-To-Safety_FINAL.pdf)

10 For further reading, please see Sida (2019): *Gender-based violence online* (https://www.sida.se/contentassets/97224704b4f643cba3b4fca3d931e576/brief_gender-based_violence_online_sep-2019_webb.pdf)

11 APC: *End violence: Women's rights and safety online*. (<https://www.apc.org/en/node/15007/>)

Artificial intelligence for repression or empowerment

Artificial intelligence (AI) will have profound consequences for all, including human rights defenders and democracy activists. For instance, the ability to create AI-generated fake footage of individuals (*deepfakes*) will give governments and extremists new tools for discrediting and harassing critics, and the use of AI to “clean” the Internet of violent content has led to the removal of evidence of war crimes.

Documentation of human rights abuses in the war in Syria was algorithmically removed by YouTube in 2017. Sida’s partner **WITNESS** worked directly with this case, including with YouTube, to successfully restore deleted footage.

Capacity building is key in this new field. Sida’s partner **ICNL**, together with Stanford University, are arranging an “AI camp” where leading civil society representatives will be immersed in the possibilities and threats presented by the changing landscape of AI.

Connecting the unconnected

The next billion will connect to an Internet different from that a decade ago. People living in poverty risk having neither resources, physical connectivity nor capacity to take advantage of new technology and navigate in a complicated online environment. Thus, they risk being turned into passive consumers, rather than active participants in democratic discourse online, and thereby being excluded from yet another development leap. The discussion of a rights-based approach to access must, therefore, include both the opportunities and risks presented by increased connectivity, and take into account the effect on social, cultural and economic rights.

In Uganda, the **Alliance for Affordable Internet** has been documenting the impact of the recently enacted social media tax on marginalized communities. This shows how government responses to perceived threats can undermine development broadly, by impacting directly on businesses.

In Colombia and South Africa, Sida’s partner **APC** has, through its partners, promoted community-owned networks in underserved areas. A particular focus lies on innovative solutions for bridging the digital gender gap, including through the use of mesh-connected and solar-powered networks.

The spread of repressive legislation

Many of Sida’s partners are working in national contexts to impact the development of national legal frameworks for the online sphere. In Jordan and Moldova, **ICNL** has been working to ensure that potentially repressive

amendments to the national cybercrime and surveillance legislation fall within the remit of international human rights norms.

Association for Progressive Communication (APC)

has developed the Feminist Principles of the Internet, a set of statements that together provide a framework for the women’s rights movement to articulate and explore issues related to technology. These principles offer a gender lens on critical internet-related rights, and make visible the fluidity between discrimination and marginalization in the offline and online spaces.¹²

The interplay between national legislative work and international norms shapes the online democratic space. In the absence of effective and rights-based national legislations, authoritarian and democratic governments copy each other, causing repressive legislation to spread and form new norms. In some cases, duty-bearers (governments) do not seek to limit speech, but simply lack the capacity to develop advanced responses to online threats. Expanding the perspective through support to both rights-holders and duty-bearers is essential in this area, especially through improved dialogue.¹³

Sida’s partners are working to establish global, normative principles that guide national and regional legislation. For instance, The **Alliance for Affordable Internet** and **UNESCO** have advanced the issue of the digital gender gap into a key policy issue.

Changing political and technical norms

Some of Sida’s partners are working to bridge the gap between human rights and technical communities.

Article 19 has been promoting a rights-based approach in the most important technical standard-setting organisations of Internet governance, the Internet Engineering Task Force and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. They have put human rights on par with security when evaluating new technical protocols.

Article 19 and **APC** contributed with grassroots examples and language to the Human Rights Council resolution on violence against women and girls in digital contexts that was adopted in 2018.

Many of the UN’s Special Rapporteurs have over recent years focused on freedom of expression and information

¹² APC: *Feminist Principles of the Internet*. (<https://feministinternet.org/>)

¹³ Sida communication to government on 14 March 2017: *Using development cooperation to counteract the shrinking space for civil society*. (<https://www.sida.se/globalassets/sida/sve/om-oss/sa-styrs-vi/sidas-skrivelse-krympande-demokratiskt-utrymme.pdf>)

and other related digital issues, and several of Sida's partners have been supporting them in this work. A key strategy has been to link up the Special Rapporteurs, and facilitating dialogue, with civil society groups in low- and middle-income countries. For instance, **APC** gave continuous support to the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women in her report on online violence against women and girls.¹⁴

Mobilization into the future

Much like the climate crisis, solutions to many of the issues facing the democratic space online will only be found through mobilisation and awareness raising, also at the highest levels. Civil society will continue to play a crucial role in connecting the many disparate dots and forging a cohesive vision of a future, where the Internet can contribute to empowerment, democratic growth and development. Just like the climate crisis, there is a need to build cross-border movements around many digital issues which cannot be solved by individual states. Left untackled, they may lead to repression and a further closing of the online space. For Sida, it is clear that Swedish foreign policy, development of international frameworks and international development cooperation must be integrated and coordinated also in the digital sphere.¹⁵

¹⁴ Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective. A/HCR/38/47 (<https://documents.un.org>)

¹⁵ Sida communication to government on 14 March 2017: *Using development cooperation to counteract the shrinking space for civil society.* (<https://www.sida.se/globalassets/sida/sve/om-oss/sa-styrs-vi/sidas-skrivelse-krympande-demokratiskt-utrymme.pdf>)

FURTHER READING

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