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Inclusive development? Civic space and the way forward

The case of Liberia

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Abstract

Civil society is an integral part of reaching sustainable development, and a cornerstone in democratic societies. The aim of this study is to investigate how Swedish donors and local partners work with civic space in Liberia, specifically challenges related to civic space. It also examines strategies Swedish donors and their local partners apply to overcome these challenges. The study has a qualitative approach and derives findings from documents and semi-structured interviews with Swedish donors and local partners. The paper finds that challenges for civil society in Liberia include low capacity and interference of state and other actors. Challenges affect the work of civil society by delaying work and making them not reach their potential, which in turn has effects on sustainable development, democracy and implementation of the SDGs. Some civil society groups, like female activists and those working with accountability and sensitive issues, are more affected than others due to their perceived lack of legitimacy. To overcome challenges, Swedish donors and local partners engage in a range of strategies, including Policy and strategic efforts, Operational responses, Alliance-building and civil society resilience efforts, and Evidence-generation. Sweden is committed to supporting Liberian civil society in its' own right.

Key words: Liberia, Civil society, Civic space, International development cooperation, Sweden

Word Count: 14 999

List of abbreviations and acronyms

CENTAL	Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FBA	Folke Bernadotte Academy
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
MFA	Ministry for Foreign Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PGD	Policy for Global Development
RFSU	Swedish Association for Sexuality Education
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEK	Swedish krona
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SIDA	Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UPR	Universal Periodic Review

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1. Introduction

Civil society is an integral part of reaching sustainable development, and a cornerstone in democratic societies. Through civil society, populations make their voices heard and influence decision-making. Civil society hold actors accountable and complement state activities (Dagher, 2017). However, in many parts of the world, civic space, the space for civil society to operate, is shrinking (Hayes, et al., 2017). In Liberia, a post-conflict country and one of the poorest countries in the world, civil society contributes immensely to development and democracy (European Union, 2017).

This study investigates what challenges Liberian civil society faces, effects they have, and strategies to overcome them. The research is based on data from interviews and documents from Swedish donors and their local partners and concludes that some challenges can be attributed to restrictions on civic space. Other challenges include low capacity among civil society and changes in civic space due to donor relationships. Parts of civil society, for instance female activists and groups working with accountability or sensitive issues, face more challenges than others, due to their perceived lack of legitimacy, or because they challenge legitimacy of elites. Challenges have effects on the ability of civil society, especially in rural areas, to do their work. This has impacts on democracy and implementation of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the principle “leave no one behind”. Swedish donors and their local partners apply a range of strategies to overcome challenges, including Policy and strategic efforts, Operational responses, Alliance-building and civil society resilience efforts and Evidence-generation. Sweden is committed to supporting civil society in Liberia in its’ own right, but many civil society actors are not able to meet donor demands.

The study begins by presenting aim and research questions. Secondly, a context of Liberian civil society, civic space, and Swedish international development cooperation is discussed. This is followed by a literature review and presentation of the main theoretical concept, based on Hossain and Khurana’s (2019) research on donor responses to restrictions on civic space. Methodological considerations are then discussed, followed by a section on findings and analysis, conclusion and further research.

1.1. Aim

The aim of the study is to investigate how Swedish donors and their local partners work with civic space in Liberia. The study does not seek to investigate whether Liberian civic space is shrinking or changing, since this implies a comparative approach. Instead, it gives a snapshot of how actors work in the current context. Previous research on civic space found impacts on sustainable development, given the important role civil society plays in contributing to for instance the SDGs (WACSI, 2020). Civil society's contribution to the SDGs is expressed specifically in SDG 16 and 17, partnership for the goals and inclusive societies, but they play a role in all goals, for instance by monitoring goal implementation (Aho, 2017). Civil society inclusion also contributes to democracy, since civil society represents the population. Liberian civil society is active in a range of sectors, providing services and monitoring government behaviour. Given the contribution of Liberian civil society to sustainable development, peace and democracy, civil society work being delayed and not meeting its' potential can have effects across a range of sectors. This makes the subject interesting and relevant to study. Studying how civic space affects development, and how actors work, is relevant for development actors, and sharing knowledge is important for actors to understand the context and adapt accordingly. Since Liberian civic space has not been studied in detail before, and donor responses is relatively un-researched, there is a gap. Civic space is relatively favourable in Liberia, and although restrictions exist it is not a worst case (CIVICUS, 2021), making it relevant to study.

The study aims to be analytical, applying theoretical concepts and arguments. An analytical framework based on Hossain and Khurana (2019), outlining challenges related to civic space and donor strategies to combat them, is used. This provides the study with theoretical relevance, as it aims to contribute to further theorisation around civic space in development research.

1.1.1. Research questions

The overall research question is: How do Swedish donors and their local partners perceive and work with challenges related to civic space in Liberia? With the following sub-question:

- What strategies do Swedish donors and their local partners apply to combat challenges related to civic space?

2. Context

This section gives a background to Liberian civil society, the context in which it operates, and Sweden's role and priorities in Liberia.

2.1. Liberia

Liberia is a post-conflict country recovering from two civil wars (Britannica, 2021). During the conflicts, the environment for civil society was unfavourable, although the women's movement played a big role in peacebuilding (European Union, 2017). In 2018, Liberia was classified as a hybrid regime, with low functioning of state (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019). The country has since 2018 been ruled by president Weah, whose appointment brought optimism about safeguarding of freedom of expression and assembly (CIVICUS, 2018c). In 2012, around 1 500 registered civil society organisations (CSOs) and a number of informal organisations, movements and networks were active (European Union, 2017). Liberian civil society is dependent on foreign aid, and the relationship with donors is "...characterised by unstable funding patterns and shifting donor priorities" (Krawczyk, 2018:296). With Liberia shifting from being a post-conflict country, Liberian civil society is an interesting case to study. Although Liberia has made significant developmental progress after the 2003 peace accord, challenges remain (European Union, 2017).

Ranking 23 on the UN list of Least Developed Countries, Liberia is one of the poorest countries in the world (World Bank, 2021). Five out of six people live in poverty, unemployment is high and the literacy rate low (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019; UNESCO 2021). Corruption is widespread (Transparency International, 2021). Infrastructure is lacking, leading to substandard accessibility of healthcare and education (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019). During the Ebola crisis, civil society actors directed attention to humanitarian work, and with challenges changing from humanitarian to developmental, civil society needs to adapt (European Union, 2017). Recently, the covid-19 pandemic led the government to impose restrictions, but the number of cases remain low (World Health Organisation, 2021). Sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a challenge and patriarchal structures part of Liberian society (Garnett &

Øygaard, 2019). In 2020, protests led president Weah to declare rape a national emergency (Porkpa, 2020). LGBTQI rights are not safeguarded in the country (Currier & Cruz, 2020) and LGBTQI organisation tend to be careful (Freedom House, 2020). These challenges show civil society can contribute immensely to democracy and development in a range of sectors, and it is relevant to examine the space for civil society.

Liberian civic space is “obstructed”, and the country partly free (CIVICUS, 2021; Freedom House, 2020). The EU (2017) considers the space for CSOs “vulnerable”. Challenges for civil society include fragmentation of the legal registration framework, lack of civil society inclusion in decision-making, and weak capacity (ibid.). The work of CSOs is regulated through the National Aid and NGO policy of Liberia (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, 2020). Freedom of expression, association and assembly are guaranteed in the constitution (Freedom House, 2020) and president Weah has repealed legislation to secure free expression (CIVICUS, 2018d). Recent restrictions to civic space include social media blockage during anti-government protests (CIVICUS, 2019), suspension of media licences (CIVICUS, 2018b) shutting down radio-stations and detention, attacks and threats against journalists (CIVICUS, 2018a; CIVICUS 2020a). During the covid-19 pandemic, there has been police crackdown on peaceful protests (CIVICUS, 2021).

2.2. Swedish international development cooperation

Sweden is, in relation to its economic size, one of the largest donors (OECD, 2019). International development cooperation is regulated through the Aid Policy Framework and priorities guided by the Feminist Foreign Policy and Policy for Global Development (PGD) (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015; Government Offices of Sweden, 2016; Government Offices of Sweden, 2021a). PGD, that aims to contribute to sustainable development, is based on coherency and extends beyond international aid to include for instance trade and environmental policies (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015). The Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) set out strategic guidelines and funding for official development assistance (ODA). The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) executes decisions and manages the biggest part of ODA (Sida, 2021c).

Sweden is present in Liberia through an embassy, with staff from the MFA and Sida, and the Swedish agency for Peace, Security and Development (FBA). Liberia is a focus country in Sweden's "Drive for Democracy" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021b). International development cooperation is guided by a development strategy covering 1,85 bn SEK from 2021-2025 (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2020a). In 2020, the largest part of ODA was distributed to international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), followed by civil society and the public sector (Sida, 2021b). See appendix 9.1. for a comprehensive list of Sida-supported activities within the sector "government and civil society".

Four Swedish organisations and strategic partners of Sida are active in Liberia: Forum Civ (previously Forum Syd), Kvinna till Kvinna, RFSU and Union to Union (Sida, 2021a). Forum Civ and Kvinna till Kvinna have offices in the country. Union to Union have two regional projects in Liberia, RFSU have two partners, Kvinna till Kvinna have 9 partners and Forum Civ have partnerships with 12 CSOs (Forum Civ, 2021; Kvinna till Kvinna, 2021a; RFSU, 2020; Union to Union, 2019). The partners work with issues ranging from union rights, sexual and reproductive health and right (SRHR), women's rights and land rights. Given Sweden's presence in Liberia and commitment to sustainable development and democracy, it is relevant to investigate how Swedish donors work with challenges related to civic space.

3. Literature Review

Research has been conducted on the role of civil society and civic space. This section discusses the theoretical background of these concepts and describes previous research about civic space in different contexts.

3.1. Theoretical Concepts

The main concept of the thesis is civic space, defined as the space for civil society to operate (Hossain & Khurana, 2019:6). Civil society is defined as structured and unstructured groups, separate from the state, working for non-profit interests (Alscher, et al., 2017:6).

3.1.1. Civil Society

Civil society has been studied since Hegel distinguished it from state and family (Dagher, 2017). Early researchers include de Tocqueville, who emphasised civil society representation of collective interests separate from state, and Putnam, who argued for the importance of social trust in civil society (ibid.). Civil society is a building block for democratic societies, sustainable development and implementation of the SDGs and theories are mostly based on western notions (Dagher, 2017; Hossain, et al., 2018). Historically, civil society has been connected to normative beliefs about morality, with ideas of inherent goodness (Dagher, 2017). Dagher (2017) argues civil society can work for ideas considered “unethical”, and groups considered “civil” or “uncivil” depending on context. Groups organised along typically western structures, like CSOs, are discussed more than informal or unorganised groups like social movements (Daniel & Neubert, 2019). Donors are more inclined to support civil society through CSOs because of their ability to apply for funding and deliver and report outcomes, resulting in a professionalisation of civil society and a questioning of who civil society represents and is accountable to (ibid.). It is relevant to investigate if this is the case in Liberia.

The role and contribution of civil society differs depending on context. Common roles for civil society are service providers and watchdogs, monitoring and demanding accountability from

elites (Hossain, et al., 2018). Whether civil society is valuable because of its' function and results or in itself is discussed by Datzberger and Nguyen (2018), who argue the professionalisation of civil society leads to civil society serving outcomes for donors. Despite more aid being distributed to civil society globally recently, civil society is not strengthened, and civic space is shrinking, perhaps because donors assume a western model of civil society that might not exist in partner countries (ibid). Dagher (2017) argues there should be a reconceptualization of civil society, widened from the western and civil undertones it has today, and it is relevant to investigate how Swedish donors and partners see this discussion in Liberia.

3.1.2. Civic space

The space for civil society to operate is considered shrinking globally. Considering the important role civil society has in achieving development, shrinking space can be explained as both a democratic and developmental issue, and a process of constraining, controlling or restricting civil society in order to reduce their influence (Hossain, et al., 2018).

Hayes et al (2017) argue the concept is a way to think about trends of repression directed at civil society and mention nine trends constraining civic space: philanthropic protectionism, legislative restrictions, constraints to the rights of freedom of assembly and association, criminalisation, stigmatisation and de-legitimation, restrictions on freedom of expression, intimidation and violent attacks, funding withdrawal, claiming civil society spaces and exclusion from banking systems (ibid.). Hossain et al (2018) claim restrictions on civic space can be formal, i.e., legislative and regulatory, or informal, referring to stigmatisation, selective application of rules, violence and impunity (ibid). Buyse (2018) acknowledges that not only CSOs room to manoeuvre is affected by shrinking space, but also peaceful protest and free media. Constraining human rights such as rights of expression and assembly is common (Hossain, et al., 2018). Buyse (2018) sees civic space determined by three processes; formal restrictions, discourse and labelling, and the capacity of civil society to maintain and create space. Shrinking of civic space could for instance lead to shutdown of organisations (Hayes, et al., 2017). It is relevant to investigate what form restrictions on civic space take in Liberia.

Different actors can be responsible for restrictions on civic space, for instance governments, companies, police, far-right groups and international donors (Hayes, et al., 2017). Buyse (2018)

uncovers possible reasons behind restrictions and clarifies they are not necessarily intentional but could be effects of actions directed at other problems. Sogge (2020) argues that civic spaces are globalised, shaped by international norms, and states, corporations and international donors affect civic space. It is relevant to investigate how Liberian civic space is shaped by for instance Swedish donors.

The term “civic space” is questioned by researchers. Hayes et al (2017) argue the concept is an oversimplification of complicated processes. There is not one space in which civil society operates, it varies for different civil society actors. How and for whom the civic space is restricted or open, and to what degree, matter, and the line between open and restricted is sometimes blurred (Sogge, 2020). Hossain et al (2018) believe “changing space” sometimes is a better description than “shrinking space”. Opposed to shrinking space, changing space does not imply less room for civil society as a whole to operate. The term highlights changes to civic space in terms of *who* participates and on what *conditions* (ibid). Hossain et al (2018) argue that the size or freedom of civil society has not changed in recent years, but the shape and nature of participation.

Civil society actors sharing values with political elites are likely included in decision-making and have more space to operate, whereas actors opposing government norms are more likely to be excluded (Hossain, et al., 2018). Given the recent trend of growing traditional and nationalistic values, civil society actors promoting values like human rights and feminism are excluded, whereas nationalistic groups get more space to operate (ibid.). In contexts where groups are perceived to contest the power, their space is restricted as a way for political elites to consolidate their power. However, Hossain et al lift how government crackdown is not always a tactical move to silence critics but sometimes a normative move.

Popplewell (2018) similarly argues that space for civil society actors is related to their degree of legitimacy, and restrictions are targeted towards those with perceived low legitimacy. He differentiates four types of organisational legitimacy; regulatory (following regulatory frameworks), pragmatic (perceived to represent interests), normative (meeting social norms) and cognitive (is recognised, accepted). CSOs can reinforce or challenge the legitimacy of others, and challenging political legitimacy is also a target-determining factor (ibid.). It is relevant to investigate if some civil society actors are more affected by restrictions on civic space than others in Liberia.

Civic space is shaped by other factors than restrictions. State capacity and foreign aid affect terms of civil society participation (Hossain, et al., 2018). Civil society is more prone to take on a service provider and humanitarian role when state fails to provide services, and a watchdog role if state capacity is high. Aid dependence affects civil society terms and regulations. Moreover, rules for civil society actors differ depending on level of corruption, and forms of civil society change in times of digitalisation (ibid). It is relevant to investigate whether these factors play a role in shaping civic space in Liberia.

Hossain et al (2018) argue development outcomes and civic space relates to the “fit” between civil society and state. They define fit as “... how successfully state and civil society interact to enable economic growth and human development” (ibid:24-25). Cooperation with state and dynamics of their relationship determine how civil society contribute to development. Civil society being close to state indicates opportunities to influence development but having a too tight fit can impact the independence of civil society. Having a loose fit with state indicates more freedom, but the ability for civil society to engage with and influence state is low (ibid.). It is relevant to investigate the fit between Liberian civil society and state, and implications for development.

To respond to shrinking space, there are a range of strategies. Hayes et al (2017) argue that in order to be successful, responses must go beyond advocating for human rights. Understanding how civic space is restricted and why, and how it relates to ideological, political, and legal dilemmas and trends, is important. They argue that parts of civil society most affected by restrictions should be supported most, advocating for a widening of the civil society concept to include looser structures and movements (ibid.). Datzberger and Nguyen (2018) argue for supporting civil society in its’ own right and context-adapted support, since civil society might look different from the western structure donors expect to find. It is relevant to investigate how Swedish donors and their partners relate to these aspects in Liberia.

Civic space is a contested concept including a range of perspectives. It is linked to the opportunity civil society has to participate in decision-making processes and has effects on development and democracy. The space for civil society to operate differ depending on context and factors as digitalisation, aid dependence, legitimacy, values and state capacity. State and other actors can intentionally restrict civic space, which many see as a global trend.

3.2. Previous research

Popplewell (2018) studied civil society and shrinking space in Burundi, by doing qualitative interviews. He found some CSOs more vulnerable to shrinking space. CSOs working with advocacy, funded by international donors, situated in the capital and not connected to grassroots are most affected. Popplewell argues this relates to their perceived illegitimacy by the state, who does not understand their role or share values. Organisations that are diverse, faith-based, receive domestic funding and do not focus on democracy are less affected by restrictions (ibid.).

Rakner (2019) argues shrinking civic space is part of democratic rollback in Africa. Civic space shrinks as countries introduce restrictions on foreign funding and CSOs are subjected to legislative attacks. Human rights organisations are regarded as political opposition, and government crackdowns is an effort to challenge their power. The research shows effects on the implementation of the SDGs, democratic participation and other sectors. CSOs shift how they operate and work with less sensitive issues to adapt. International donors do not know how to respond, and there is a limited understanding of possible response mechanisms, for instance when civil society funding is restricted (ibid.).

Smidt's (2018) research highlights a trend of increasing crackdown on human rights organisations in Africa. Challenges to operate include intimidation and arrest, restrictive legislation and cumbersome administrative processes. Smidt emphasises the watchdog role of civil society, arguing that monitoring and exposing human rights abuses make CSOs vulnerable to restrictions on civic space since governments wish to silence them. However, efforts to silence civil society are not always fruitful, since civil society finds new ways to expose human rights abuses. Smidt compares African civic space between 2000 and 2015 and finds restrictions in West Africa have decreased. Liberia has seen a decrease in number of restrictions until 2015. A case study on Kenya shows how civil society adapts to shrinking space, using art to express criticism, operating without registration and forming partnerships with politicians.

WACSI (2020) studied civil society and civic space in West Africa. Civic space is obstructed in 12 West African countries, including Liberia. Restrictions to civic space include formal and informal attacks on legitimacy, credibility and operations and take the form of physical harassment and intimidation, criminalisation, administrative restrictions, stigmatisation,

negative labelling and participation under pressure. In Liberia, there have been reports on harassment and lawsuits against activists and journalists, denial of registration of LGBTQI organisations, and banning of gatherings. Strategies to combat shrinking space among donors include changing funding approaches, knowledge sharing, remote operation, providing resources and establishing relationships with local organisations. Collaboration is a response that make civil society increase their voice and impact, enhance visibility, credibility and legitimacy, create synergies and share knowledge and resources. In-country collaboration between civil society is high, however, cross-country collaboration in West Africa remains weak. Other strategies civil society applies to combat shrinking space is mobilisation of support and rebranding or restructuring to meet new criteria (ibid.).

4. Analytical framework

The analytical framework is based on research by Hossain and Khurana (2019), who analyse international donors and responses to shrinking civic space. Hossain and Khurana argue that civic space is shaped by its' relationship with the state and transnational actors. Some civil society challenges of the enabling environment are not necessarily related to shrinking civic space, like competition over funds, low representation of population and predominance of donor agendas, leading to a lack of local ownership.

Shrinking space has different effects on civil society depending on context. The political system and whether civil society has a tight or loose fit with government both play a role (Hossain & Khurana, 2019). Donors need to adapt their responses according to context. Since civil society contributes to development by raising awareness, influencing policymaking, monitoring and holding government actors accountable, restrictions on civic space have negative impacts on development and the implementation of the SDGs, including the principle “leaving no one behind” (ibid.). Moreover, the report highlights how shrinking space has impacted the operation of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Effects include difficulties for partners to engage with policymakers, loss of trust between CSOs, staff turnover, few CSOs being able to meet donor demands, delays or discontinuation of projects and donors not being able to adapt to local priorities. The SDC also identified effects of restricted civic space for development as a whole; lack of democratic participation, state policies being unresponsive to needs of the population, weakening of anti-corruption measures and key issues, such as LGBTQI rights, not being addressed (ibid). It is relevant to investigate whether these effects are seen in Liberia. Democratic participation issues can occur if civil society is not recognised by the state as an actor representing the population, leaving them out of decision-making processes.

Strategies to combat shrinking civic space are classified in four categories: Policy and strategic efforts, Operational responses, Alliance-building and civil society resilience efforts and Evidence-generation (Hossain & Khurana, 2019). Policy and strategic efforts include putting pressure on governments to end repressive legislation and standing up for democracy and human rights globally. Operational responses target the consequences of shrinking space and focus on providing emergency aid and protection for people under threat and adapting

programme and reporting requirements. Alliance-building and civil society resilience efforts aim to strengthen civil society, so they are able to operate in a context where the civic space is restricted. Evidence-generation relates to documenting and monitoring restrictions on civic space. According to the report, donors more often apply operational efforts to combat shrinking space, rather than long-term, strategic efforts like alliance-building and policy efforts. Sida is one of the donors analysed in the report, and Hossain and Khurana conclude that Sida apply all four responses, to various degrees. In assessments of donor responses to restrictions on civic space, Hossain and Khurana note "... strategic and policy efforts have been weak, poorly coordinated or misaligned across the international aid system." (Hossain & Khurana, 2019:14). They identified gaps in donor responses, and challenges to respond in an adequate way include a difference in private vs public interests, service delivery vs human rights, and ways in which aid is distributed to civil society, by funding professionalised CSOs that may not represent local interests. It is relevant to investigate what kind of responses Swedish donors and their local partners apply in Liberia.

5. Methodology and Research Design

The research is a qualitative, exploratory case study of Liberia. Liberia was chosen as the unit of analysis because it is a country in change, moving from a humanitarian context, with a history of conflict and health crisis, to more stability. However, challenges remain, being one of the least developed countries in the world. Liberian civil society is diverse, and although parts have been strong and influential in the past, other part remains weak. It is not a worse case when it comes to civic space. This complex nature makes Liberian civil society and civic space interesting to examine. A qualitative approach is appropriate, since the aim of the study is to gain in-depth knowledge about the experience of Swedish donors and their partners in Liberia (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The civic space situation in Liberia and how Swedish donors and their partners relate to it is complex and requires detailed understanding of the specific context, proving a qualitative approach appropriate. The approach allows for deep descriptions and exploration of the subject and for bringing multiple perspectives to answer the research questions (ibid.). Data was collected through online interviews with staff from Swedish donors and their partner organisations. To complement the interviews, secondary data was collected, and text analysis conducted on documents of Swedish donors. The multiple data analysed provides a broad picture of Swedish engagement in Liberia.

5.1. Data collection

5.1.1. Sampling

The sampling of respondents and documents is non-random, purposive and strategic (Bryman, 2012). In order to be relevant and inform the research questions, the data collected fulfil two criteria. They represent the views of Swedish donors or their local partners and have insight to Liberian civil society work. This criterion sampling is a way to be sure to “... obtain qualified candidates that will provide the most credible information to the study” (Turner, 2010:757). Documents were collected and respondents sampled from the MFA, Sida and the four strategic partners active in Liberia. After interviewing respondents from Swedish organisations, they put

me in contact with partner organisations, making parts of the sampling based on the snowball approach (Bryman, 2012).

5.1.2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 7 respondents from 6 Swedish donors and local partners active in Liberia between February and April 2021. A list of interviews is found in table 1. All contacted respondents could not participate in the study. Respondents and their respective organisations are anonymised in the report. Some respondents are based in Sweden, and some in Liberia. Interviews were conducted in Swedish or English. The interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide with open-ended questions (see appendix 9.5). The semi-structured approach allowed for focusing the interviews on themes of interest, but also for going deeper if interesting aspects came up (Bryman, 2012). Some interviews followed the interview guide carefully, while others strayed. The questions were focused on themes, and follow-up questions prepared. The interview guide allowed for comparison between respondents during the analysis stage (*ibid.*).

Interviews were conducted online and recorded, transcribed and translated before analysis. Recordings and transcripts were anonymised when used and deleted upon publishing of the report. Online interviews provided an opportunity to hold safe interviews during covid-19 and were held on different platforms depending on the preference of respondents. Before the interviews, a consent form (see appendix 9.6) was shared with respondents to ensure awareness of usage of data and conditions of participation. Conducting in-depth interviews provides the report with high validity, since it is in line with the aim of investigating experiences of Swedish organisations and their partners in Liberia (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Organisation	Respondent/s	Description of organisation
Organisation 1	Respondent 1	Swedish CSO working for the protection of specific rights.
Organisation 2	Respondent 2, Respondent 3	Swedish CSO working for the protection of specific rights.
Organisation 3	Respondent 4	Swedish governmental organisation working with international development cooperation.
Organisation 4	Respondent 5	Swedish governmental organisation working with international development cooperation.
Organisation 5	Respondent 6	Local partner of Swedish CSO.
Organisation 6	Respondent 7	Local partner of Swedish CSO.

Table 1: Interviews

5.1.3. Documents

Documents were collected from the MFA, Sida, Forum Civ, Kvinna till Kvinna, RFSU and Union to Union. Data was also collected from CONCORD Sverige, an umbrella organisation where all strategic partners are active. The documents from CONCORD Sverige are co-authored and signed by all strategic partners, representing their views. The documents provide the report with reliability and validity since they represent the views and experiences of Swedish organisations and are accessible online, for reproducing the results (Bryman, 2012). See appendix 9.2 for a conclusive list of documents.

5.2. Analytical approach

Documents and transcripts were coded manually, using Excel. The coding allowed the research focus to become visible in the data (Bryman, 2012). The introduction of theoretical concepts in the coding phase made connection to theory clear. Coding themes were chosen due to their relevance of the thesis aim and for providing a base for answering the research questions (ibid.). Coding made sense of and categorised the data, and was conducted several times throughout the process, to ensure acknowledgement of important aspects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The

coding and analysis were conducted parallel to collecting data, and things discovered in the analysis was kept in mind throughout data collection. The data was coded according to the following categories:

View of civil society	What challenges does civil society experience?
	Who constitutes civil society?
	Positive/negative
Value of civil society	What role does civil society have?
	What results do they bring?
View of restriction on civic space	Indications of a shrinking or changing civic space
	How are restrictions on civic space a problem?
	What are the reasons behind restrictions?
	What consequences does restrictions on civic space have?
	For whom is restrictions on civic space a problem?
	Who is responsible for restrictions on civic space?
	What is the role of international donors in civic space?
Civic space strategy	Policy and strategic efforts
	Operational efforts
	Alliance building and civil society resilience
	Evidence generation
	Successful/unsuccessful strategies

Table 2: Coding themes

Analysis was conducted by applying theoretical approaches discussed in the literature review and the analytical framework on donor responses to shrinking civic space. The theory was chosen before data was collected, based on the relevance of the theory to the research questions. This makes the research more deductive rather than inductive, although the data itself was used

to broaden the theory, making the study inductive as well (Bryman, 2012). In addition to being relevant, the theory gives the study validity, since the classification of donor responses corresponds to the aim of the study. Moreover, the theory puts the data in a larger context, and although the paper is a case study, applying theory connects it to previous research and makes sense of the findings.

5.3. Limitations

Findings are qualitative, context-based, and non-generalisable (Bryman, 2012). Although it can be argued some findings can be transferred to other contexts, the aim of the thesis is to investigate only Liberia. Had the study taken a quantitative approach, comparing countries, numbers of restrictions and correlations with development initiatives, it would have been more generalisable, albeit the study would not have provided as much in-depth knowledge. The transparency of the coding and analysis process makes it possible to reproduce the analysis of the documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, the respondents are anonymous, and transcripts not official, and analysis not reproducible to the same degree. If interviews were conducted to reproduce the study, different results might appear since different answers might be given by other respondents or by the same respondents in other circumstances.

The study only investigates views and experiences of Swedish donors and their partners in Liberia, and not beneficiaries, the represented population or donors from other countries. Moreover, respondents from Liberian organisations are organised, well-structured and have been successful in attaining funds from international donors. Therefore, the findings only represent views and experiences of established organisations, and there is a possibility results would have been different if unstructured civil society actors were consulted. These limitations are partly due to the inability to collect data in Liberia because of travel restrictions and conducting data collection online limits participation.

There are limitations related to the interviews. Due to covid-19 and travel restrictions, interviews were conducted online. The quality of internet in Liberia posed problems for some of the interviews, when video had to be turned off and interviews were rescheduled or cancelled due to weather conditions. Moreover, the distance between the interviewer and interviewee

sometimes made it difficult to register body language and other signals (Bryman, 2012). Had the interviews been done in person, it is possible the connection between interviewer and interviewee had been better, allowing for other follow-up questions and respondents to feel more comfortable, sharing other aspects (ibid.). Furthermore, some interviews were conducted in English and others in Swedish. This allowed native Swedish speakers to express themselves naturally, however, the researcher and some respondents whose interviews were conducted in English do not have English as a first language, and it is difficult to know if they would have expressed themselves differently had the language been another (Bryman, 2012). There is also a risk when translating quotes from Swedish to English, some meaning disappears (ibid.).

The data consisting of documents also pose limitations. Some documents are specific to Liberia, whereas others are general to civil society and civic space. The ones not going in-depth about Liberian civil society only act as complement to other data. They are however valuable resources, especially since not all Swedish donors are represented through interviews.

5.4. Ethical considerations

Respondents were given a consent form (see appendix 9.6) outlining the conditions for participation, following an ethical code of conduct (Bryman, 2012). The consent form ensured anonymity, voluntary participation, and withdrawal of consent at any time. It is assured the respondents have participated voluntarily, since respondents either signed the form or consented orally or via email. Some respondents requested to go over their quotes and references before publication, and these were emailed to them beforehand for consent. To make sure the interviews and research is valuable for the respondents, the final product is shared with them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The anonymity aspect allowed for respondent to speak freely, making the data reliable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was especially important considering some of the respondents are dependent on funds of other respondents. It is important to be aware of this power relation since it can affect their answers. The anonymity mitigated this risk, so it affects the findings as little as possible. This also applies to the sensitivity of the subject, for instance when respondents criticise their donor or the political elite in Liberia.

It is important to consider the positionality of the researcher in relation to research and respondents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Being of Swedish nationality, the researcher can in interviews with respondents be seen as representing the view of Swedish donors. To make sure this did not affect interviews, the researcher attempted to have questions and comments as neutral as possible, and not have preconceived ideas about answers. However, it is possible the researcher had a better cultural understanding and could ask more follow-up questions in interviews with Swedish respondents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In conducting the analysis, the researcher attempted to put personal bias aside, but it is the belief of the researcher that no research is completely neutral and objective knowledge does not exist.

6. Findings and Analysis

This chapter examines how Swedish donors and local partners work with civic space in Liberia. The chapter analyses civic space challenges in Liberia and strategies to combat challenges are analysed. Theoretical perspectives and Hossain and Khurana's (2019) analytical framework and conceptualisation around civic space and distinction of donor strategies is applied. Considering the space for CSOs in Liberia is "vulnerable" (European Union, 2017), civil society's ability to contribute to sustainable development is affected. Swedish donors and their local partners use the four types of strategies as described by Hossain and Khurana (2019) to combat restrictions on civic space.

6.1. Civic space

Civil society's relationship with the state and whether they have a loose or tight fit, shape civic space (Hossain, et al., 2018). Liberian civil society is rich and diverse, with CSOs working with service-delivery, democratic governance and accountability (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019; Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 6, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021). Therefore, a restricted civic space would have effects on a range of sectors and development issues in the country.

This section discusses the nature of civic space in Liberia, main challenges and their implications. First, the capacity of Liberian civil society is discussed, followed by an analysis on restrictions such as breaches of freedom of expression and administrative constraints. The text goes on to discuss which civil society actors are most affected by restrictions, and why. See appendix 9.3. for a summary of challenges, causes and consequences.

6.1.1. Capacity

The capacity of civil society matters since it determines civil society's ability to maintain and create civic space (Buyse, 2018). It affects civil society's independence, ability to engage with others, participate in decision-making processes and resilience to withstand restrictions

(Hossain & Khurana, 2019). This section discusses the capacity of Liberian civil society and its implications.

Liberian civil society is considered new and their capacity low (Respondent 3, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021). Compared to other countries, civil society is not as organised and structured, and parts of it is informal (Respondent 3, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021). The current list of CSOs often referred to is from 2012 (Respondent 5, 2021), hence there is some uncertainty when it comes to how many organisations are active in the country. Many organisations are informal and unregistered, adding to this uncertainty. One of the Swedish donors describe:

It is a rich civil society, with a lot of organisations active in basically all sectors, including service delivery, human rights and democracy... But it is a civil society that has not had many decades to work, establish itself or develop. Civil society is just finding its' role. It is not as well-established, well-formulated or well-structured if you compare to other countries in West Africa.

Respondent 4, 2021

Civil society contributes to development in Liberia in most sectors, by complementing government activities and demanding accountability (Respondent 5, 2021; Respondent 6, 2021). Respondent 7 (2021) expressed how "... the value of civil society is making sure government is able to do their responsibilities". Civil society contributes to development in a range of areas, including peacebuilding, human rights, poverty alleviation, gender equality, SRHR, democracy and day to day running of the country (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 2, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021). This shows civil society is valuable, partly due to the development results they produce (Datzberger & Nguyen, 2018).

The capacity of CSOs to work within areas such as human rights and accountability was weakened during 2019 (Sida, 2020). The low capacity is explained as a result of the civil wars and low educational level (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021). Corruption seeps into civil society, and it is not clear what kind of internal control mechanisms are required for CSOs, which could be a reason why these are sometimes missing (Respondent 1, 2021). Lacking capacity affects the ability to attract resources and make an impact, leading to shutdown of

operations or organisations (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 6, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021), something Hayes et al (2017) observe as a risk of restricted space.

People working in established CSOs are often based in the capital Monrovia and have higher education than the general population (Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021). The divide between them puts into question how connected established CSOs are to Liberians, and whether civil society represents a collective interest (Dagher, 2017). All established organisations might not have insight to issues or solutions of people living in poverty, and their voices are not heard. Respondent 7 (2021), whose organisation is rurally based, values being closer to the real issues. The respondent finds living with the people in rural areas makes it easier to take inclusive decisions and involve the population in solutions of problems. Thus, Monrovia-based organisations might miss this connection with the people. The lack of capacity in rural areas exists within the Liberian state as well, as political power is centralised to the capital area (Respondent 4, 2021). Therefore, rural organisations, despite lacking in capacity, sometimes have a higher presence than the state and complement state activities (Respondent 5, 2021).

One Swedish donor expressed concern about how competent staff leave the Liberian civil society sector to go into politics, draining civil society of capacity (Respondent 1, 2021). The government recruits people from the civil society sector because of their competence, given the lack of capacity in the public sector. If the government considers the work civil society does as threatening their power, they sometimes recruit people so their competence can be used for the government instead. Civil society staff can seldom decline offers from the government, because of better working conditions (ibid.). This example shows the line between civil society and the state is sometimes blurred, and when the fit between civil society and state is too tight, it prevents civil society to act independently (Hossain & Khurana, 2019). Moreover, it shows staff turnover is an issue in Liberia, a finding Hossain and Khurana found as a possible effect of shrinking space.

Respondents view two types of groups as having more capacity than others – women organisations and faith-based groups (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021). Women organisations were strong during the civil wars and the leadup to the peace agreement in 2003 and have continued being prominent parts of Liberian civil society, as described by one Swedish donor:

Liberia used to have a strong women's movement. I think that it's still there. You can still see some organisations, women's organisations, that are well organised, they're campaigning, they are doing some activities.

Respondent 1, 2021

Since female political participation is low in Liberia, being involved in civil society is another way for women to gain influence (Respondent 5, 2021; Wassholm, 2018). This shows the democratic gains that can be made from civil society (Dagher, 2017). However, Sida (2020) finds the women's movement in Liberia fragmented, and they have missed out on making joint statements on important issues like political participation in recent years. This implies that capacity issues exist within women groups as well.

Faith based groups represent the majority of the population (Respondent 6, 2021), and respondent 4 (2021) accounts their strength to the fact that they make use of the infrastructure they inherently possess. The strength of faith-based groups was something Popplewell (2018) observed in Burundi as well, claiming their cognitive legitimacy is high due to their representation of religious groups, giving them more space to operate. This could also be a factor in Liberia. Although faith-based groups are prominent in the country, Swedish donors need to deepen their knowledge about this part of civil society (Respondent 4, 2021).

Moreover, civil society's capacity in cooperating, coming together and engaging with others is considered low (Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 6, 2021). Difficulty in attracting resources creates competition among CSOs, inhibiting cooperation and making civil society lose out on opportunities to come together (Respondent 4, 2021). This indicates a loss of trust between civil society actors, which according to Hossain and Khurana (2019) is an effect of restrictions on civic space. Moreover, it shows that without trust, cooperation and creation of networks is difficult (Dagher, 2017). According to one donor, professionalisation, donor demands, and project-based funding has negative impacts on the strengthening of civil society and trust between local partners and donors as well (Respondent 3, 2021).

Inability to cooperate and engage with others implies civil society has a hard time gaining influence, and they are unable to create space to operate (Buyse, 2018). This is similar to difficulties SDC experienced (Hossain & Khurana, 2019), however, in the Liberian case, this is not an effect of restrictions. Instead, the difficulty is linked to civil society's own capacity to

create civic space. However, the same results occur, as civil society's "fit" with the state becomes loose, implying civil society has difficulties in participating in decision-making and getting their views across. Their lack of influence could, as described by Hossain and Khurana (2019) lead to policies being unresponsive to the needs of the population.

The lack of resources in Liberian civil society has led to a high reliance and dependency on international donors (Respondent 3, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 6, 2021). Donors mostly work project-based and have high demands on organisations in terms of transparency, structure and control mechanisms. Given the general low capacity of civil society, demands are not always met (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021). One local partner expressed frustration of the high demands donors have on CSOs to be eligible for funding:

They need all the legal documents before they can even support you. I see it as an issue, because these organisations [with low capacity] are based especially in the rural area. And we know the issues in the community. Is it really the documents that work with these issues?

Respondent 7, 2021

Sida (2019) express concerns that donors fail to reach informal groups without capacity to apply for funding or perform administrative tasks related to management and result follow-up. This issue is highlighted by Hossain and Khurana (2019) as an effect of limited civic space. The inability to attract funding means parts of civil society are left out, as donors turn to more established organisations and INGOs, undermining the work of local organisations (Wassholm, 2018). Formal CSOs and parts of civil society following a western structure are promoted rather than informal networks and grassroots (ibid). This poses questions about *who* in civil society are able to operate, and who they represent (Datzberger & Nguyen, 2018).

Not getting enough support from international donors means the process of civil society work slows down, and their work does not reach the potential it could (Respondent 7, 2021). The same problem applies when the process of attaining funding is cumbersome and time-consuming, since there is not always time to wait for funds (ibid.). Not attaining enough funding, or only project-based funding, can make important parts of civil society work, like promotion and marketing to attract more funding, difficult, leaving some organisations stuck in a loop (Respondent 7, 2021).

One local partner saw a problem in how donors set the agenda in Liberian civil society, since CSOs are dependent on aid for their operation to continue (Respondent 6, 2021). This implies Liberian civil society is sometimes used as a means towards fulfilling the goals of donors (Daniel & Neubert, 2019). This setup prevents from solving real problems, since project-based work just scratch the surface and local societies are not involved in finding solutions (Respondent 6, 2021). One Swedish donor agreed:

For development to be sustainable, it needs to be done on the terms of the people. Often, we don't do this. When we plan our operations from Sweden or someplace else, we come with our own ideas about what will work. I think things might be achieved in the short-term, but there will be no big impact with this approach.

Respondent 3, 2021

Given the dependence on international donors, local CSOs tend to not critique or come forward with this problem. Respondent 6 (2021) fears organisations losing out on international grants will either cease to exist or lose their independence when having to rely on the government instead, making the fit with state too tight to make a difference. There is a risk aid dependency makes civil society more accountable to donors than to the population it is supposed to represent (Respondent 1, 2021). Sogge (2020) brings up this problem, fearing local ownership of the process will be lost. This process can make civil society lose out on legitimacy if they are considered representing foreign interests (ibid.), but this process is not seen in the data.

A predominance of donor agendas and lack of local engagement implies donors are not able to adapt local priorities, and local ownership is lost (Hossain & Khurana, 2019). Hossain and Khurana consider these problems to not be fully related to restrictions on civic space. However, it is relevant to argue these are prominent factors determining the environment for civil society in Liberia. Effects of civil society's relationship with donors, such as delays and discontinuation of projects and loss of trust, are mentioned as effects of restrictions on civic space by Hossain and Khurana (2019), showing donor influence over an enabling environment can affect civic space to the same degree that restrictions of civic space can, and donors have influence over civic spaces (Sogge, 2020).

Swedish donors and local partners believe donors have influence on civic space (Aho, 2017; Respondent 6, 2021; Sida, 2019; Wassholm, 2018). However, Swedish donors are fairly good

at promoting enabling environments and the civil society sector compared to other international donors (Respondent 3, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021). Although, even Swedish donors promote formal civil society following a western structure more than informal groups and networks with lower capacity.

Liberian civil society also lacks capacity when it comes to digitalisation, shaping the civic space. Global digitalisation is a reality, and during the covid-19 pandemic digital solutions have become necessary for participation. This changes the terms on which civil society participates (Hossain & Khurana, 2019). Digitalisation could be an opportunity for civil society, if access is provided (WACSI, 2020). However, the Liberian infrastructure poses problems to civil society, especially in rural areas where internet and electricity are unreliable (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021). There is a clear divide in regard to who is affected by this problem (Hossain & Khurana, 2019). Effects of the problem include inability to participate in meetings, cooperate with actors and take part in decision-making processes, leading to what Hossain and Khurana (2019) also saw in their report, a lack of democratic participation and difficulty to engage with policymakers. Respondent 2 (2021) expressed how not being able to participate in digital meetings due to internet connectivity problems will lead to one part of civil society not making their voices heard, and as a result, decisions made are not adapted to their availability to participate the next time, widening the divide between urban and rural areas. During the pandemic, it has been more difficult for organisations to reach out to their beneficiaries, and staff have had to work more to keep up the same level of engagement (Respondent 7, 2021).

6.1.2. Restrictions

Formal and informal restrictions on civic space affect its' size and shape (Hossain, et al., 2018). Actors intentionally restricting civic space do it for either normative or tactical reasons (ibid.). This section discusses restrictions imposed on Liberian civil society. It finds that some of the trends of shrinking civic space mentioned by Hayes et al (2017), such as the rights of expression, assembly and association, criminalisation, violence and administrative challenges, exist in Liberia. These restrictions on civic space implies the legitimacy of civil society is deemed low by the Liberian government (Poplewell, 2018). Effects of restrictions on civic space vary depending on the role of civil society. If civil society is the main provider of services, limiting their actions has consequences for education and healthcare, and if civil society is

important in demanding accountability, restrictions on civic space may lead to less transparency and democracy (Hossain & Khurana, 2019).

Compared to other countries in the region, Liberian civic space is relatively open and conditions relatively favourable (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 5, 2021). However, civic space is not static, but fluctuates over time (Buyse, 2018; Respondent 5, 2021). CSOs are respected by the authorities (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019) and there are no formal restrictions, what Hossain et al (2018) call legislative and regulatory restrictions. The work for human rights and civic space in Liberia stagnated during 2019 (Sida, 2020). Although the Weah administration has not limited the actions of CSOs per se, they have not worked for an enabling environment either (ibid.). Sida concludes there is a high risk of civic space shrinking, much due to limited knowledge of civil society role and contribution. That the state lacks knowledge of civil society contribution implies civil society has low cognitive legitimacy, which Popplewell (2018) argues is a risk for being subjected to restrictions. Civic space is sometimes restricted, for instance through limitations of freedom of expression:

They have some limits in terms of freedom of expression. You can touch everything, but don't touch politics. Civic space is not safe for CSOs, there is no freedom of expression that is guaranteed – it depends on the topics you address.

Respondent 1, 2021

Restrictions on the right of expression is a factor determining civic space (Buyse, 2018; Government Offices of Sweden, 2016; Sida 2019; Union to Union, 2018; Wassholm, et al., 2018). One local partner lifts examples of freedom of speech restrictions in Liberia, leading to self-censorship and poor monitoring of government (Respondent 6, 2021). Radio stations criticising the government have been vandalised, and the press association reached out to the UN in 2018, concerned about the shrinking space for free media (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019). Protests against journalist brutality were held in 2020, and president Weah set up a commission to investigate the issue and take action (Respondent 6, 2021). However, the commission has not yet produced results or started their work, indicating a conscious attempt to delay action (ibid.).

Freedom of expression is put at risk when journalists are persuaded into cooperating with politicians, undermining their independence (Respondent 6, 2021). Many radio stations are

owned by politicians, as a way for them to spread their views. Often, journalists do not have an option but to cooperate with politicians since they offer good working conditions (ibid.). The “cooperation” between journalists and politicians can be seen as an example of how a too tight “fit” between civil society and policy makers can constrain civic space (Hossain, et al., 2018). Journalists lose independence, cannot write or talk about what they choose, and are unable to criticise politicians and demand accountability. By owning radio stations, the state takes over parts that is otherwise the responsibility of civil society or media, claiming civil society spaces, and civic space is in this way restricted (Hayes, et al., 2017).

Other restrictions on civil society from the government side can take the form of interruption of protests, shutting down of the internet, arbitrary arrests, surveillance of one’s house or office, violence and possibly killings (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019; Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021). Journalists have taken to adapt to the new digital landscape on social media, and although this has potential to reach out to more people, many face challenges and journalists have been attacked when live streaming events (Respondent 6, 2021). The government has plans to introduce compulsory registration for news platforms to be active on social media, possibly a sign of trying to gain control over media coverage (ibid.), a potential risk of shrinking civic space in the future (Hayes, et al., 2017).

These repressive restrictions towards civil society and media implies there are informal restrictions towards Liberian civic space (Hossain, et al., 2018). The restrictions on human rights are parts of trends such as constraints to the rights of freedom of assembly, association, and expression, intimidation and violent attacks, indicating shrinking space (Hayes, et al., 2017). Restrictions have led to civil society actors fleeing the country, avoiding protesting or self-censoring because of fear (Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 6, 2021). This kind of staff turnover and ending of civil society work can have negative impacts on development in the country, not least the SDGs (Aho, 2017). Swedish donors consider civil society necessary in implementing the SDGs (Aho, 2017; Respondent 4, 2021), implying donors believe that inclusive development, i.e., the principle “leave no one behind”, needs inclusive processes (Hossain, et al., 2018).

There are also administrative and legislative challenges for civil society to operate in Liberia. A new policy for civil society was introduced recently, the National aid and NGO policy, and Swedish donors expressed concern it could be used to control parts of civil society in an

unhealthy way, even though the idea of the policy, which is to ensure transparency, openness and coordination with government, is generally positive (Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 5, 2021). Having more state control over civil society implies a tighter fit (Hossain, et al., 2018), and depending on how the policy is implemented, it could either increase civil society's influence, if they can cooperate better with the government, or restrict influence, if it is used to control their actions.

CSO registration is conducted every year and the regulatory framework for civil society is fragmented and complicated (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019; Respondent 1, 2021). Getting documents approved can be time consuming, and new organisations need to turn to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Business registry and sector-specific ministries to get registered (Respondent 6, 2021). However, one local partner expressed it is fairly easy for CSOs to operate in Liberia, as long as you have the required documents and follow guidelines (Respondent 7, 2021). Hence, organisations with regulatory legitimacy are generally respected (Poplewell, 2018). The difference in perspectives between respondents highlights that administrative challenges exist for civil society but are not necessarily *intentional* efforts to restrict civic space, but more likely an effect of poor standards and guidelines. The fragmentation of the administrative system mostly affects unstructured civil society with low capacity, who lose regulatory legitimacy and have trouble working when failing to reach administrative demands (Poplewell, 2018). Since registration and documentation is necessary to obtain foreign funding, these groups also face problems with resource allocation (Respondent 7, 2021).

To what degree Liberian civic space is restricted requires a more refined analysis, but the fact remains that the civic space is not open. There are indications of civic space restrictions, for example constraints on the freedom of expression, association and assembly, and violence, however, civic space is not as restricted compared to other countries. As Sogge (2020) argues, the line between an open and closed civic space is sometimes blurred, and the answer is not black and white. The range of activities Liberian civil society is involved in implies their contribution to development is large, and there are consequences to development if they are restricted. There would be effects in the service sector, democracy, accountability, peace building and equality. As Respondent 1 (2021) puts it; "Removing civil society from the game, then the game is over".

6.1.3. Targeting

Restrictions on civic space does not affect civil society actors equally, and which actors are affected is determined by their perceived level of legitimacy (Poplewell, 2018). This section discusses which civil society actors are most affected by restrictions and finds that civil society groups in Liberia lacking legitimacy or threatening the legitimacy of elites are more affected by restrictions on civic space.

Journalists and civil society groups working with accountability are among those most affected by restrictions in Liberia (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 2, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 6, 2021). They reflect groups threatening the legitimacy of the political or economic elites, those most affected according to Poplewell (2018). One Swedish donor argues that with civic space, there is a "...challenge within areas, such as accountability and anti-corruption work and there is strong resistance, within the political elites, but also the economic elites" (Respondent 4, 2021). Corruption is present in the Liberian political and economic spheres, such as politicians and businesses, making it difficult to hold politicians and companies accountable (Respondent 6, 2021). Elites sometimes silence critics in order to maintain power (Wågman, 2018), a similar trend to what Smidt (2018) found in Sub-Saharan Africa. Restricting the space for these groups to act can be considered a tactical move to avoid criticism jeopardising their political or economic power (Hossain, et al., 2018). Consequences of targeting these groups can be self-censorship and weakening of anti-corruption and accountability work, what Hossain and Khurana (2019) also found in their research.

Groups working with sensitive issues such as LGBTQI are also more affected by restrictions (Respondent 4, 2021). Organisations working with LGBTQI rights are more careful, and LGBTQI activists are restricted in terms of freedom of assembly both in private and as activists (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2021b; Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019). Kvinna till Kvinna (2021b) considers the civic space for LGBTQI activists in Liberia to be "narrow", and they face problems with registration. LGBTQI groups are deemed "anti-Liberian" (Respondent 4, 2021), and groups working with these issues lack what Poplewell (2018) calls normative legitimacy. Safeguarding values or norms is a possible explanation behind restrictions against them (Respondent 4, 2021). In this case, it is a normative move to restrict operations (Hossain, et al., 2018). Unlike restrictions targeted towards those threatening the legitimacy of elites, it is more

common for other parts of society to be responsible for restrictions when it comes to these groups (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2021b).

According to Kvinna till Kvinna (2021b), female activists are also more exposed to restrictions. Kvinna till Kvinna (2021b) label the civic space for women human rights defenders in Liberia as “narrow”, and space is restricted by all kinds of actors. They are likely to be exposed methods to obstruct their work such as sexual violence, harassment and smear campaigns (ibid.). While being more likely to experience restrictions because of what they work with, they are also more vulnerable simply because of who they are. Women are especially exposed to restrictions since they challenge patriarchal, conservative, religious and nationalistic norms (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2021b). Much like groups working with LGBTQI issues, their normative legitimacy is questioned, which is why they are targeted (Popplewell, 2018).

Respondent 7 (2021) and Kvinna till Kvinna (2021b) also consider female genital mutilation (FGM) a sensitive issue facing resistance in Liberia. However, SRHR is, according to respondent 1 (2021) not an issue receiving much attention from the government, since it does not threaten their power. Respondent 7 (2021) believes the resistance is mostly due to traditional values, and groups working with this issue lack normative legitimacy (Popplewell, 2018), but also highlights it might not only be values that make people hold on to tradition, but livelihood and ways of living. This indicates tactical or normative motivations are not always enough to explain why actors choose to constrain civic space, and reality is more complex.

Consequences of the narrow space of women and LGBTQI and FGM activists are, according to Kvinna till Kvinna (2021b), psychological tolls on those affected and avoidance of working with these issues because of fear. This is different from what Rakner (2019) noted was a way for targeted CSOs to adapt and get through by avoiding sensitive issues, since this is done out of fear and not tactical reasons. Activists actively stay away from engaging with LGBTQI issues is an effect Hossain and Khurana (2019) noticed as well, and these staff turnover problems can impact the capacity of organisations, and their ability to reach out. Moreover, there is a risk LGBTQI issues and FGM are ignored in the general political debate (ibid), which would affect the advancement of LGBTQI and FGM rights in Liberia. Since female participation in politics is low, women in civil society being excluded means they have few platforms to make their voices heard. This has negative impacts on gender equality, including SDG 5, since policies are likely to not be responsive to their needs, and their participation is lower than men’s. However,

since women groups were described as one of the strongest parts of civil society, they have some resilience towards restrictions.

The groups most affected by civic space restrictions in Liberia, i.e., women and groups working with accountability or sensitive issues, is well in line with what Swedish donors (Forum Syd, 2018; Wassholm, et al., 2018) and Hossain and Khurana (2019) considers the most affected groups in the world. The discussion point to an important argument in Hossain et al's (2018) research, namely *who* participates. The civic space is restricted for these groups, but the same might not be true for other groups in civil society. These groups being left out leads to a weakened monitoring of power holders and key issues, like LGBTQI issues and FGM not being addressed (Hossain & Khurana, 2019). This also goes for issues affecting women more than men if women have no seat at the table, since "men will not adequately discuss issues that are affecting women more than men" (Respondent 7, 2021).

Liberian civil society is an arena where people who are not otherwise included in decision-making can make their voices heard, for example through advocacy (Respondent 7, 2021). Civil society is in this instance valuable because of their democratic role (Datzberger & Nguyen, 2018). Swedish donors believe inclusion of civil society is a crucial factor in achieving democratic societies, consistent with Dagher's (2017) view of civil society as an important building block of democracy. Since parts of civil society, working with certain issues, are more affected by restrictions than others, effects on development work are seen mostly in these areas. The divide implies an overall democracy issue, where some people have more influence than others, not representing an inclusive society. Difficulties actors demanding accountability face when working e.g., against corruption aggravate these issues, since more power is concentrated to elites.

6.2. Strategies

According to the Swedish democracy strategy (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2020b), combatting underlying causes of shrinking democratic space is prioritised and the Liberia strategy highlights civil society and media as prioritised sectors (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2020a). This section discusses strategies Swedish donors and their partners use to combat challenges. See appendix 9.4. for a summary of strategies, categorised according to Hossain and Khurana's (2019) framework. According to Hossain and Khurana (2019), Sida apply all four responses – Evidence-generation, Alliance-building and civil society resilience efforts, Operational responses, and Policy and Strategic efforts – to combat shrinking space globally, and the conclusion is reached that the same strategies are applied in Liberia.

6.2.1. Evidence-generation

Civic space is highly dependent on context (Hossain, et al., 2018), and in order to adapt operations, context analyses are necessary in Sida's interventions (Sida, 2019). Swedish donors and partners engage in evidence-generation, seen in the number of reports produced by Swedish organisations, like the MFA's Human Rights Report and Sida's strategy report for Liberia (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019; Sida, 2020). Kvinna till Kvinna (2021b) wrote a report on the civic space situation for women and LGBTQI people in Liberia, raising awareness about the situation. This evidence-generation is a way to support civil society, since visibility can protect people exposed to restrictions of civic space, and specifically supports the most targeted groups.

However, CONCORD Sverige believe systematic context analysis of civil society conditions, such as the freedom of association and assembly, need to be strengthened and better integrated in MFA texts (Wassholm, et al., 2018). In the MFA Human Rights Report (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019), the "civic space" section is separate from sections on human rights. Since civic space and human rights, such as freedom of expression and association, are highly connected (Buyse, 2018), this indicates that evidence-generation as a response to civic space is not always as straightforward or integrated as it could be, and evidence-generation can be found even when combatting restrictions on civic space is not an explicit goal.

One local organisation needs to be aware of instances when freedom of speech is breached, and members let them know when something occurs:

They come to us; all we need to do is know about it. When we know about it, we start to advocate, obviously it's our job to do that. To make sure that we flag that. We try to get to the bottom of it. At one point we marched the streets, protested, and presented a petition to the president of Liberia. We advocate and make sure the truth comes out.

Respondent 6, 2021

This shows how important evidence-generation is in combatting restrictions on civic space. A lot of the other responses rely on evidence-generation, and it is a pre-requisite for other responses to be successful – for instance, it is difficult to advocate for change or support the right actors in the right way if you have no insight to the situation.

6.2.2. Alliance-Building and Civil Society Resilience efforts

This section discusses the ways in which Swedish donors and their local partners apply Alliance Building and Civil Society Resilience efforts to combat challenges related to civic space. It reaches the conclusion that Swedish donors and partners work with capacity building to strengthen the capacity of Liberian civil society.

Strengthening civil society is a focus for Swedish donors in Liberia. They establish relationships with local organisations, offer monetary support and engage in capacity building (Forum Civ, 2020a; Sida, 2021a). Sida (2019) aim to support civil society in their own right, not as a means to reach other goals, acknowledging the risk that Datzberger and Nguyen (2018) see with a professionalised civil society. However, acknowledging the different roles and values civil society has, Sida (2019) only support rights-based, pluralistic civil society. Local partners work to raise capacity, for themselves and other parts of civil society (Respondent 6, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021). One donor explains their motivation for working with capacity building:

The civil society in Liberia is not really strong but that is the reason we are all focusing more on Liberia because we want to strengthen the civil society, want to build the capacities. For the locals to have access to resources, which is one of the issues they are facing.

Respondent 1, 2021

Forum Civ and RFSU work to strengthen LGBTQI-organisations working with rights and advocacy and Sida support the network LIPRIDE (Sida, 2021a), Moreover, Sida (2021b) support the anti-corruption organisation CENTAL to combat corruption. This shows that Swedish donors also use civil society resilience efforts to support the groups most affected by restrictions on civic space.

The capacity building focuses on technical and organisational capacity and knowledge-sharing and is a way to make sure civil society's work is sustainable, and that they can continue working if donors cut funding (Respondent 3, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021). With digitalisation, both local partners and Swedish donors work to increase capacity among civil society actors to use digital methods, for instance by funding projects on digital adaptation and finding new structures and working methods (Sida, 2021b; Respondent 6, 2021). Swedish donors wish to increase the capacity of civil society for them to be able to access resources, reach out with their activities, coordinate work and be able to engage with the government (Respondent 1, 2021).

Several respondents discussed the importance of strengthening civil society as a way of ensuring local ownership of development (Respondent 2, 2021; Respondent 6, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021). A recurring discussion among respondents was how capacity building should be done on the terms of civil society, to build on already existing sense of community and not impose structures (Respondent 2, 2021; Respondent 3, 2021, Respondent 4, 2021). However, given the demands donors have to relate to, for instance concerning control mechanisms, this is not easy (Respondent 4, 2021). This argument shows that donors need to compromise between priorities such as ensuring local ownership and civil society strengthening, and results management, control mechanisms and effectiveness (Datzberger & Nguyen, 2018).

Capacity building is also directed at corruption issues, to make sure local organisations have necessary strategies, policies and structures to withstand corruption, since corruption is a higher risk when CSOs have low capacity (Sida, 2017). Since corruption is widespread in Liberia, it

is difficult for organisations to not be part of it, and one donor had to cancel their partnership with an organisation due to corruption issues (Respondent 1, 2021). One Swedish donor has seen capacity improvements of local partners after these efforts, when it comes to implementation, monitoring and reporting (Respondent 1, 2021). However, according to Sida (2020), civil society capacity to demand accountability was not improved during 2019.

Swedish donors and their local partner also work with capacity building for networks and alliance-building. One donor supports local partners to build networks with likeminded actors globally, for knowledge-sharing and support (Respondent 1, 2021). Kvinna till Kvinna (2021b) note the importance of national networks and platforms, where civil society actors interact, learn from and support each other, and these should be funded more. Local partners engage in networks, as respondent 6's (2021) organisation aims to establish a commission, and respondent 7 (2021) cooperate with formal and informal civil society actors. Respondent 7 exemplifies the cooperation and why it is important in the following way:

We are cooperating with some other actors, and it works fine because one organisation cannot do all. So, let's look at the issue of [xx]. What we are able to do, when we have a [xx] case, we have to connect all the stakeholders we can in the process.

Respondent 7, 2021

Respondent 7 believes cooperation between CSOs and capacity building is important because coming together makes it easier to advocate and for the state to recognise their view, just as WACSI (2020) saw in their research. This statement shows trust in and between CSOs is crucial when working towards their goals and for a more enabling environment, what Putnam argued for (Dagher, 2017). Having a continuous dialogue and cooperating within civil society builds trust and strengthens their voice (Wassholm, et al., 2018). However, despite efforts to build networks and cooperate within civil society, the ability for civil society to cooperate was weakened during 2019 (Sida, 2020).

Capacity building is one of the biggest commitments of Swedish donors and their local partners, in line with the fact that low capacity is one of the largest challenges for civil society operations in Liberia. The engagement of Swedish donors to build civil society capacity aims to increase civil society resilience, so they are able to create and maintain the space to operate (Buyse, 2018).

6.2.3. Operational responses

Restrictions on civil society such as arbitrary arrests, restrictions on freedom of expression and administrative challenges occur in Liberia. To combat this, Hossain and Khurana (2019) find operational responses, like providing safe spaces and adapting donor demands and relations to the conditions for civil society, are commonly used. This section discusses the operational responses used by Swedish donors and their partners and reaches the conclusion that Swedish donors use operational responses to combat civil society challenges in Liberia to some degree, but they wish to do more.

One way to ensure civil society ownership and facilitate work is providing core funding. This operational response gives organisations more flexibility and ownership over funds (Sida, 2019). Providing core funding eases donor demands and fosters trust, since it eases the administrative burden and control (Sida, 2019). However, core funding imposes a higher risk since donors do not have the same level of control over funds (Sida, 2019). In Liberia, Sida (2021b) offer core funding to some INGOs, such as UN Women and UNFPA. The situation is described by one of the Swedish donors:

We aim to provide core funding and supporting strategic plans. It's about supporting what the Liberian civil society actually want. How could we go in and support movements, networks, temporary alliances that come together to create change here and now, based on the context? It is difficult to manage so far, since we have demands on our financial support. So, we are looking for mature, well-managed organisations, it's a way for us to be confident that the money is not managed in the wrong way.

Respondent 4, 2021

Supporting unstructured organisations and lowering demands would be a way for Swedish donors to adapt to the Liberian context (Datzberger & Nguyen, 2018). Sida (2019) consider these movements to have profound impact on for instance democratic development. However, when it comes to supporting less established organisations, Swedish donors are struggling. This implies that Swedish donors are not sufficiently adapting to the current capacity level of Liberian civil society. Forum Civ has a project supporting unregistered organisations (Sida, 2021a), but otherwise commitment is low. Although there is a will to support unstructured groups, demands on donors about financial control does not allow for such risk-taking (ibid.).

Again, this shows that donors make compromises between priorities such as civil society strengthening, local ownership and financial control (Datzberger & Nguyen, 2018). In the Swedish Liberia strategy, there is an ambition to change the funding approach and fund more Liberian CSOs directly, instead of going through intermediators such as UN organs or strategic partners (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2020a). This could reduce the risk of development being done on the terms of the donor (Datzberger & Nguyen, 2018). Swedish organisations try to reduce negative influence on civic space in Liberia by applying operational responses, however, they do not reach all the way.

In order to have a sustainable operation despite donor funding not being reliable, local partners try not to be dependent on international donors (Respondent 7, 2021). They attempt to keep other doors open, and are aware that if something sudden occurs, they may have to act first, without waiting for funding (ibid.). How this is done in practice is not specified further.

When it comes to protecting civil society actors from arbitrary arrests, violence and restrictions, Swedish donors and local partners work somewhat with security and protection. Offering protections supports those most affected by restrictions. One Swedish donor expressed they support civil society actors subjected to security risks by discussing how they can protect themselves from reprisals:

Supporting civil society, if they are subjected to reprisals, we see it as an important part of our work here... We work with supporting and strengthening the Liberian civil society, and there's the question of security and potential reprisals, how you can avoid and be protected from that. And we do that together with other donors here, it's a joint commitment.

Respondent 4, 2021

Respondent 1 (2021) believes donors in Liberia should be more responsive when it comes to mitigating issues and dealing with security risks and had one local partner requesting more funds for security purposes. Kvinna till Kvinna (2021b) offer recommendations for international donors and funders, highly connected to operational responses, including funding security measures and supporting safe spaces. They consider safety plans and risk assessments to be a fundamental part of working in Liberia's narrow space, although many CSOs are not able to work with this due to lack of resources. This indicates more operational responses would be necessary in Liberia.

Operational responses are applied to some degree by Swedish donors, although there is a wish to do more since safe spaces are underfunded and donor relations effect civic space to a large degree. Swedish donors do not adapt to the structure and capacity of Liberian civil society to the degree as they wish. The fact that Swedish donors struggle most with operational responses is interesting, since Hossain and Khurana (2019) noted this to be the most commonly used strategy among donors. They describe operational responses to be usually directed at the effects of a restricted civic space, and adaption to the situation, and applying operational responses often does not require as much long-term, strategic planning as other responses mentioned. These examples show that operational responses are not always as straightforward as they would appear, for instance when it comes to adapting funding requirements. The limited application of operational responses of Swedish donors in Liberia could be because Liberian civic space is not a worst case, and operational responses regarding safe spaces or donor adaption are not prioritised, since there are no restrictions on foreign funding. Rakner (2019) discussed the limited understanding to response mechanisms regarding democratic rollback, and the same can be argued for how other factors, not necessarily restrictions, shape civic space negatively.

6.2.4. Policy and Strategic efforts

This section discusses policy and strategic efforts applied to combat challenges related to civic spaces in Liberia and finds that in dealing with restrictions on civic space, Swedish donors and local partners focus on promoting norms holding the Liberian state and other actors accountable for their actions.

Swedish donors and local partners use policy and strategic efforts, such as diplomatic measures and political dialogue, to combat restrictions (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021). Strategic and policy responses can work to change views of actors restricting civic space, in turn increasing the perceived normative legitimacy of civil society actors by bringing values of government and civil society closer together, and make actors see civil society contribution, increasing their cognitive legitimacy (Poplewell, 2018). Liberia is part of the UPR-process, the UN human rights review system of member states, where there are opportunities to hold the Liberian state accountable, for example if there has been reports of repressive methods

contributing to shrinking space (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 4, 2021). A reoccurring theme among respondents was the importance of local organisations holding the Liberian government accountable, instead of critique coming from international actors (Respondent 1, 2021; Respondent 3, 2021). This could be because foreign interests are generally regarded with suspicion, and foreign agents as having lower legitimacy (Poplewell, 2018). One donor has guided Liberian CSOs to produce recommendations for the government (Respondent 1, 2021), and local women organisations joined forces to demand action from president Weah regarding the increase in rape cases, ultimately resulting in him declaring a rape emergency (Respondent 7, 2021).

From the Swedish side, the Foreign Minister and representatives bring up issues during official meetings (Respondent 4, 2021), using policy and strategic efforts towards the Liberian government. Respondent 5 (2021) holds the opinion that Sweden does not back down when it comes to bringing up sensitive issues. Internationally, there is a focus on strengthening norms (Sida, 2017) and working through the EU and UN. Women and people working with accountability or sensitive issues are more affected by restrictions on civic space than others, and Swedish donors and their local partners prioritise these groups when working for an enabling environment. Since these groups face more restrictions because of their perceived lack of cognitive and normative legitimacy, i.e., not being deemed valuable or seen as normatively wrong, or because they threaten the legitimacy of elites (Poplewell, 2018), efforts to increase their legitimacy are seen. Sweden's feminist foreign policy makes gender equality a priority (Government Offices of Sweden, 2021a), and improving gender equality, reducing SGBV and advancing SRHR are priorities in Sweden's Liberia strategy (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2020a). Sweden advocates for these issues internationally and in discussions with officials, using policy and strategic measures.

The strategic partners use advocacy towards the Swedish government and other actors, to make them take action against restrictions and advocate for civic space globally (CONCORD Sverige, 2016; CONCORD Sverige, 2018; RFSU, 2019). Common recommendations to combat restrictions on civic space include recognising the struggles of people affected by restrictions, speaking up against repressive regimes, imposing sanctions, flexibility in funding, taking responsibility for Swedish companies abroad and going beyond measures related to international development cooperation (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2021b; Wassholm, 2018; Wassholm, et al., 2018). The last point refers to Sweden's coherency policy, PGD, highlighting

that promotion of rights to assembly and association should be part of all international work. This is in line with Hayes et al's (2017) argument that responses to restrictions on civic space need to go beyond mere promoting of human rights, but actions, such as imposing sanctions, are necessary. Sida (2017) believe the struggle against shrinking space should be mainstreamed in Swedish international policy. According to the strategic partners, working strategically and long term to promote democratic values and norms is necessary when working towards an enabling environment for civil society (ibid).

More than holding actors accountable, interaction between civil society and the Liberian government is important (Respondent 4, 2021; Respondent 6, 2021; Respondent 7, 2021). When it comes to administrative challenges, local organisations adapt and try to meet the demands of the authorities to be able to work (Respondent 7, 2021). Being in line with government priorities and working with both duty bearers and rights holders is important for Swedish donors (Respondent 4, 2021; Sida, 2019), also for the matter of sustainability (Respondent 1, 2021).

One local partner works closely with the Liberian government, in order to push for legislative changes and advocate for free speech (Respondent 6, 2021). The relationship with the government appears to be mutual in some respects (ibid.), the fit is not too loose, and not too tight (Hossain, et al., 2018). The government listens to civil society suggestions that would make Liberia look good internationally (Respondent 6, 2021). Civil society is in this way used by the government to increase their own legitimacy. Just as Popplewell (2018) discussed that challenging the political elites makes one more vulnerable to restrictions on civic space, it can be argued that civil society is here given civic space when they are perceived to legitimise elites. The local organisation was successful in decriminalising free speech in 2019 and is now trying to change legislation on media ownership and advocate for setting up an independent commission (Respondent 6, 2021). However, although there has been a regulatory change, the behavioural change is not there (ibid.). Respondent 7 (2021) uses advocacy towards local leaders in rural areas and helps them understand and work for government policies for human rights:

Living in a rural area, the local leaders, they do not have adequate knowledge about the policies, the human rights documents that our government sign. At the beginning, it was not easy. It's a gradual process, but now we are seeing a lot of local leaders coming over to us.

And the relationship between us and the local leaders is getting on fine. We sit around the table with them, and we are able to discuss issues that concern our community, and they themselves come up with solutions... Civil society needs to engage them, over and over again. So, we are on their back.

Respondent 7, 2021

When working with sensitive issues like FGM, the local organisation applies a holistic and gradual approach, towards leaders and parts of society disapproving of their work (Respondent 7, 2021). This is because breaking traditional values takes time, and because it takes more than changing someone's view to make changes. When it comes to FGM, it is difficult for people making their living by doing procedures to leave the practice behind, since it means they may not be able to feed their family or send their children to school. Therefore, advocacy measures are combined with other measures, such as livelihood programmes (ibid).

Swedish donors and their partners use policy and strategic measures to influence actors affecting civic space negatively. They use both accountability measures and cooperation to make long-term, sustainable change, indicating that civil society can have influence in different ways, even if their fit with state is tight or loose (Hossain, et al., 2018). However, the example of working with FGM indicates that responses beyond advocacy and normative change is necessary when working with certain issues. This indicates the categorisation of responses in the analytical framework by Hossain and Khurana (2019) are not enough to describe the range of responses used to combat restrictions on civic space.

7. Conclusion

This thesis attempts to investigate how Swedish donors and their local partners work with civic space in Liberia, focusing especially on perceived challenges related to civic space and strategies to overcome them.

The paper concludes that the low capacity of Liberian civil society affects their resilience and ability to create and maintain civic space and cooperate, excluding them from decision-making processes with the state and international donors. Swedish donors and local partners believe civil society can operate without much interference from the state, although interference occurs, for instance on freedom of expression, association and assembly. Certain actors are more affected by restrictions than others, mainly women and actors working with accountability and sensitive issues such as LGBTQI and FGM. These groups are more affected because they either threaten the legitimacy of elites or are perceived to lack legitimacy of their own.

The work of CSOs is negatively affected by the challenges related to civic space. Swedish donors and local partners believe CSOs are not able to reach their full potential, due to delays or inability to reach out. Since civil society is an integral part of achieving development, not being able to contribute slows down development processes, impacting the implementation of the SDGs and the principle leaving no one behind. Since some parts of civil society are more affected, issues they work with, like LGBTQI rights, accountability and corruption, suffer the most. Democracy in Liberia suffers consequences since participation is limited.

Swedish donors and partners work for an enabling environment for civil society. Strategies applied; policy and strategic efforts, operational responses, resilience and alliance-building efforts and evidence-generation, are implemented despite civic space not being restricted to a large degree. Swedish donors have difficulties in implementing strategies, especially regarding problems of their own role in the context. There is a wish for donors to support more unstructured groups in civil society, but given the risks this implies, it is not implemented. Swedish donors and their partners also apply strategies beyond the analytical framework to combat challenges.

7.1. Further research

This paper limits itself to investigating civil society challenges in Liberia, implications for development and strategies of Swedish donors and their local partners to overcome these. It does not, however, delve deep into the historical changes of civic space in Liberia, nor the way in which other international actors act to support civil society in their operations. This could be subject to further research. Moreover, it would be interesting if research was conducted on the relationship between Liberian civil society and international donors, and how the “fit” between them could affect the civic space in Liberia. Lastly, as the covid-19 pandemic limited access to local organisations, a study with data from local organisations, and perhaps how their views differ from international donors, would be an interesting contribution to research on the subject.

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9. Appendices

9.1. Activities supported by Sida

Organisation	Project
The Carter Center	Access to Justice
CENTAL	Enhancing anti-corruption in Liberia
ECOWAS	Transitional Support to the ECOWAS Regional Radio
Forum Civ	Civil Society Strengthening
Forum Civ	Promoting human rights and accountability in mining communities
Forum Civ	Strengthening LGBT rights
International NGO	Just and equal societies: securing SRHR
Kvinna till Kvinna	Enhancing women's rights and empowerment
Kvinna till Kvinna	Supporting effective advocacy
Liberia Revenue Authority	Inception Phase
OHCHR	Capacity Building of the INCHRL
ODI	Budget strengthening initiative
RFSU	Raising awareness, sex education and teen pregnancy
RFSU	Sexuality education and non-discrimination
UN Women	Strategic Note 2020-2024
UNFPA	Liberia Country Programme
Union to Union	Building and strengthening ICTS unions
Union to Union	Digital organising campaign
Union to Union	Strengthening unions for quality public health systems
ZOA	Peacebuilding, Reconciliation and Community Dialogue

Source: *OpenAid* (Sida, 2021b)

9.2. Secondary data

Organisation	Name of document	Document type: year
CONCORD Sverige	Remissvar. Regeringens skrivelse: Policyramverket för det svenska utvecklingsarbetet	Consultation: 2016
	Tag plats! Civilsamhällets demokratiska utrymme och rätten till organisering	Report: 2018
	Vi måste ta hoten mot demokratin på allvar	Article: 2018
Forum Civ	Shrinking space for civil society – challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda	Report: 2017
	Defending their rights, Risking their lives: Shrinking space and extractive industries	Report: 2018
	Annual Report 2019	Annual report: 2020
Kvinna till Kvinna	Suffocating the movement: shrinking space for women’s rights	Report: 2018
	The space for Women Human Rights Defenders and LGBTQI activists in Liberia	Report: 2021
Ministry for Foreign Affairs	Policy framework for Swedish development cooperation and humanitarian assistance	Policy: 2016
	Liberia – Mänskliga rättigheter, demokrati och rättsstatens principer: situation per den 30 juni 2019	Report: 2019
	Strategi för Sveriges utvecklingssamarbete med Liberia 2021–2025	Strategy: 2020
	Ändrad strategi för Sveriges utvecklingssamarbete avseende arbetet med de mänskliga rättigheterna, demokrati och rättsstatens principer 2018–2022	Strategy: 2020

RFSU	EU-valet 2019: Stå upp för sexuella rättigheter, viktigare än någonsin	Information paper: 2019
SIDA	Sidas skrivelse till svar på RB-uppdraget om Krympande Demokratiskt Utrymme	Consultation: 2017
	Guiding principles for SIDA's engagement with and support to Civil Society	Policy: 2019
	Strategirapport för Sveriges utvecklingssamarbete med Liberia 2016–2020	Annual report: 2020
Union to Union	Sustainable development through decent work: The Strategy of Union to Union 2018-2022	Strategy: 2018
	Opinion: Attackerna mot facket ökar i en värld med krympande demokrati	Article: 2018

9.3. Civil society challenges and effects

Challenge	Cause	Effect
Low capacity	<p>Low level of education</p> <p>Capacity drain</p> <p>Civil wars</p> <p>Poverty rate</p> <p>Lacking digital infrastructure</p>	<p>Difficulty to reach out</p> <p>Difficulty to attract funding, lack of resources, competition for resources</p> <p>Donor dependence, agenda setting</p> <p>Urban/rural divide</p> <p>Organisation closures</p> <p>Movements and networks left out</p> <p>Real issues not resolved</p>
Restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, association, administrative challenges	<p>Tactical moves</p> <p>Normative moves</p> <p>Unwillingness to change way of life</p> <p>Lacking infrastructure</p>	<p>Psychological toll</p> <p>Self- censorship</p> <p>Leaving the country, staff turnover</p> <p>Arrests, violence</p> <p>Time consuming process</p> <p>Effects on operations</p>
Targeting	<p>Low normative/cognitive legitimacy</p> <p>Challenging legitimacy of state</p>	<p>Sensitive issues ignored</p> <p>Staff turnover</p> <p>Marginalised people left out</p> <p>Gender equality ignored</p> <p>Weakened accountability work</p>

9.4. Civil society challenges and strategies

Challenge	Strategy	Type of strategy
Low capacity	Capacity building Funding approach Adaption	Alliance-building and civil society resilience efforts Operational responses
Restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, association, administrative challenges	Writing reports Accountability measures Diplomatic measures Security measures Funding Adaption	Evidence-generation Strategic and policy efforts Operational responses
Targeting	Writing reports Funding Security measures Accountability measures	Evidence-generation Alliance-building and civil society resilience efforts Operational responses Strategic and policy efforts

9.5. Interview guide

Introduction

- Explain the project, the purpose of the interview
- Ensure consent
- Describe the outline of the interview, questions and length
- Do you have any questions?

View of civil society

- Can you describe Liberian civil society?
 - Who is included in civil society?
 - Who do they represent?
- What do you think the value of civil society is in Liberia ?
 - What kind of functions or activities are important?
 - What is civil society's contribution to development?

View of civic space

- How would you describe civic space in Liberia?
 - Is it actually shrinking? Changing?
 - Is any group more affected than others?
 - Have you seen any improvements or deteriorations in recent years?
- In your opinion, what are driving factors behind civic space restrictions in Liberia?
 - Who are the responsible actors behind the problems?
 - Can you see any additional risks that might worsen the situation in the future?
- In your experience, has the situation of civic space affected development work in Liberia? How?
 - How has it affected you as a donor/local organisation vs the development work in general?
 - Has it affected development results?

Civic space strategy

- Who do you think should take responsibility for improving the situation in Liberia?

- Do you have any examples of activities that you do in order to combat shrinking space in Liberia?
 - Who are the main actors you work with?
 - Do you work with these issues in multi-national settings?
- Do you think that the strategy has been successful so far?
 - Has there been any unintended consequences, that has made the situation worse?

Anything you would like to add?

Thank you!

9.6. Informed Consent Form



LUNDS
UNIVERSITET

Brief description of project:

Research is conducted as part of the final thesis for the MSc programme “International Development and Management” at Lund University. The purpose of the thesis is to investigate Swedish donor’s perception of civic space in Liberia, including the role of civil society in development cooperation and strategies to go around potential challenges.

I would like to inform you that:

- It is completely voluntary to participate in this interview.
- You can withdraw your consent at any time.
- You can stop the interview whenever you want.
- It is optional to be recorded. If the interview is recorded, only the thesis author will hear the audio file and have access to a transcript of the interview. The audio file and transcript will be deleted after the thesis hand-in in June 2021.
- You can refuse to answer any specific questions and do not need to explain why.
- Your data will be anonymised during processing and in the final product.
- You can choose to be quoted for the entire interview, or for selected statements.
- The final product will be made public and shared with you upon completion.

Thank you for participating!

Signature of interviewee

Signature of interviewer

Date and place

Date and place
