The implications of closing civic space for hunger and poverty in the Global South

Abstract

Concerns about the phenomenon of closing civic space around the world have focused on the impacts on human rights, and little has been known of the impacts on development. This article draws on a study that traced the impacts of closing civic space on civil society and social movements addressing poverty and hunger in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe. Despite the highly varied pathways of impact across these diverse political and economic settings, the overall implications are similar: restrictions on civic space prevent broad civic engagement in policy processes, in particular critique or scrutiny of government policy and practice, and can also hamper the role of non-governmental organizations in service delivery. Because civic engagement matters most for marginalized and disempowered people, their exclusion from policy processes and services will deepen. Reversals or stagnation in progress towards addressing poverty and hunger indicate that as civic space narrows, the most marginalized and disempowered groups face a growing risk of being left behind by development.

Policy implications

- Research in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe found restrictions on civil society adversely affected efforts to tackle poverty and hunger reduction
- The pathways of impact varied according to how political power is distributed, and the nature of state-civil society relations
- Where ruling elites are committed to inclusive development, headline indicators of poverty and hunger reduction may improve despite closing space
- But the poorest and most hungry groups are left behind, unable to voice their demands or access the services they need.

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1. Introduction

The space in which civil society can operate legally and without fear has been shrinking worldwide for a decade (Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014; ICNL, 2016), yet to date there has been little analysis of the implications for development (Hossain *et al.*, 2019). This article explores pathways through which poverty and hunger have been affected by restrictions on civil society and social movements, through case studies of Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe. Drawing on the literature on the role of civil society in development, the article develops propositions about two key mechanisms through which impacts are likely to be felt: i) restrictions on policy influence and feedback, specifically on civil society participation in formal policy space, advocacy, campaigns, and critiques of government policy, and protection of civil society activists from reprisal; and ii) through restrictions on service delivery, through immediate and direct reductions in the quantity or quality of services to people living with poverty or hunger, and indirect routes through which their ability to provide tangible services are affected. The article explores these propositions comparatively and longitudinally, studying moments when civic space has visibly been under pressure, tracing how changes in rules, regulations, practices, and the broader environment in which civil society and social movements can operate has affected action on poverty and hunger.

The case studies indicate that how political power is distributed influences why and how governments restrict civic actors, but how those restrictions affect action on poverty and hunger ultimately depends on the nature of the 'fit' between civil society and the state in addressing poverty and hunger. In other words, it is not only the freedom civic actors have to operate that matters, but also whether changes in that space affect whether and how they can engage with and hold the state accountable on critical matters of poverty and hunger policy. The article makes an empirical contribution, providing a synthesis of secondary and key informant evidence of the pathways through which civic space impacts on development in specific contexts. It also makes a conceptual contribution, by advancing and refining our understanding of the mechanisms through which civic space shapes development, drawing on insights from political economy thinking about inclusive development, and more fine-grained thinking about the role of civil society and its relationship with the state in that process. The article concludes that while the outcomes look different in each setting, restrictions on civic space limit the inclusiveness of anti-poverty or hunger reduction policies across political contexts. Key principles of the internationally agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of inclusion, sustainability, and 'leaving no one behind' - are routinely violated under conditions where civil society actors are being restricted.

These arguments are presented as follows. The next section provides the background to the phenomenon of closing – or rather, changing – civic space and the theoretical framework for the analysis of the 'fit' between civil society and the state. Section 3 presents the research methods used to gather data. Section 4 features summarized case studies of changes in civic space and poverty and hunger outcomes in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe. Section 5 synthesizes the findings from across the country cases. It draws some conclusions about the prospects for achieving the SDGs and for the eradication of poverty and hunger under conditions of closing civic space.

2. Civic space and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Civil society and development

An enabling environment for civil society is understood to be essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular the injunction that development should 'leave no one behind' (HLPE, 2013; PartnersGlobal *et al.*, 2017; OECD, 2018). Civil society here refers to voluntary or non-profit social organizations that mediate between the state, market, and societal actors and interests. Here we focus on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs), often aid- or foreign-funded, but the term may also refer to human rights and environmental defenders, professional associations, and community-based organizations, among others (Howell and Pearce, 2002; Lewis, 2004; Edwards, 2009). Restrictions on civic space may impact on development in several ways, including through curbing the ability of NGOs to provide services to people facing poverty and hunger. A study of 134 countries showed that bilateral (official) aid flows dropped by around one-third in the years after aid-recipient governments introduced new restrictions on NGOs, mainly because donors could no longer fund preferred NGOs (Dupuy and Prakash 2017). Since many NGOs implement social protection and antipoverty programs, declines in foreign aid have meant cuts to services for the poor and hungry (Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014).

Civil society also informs, pushes for or complements public policy in ways that affect development outcomes such as poverty and hunger (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2015). Civic actors have been part of struggles by people facing marginalization, discrimination and poverty, making their issues visible, creating spaces for policy dialogue and oversight, and building alliances for change (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010; Gaventa and McGee, 2010; Tandon and Brown, 2013). Civil society and social movements have helped enable voice and inclusion of marginalized and excluded groups, including women and minority ethnic groups. In their accountability or 'watchdog role', civil society actors push governments to be transparent and answerable for their policies and practices; help prevent corruption and abuse; and monitor gaps and other failures in policies or implementation (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006; World Bank, 2017). Civic activism in relation to accountability for public services is part of the governance apparatus necessary to ensure services 'work for poor people in development' (World Bank, 2003). NGOs and social movements have been unevenly successful in holding governments accountable for pro-poor services delivery (Hickey and Mohan, 2005; Mansuri and Rao, 2012), but a growing consensus is that 'social accountability' functions through coalitions of civil society actors working at multiple levels to monitor, demand and enforce accountability through long-term, political struggles rather than one-shot technocratic interventions (Fox 2016; Fox 2015).

The importance of the 'fit' between civil society and the state

Civil society has the potential to support policies that address poverty, but much depends on the relationship between civil society and the state. Relationships between states and civil societies are situated within changing market and social relations, and shaped by global, national, regional and local forces, as well as specific histories of engagement, contention and mobilization (Howell and Pearce, 2002). In this article we move away from the metaphor of 'civic space' with its attendant implications of autonomy as the necessary condition of civil society action. Instead, we draw on Peter Houtzager's

discussion of the 'fit' between civil society and the state for the relevant metaphor of the role of civil society in addressing poverty and hunger (Houtzager, 2003). The metaphor of 'fit' indicates both space or freedom to operate, and capacity to engage closely with the state where necessary. Focusing on both civil society freedoms and capacities to engage grants us closer access to the diverse ways in which different polities have enabled civil society to engage with poverty and hunger policies in practice. It also allows us to take into account how civic space may be not so much *shrinking* as *changing*: actors such as right-wing groups and protest movements have gained space in many countries, and the space for civic action has itself expanded and altered with the growth of digital public space and online platforms (Hossain *et al.*, 2018).

Houtzager (2003, p.2-3) argues that the extent to which civil society can help foster inclusive development is a function of politics:

> The capacity and nature of both state and societal actors are understood as a two-way exchange… (…) The ability of political actors to produce a politics of inclusion is in large measure contingent on their ability to engineer a *fit* with political institutions that grant some actors greater leverage in the policy process than others.

It is particularly crucial to address the varieties of fit between states and civil societies in the process of tackling poverty and hunger because it is clear that some countries that have curtailed civil society, such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, and China, have also seen rapid reductions in hunger and poverty. This is because elites have been committed to such goals, and built state capacity to address them (Hickey, Sen and Bukenya, 2015). Civil society is never absent from such 'closed' settings (Howell, 2012; Teets, 2013), but it may not function as per Tocquevillian assumptions that autonomy is essential for civil society to contribute to inclusive change (Mercer, 2003).

How effective civil society can be in advancing pro-poor policies is shaped substantially by the nature of its 'fit' or relationship with the state, which is in turn shaped by the space the state creates and the nature of the state itself. Houtzager (*ibid*, p. 12) warns that a politics of inclusion cannot solely evolve around civil society as it is too uncoordinated, diffuses power thinly, and is itself often marred by inequalities and division. Civil society is often - and always potentially – contentious in its engagement with the state. The critical questions are whether civil society can gain traction and collaborate with the state if and when needed, but also whether it can challenge and critique if and when relevant. This 'fit' determines the ability of civil society to keep pressure on the state and ensure development is inclusive at any given time, but is also the function of the space and engagement the state has enabled in the past.

Political settlements and inclusive development

This 'fit' will therefore depend on how civil society fits within the wider political settlement, or 'the balance or distribution of power between contending social groups and social classes, on which any state is based' (Di John and Putzel, 2009, p. 4). How states treat civic space will depend on how likely civil society is to disturb that balance and in whose interests, as well as on how long civil society actors can hold out in their struggles with the state (Khan, 2018). Efforts to shrink civil society space are best understood as efforts by ruling elites to consolidate or regain power and undermine (support to) political opponents and critics. The strategies may be ideological, physical, material, or regulatory in nature, but we can assume that in each instance, the effort is informed by a presumption among powerholders that (particular) civil society actors have too much or illegitimate power, or are aligned

with and potentially increase oppositional power. Where a stable coalition dominates political power, civil society may be squeezed or coopted; where political power is more competitive and fragmented, sections of civil society may be demonized or criminalized. But how elites use the power they withdraw from civil society varies, depending on their commitment to inclusive development, and the capacity of the state to deliver it (Hickey, Sen and Bukenya, 2015). In countries where political elites clamp down on civil society to push through high growth poverty reduction policies, the outcomes will be very different to where dominant elites merely seek to remain in power to enrich themselves and their powerful supporters. In more competitive political systems, ruling elites may view civil society as supporting political oppositions, making civic action on hunger and poverty policies more contentious and politicized. For these reasons, it is important to explore the changing fit between civil society and states across different political settlements.

3. Research design and methodology

Whether political settlements are dominated by stable coalitions, or whether they face competition over the distribution of political power, there are two broad mechanisms through which the fit between civil society and state shapes action on poverty and hunger. They feature both 'intermediate governance' or 'process' variables (capacity to influence policy freely and in safety, including through mobilizing constituencies), as well as 'outcome' variables (how many and which people reached with which services). These mechanisms do not have singular or linear impacts, but comprise iterative cycles of feedback, empowerment of constituencies or groups facing poverty or hunger, and accountability. The first mechanism is *'Policy influence and feedback'*: how closing civic space impacted on the ways in which the interests and needs of marginalized groups living with poverty and hunger were being represented, advocated for, and taken onto the policy agenda. We focused on:

a. Civil society participation in formal policy spaces in which policy is designed, implemented, or monitored
b. Space for mobilization advocacy, campaigns, and critiques of government policy, in which to inform or frame poverty and hunger debates; this includes freedom of association and speech issues and the independence of the media, and
c. Protection of civil society activists from reprisal, so that they are able to advocate without fear.

The second mechanism is '*Service delivery'*: as civil society actors provide a range of services to people living with poverty and hunger, closing civic space meant an immediate and direct reduction in the quantity or quality of services to (certain) target populations. We also explored whether restrictions on civil society groups led to impacts that indirectly affected their ability to provide services to tackle poverty or hunger.

We chose four different political settings where the fit between civil society and the state is likely to be different. As already noted, it is not only important how much power states have, but also how they use the power they take away from civic actors. To understand that, we selected countries that ranged from 'developmental' (where state power is exercised broadly in order to advance economic and human development goals) to more 'predatory' (where power is exercised chiefly to enrich ruling elites and

their cronies). The four country case studies were Brazil (developmental, until 2016), Ethiopia (developmental), Pakistan (predatory), and Zimbabwe (highly predatory).

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, country case studies developed a 'thick description' of the contexts within which civic space entered into contention, and traced the impacts of efforts to control civic actors on their ability to contribute to development. Data on poverty and hunger trends was mapped onto moments of opening or increasing constraints on civic space. The methodology thus specified episodes when civic space had been in contention in policy domains where 'frontline' inclusive development outcomes (poverty and hunger reduction, gender equality, etc.) were at stake (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).
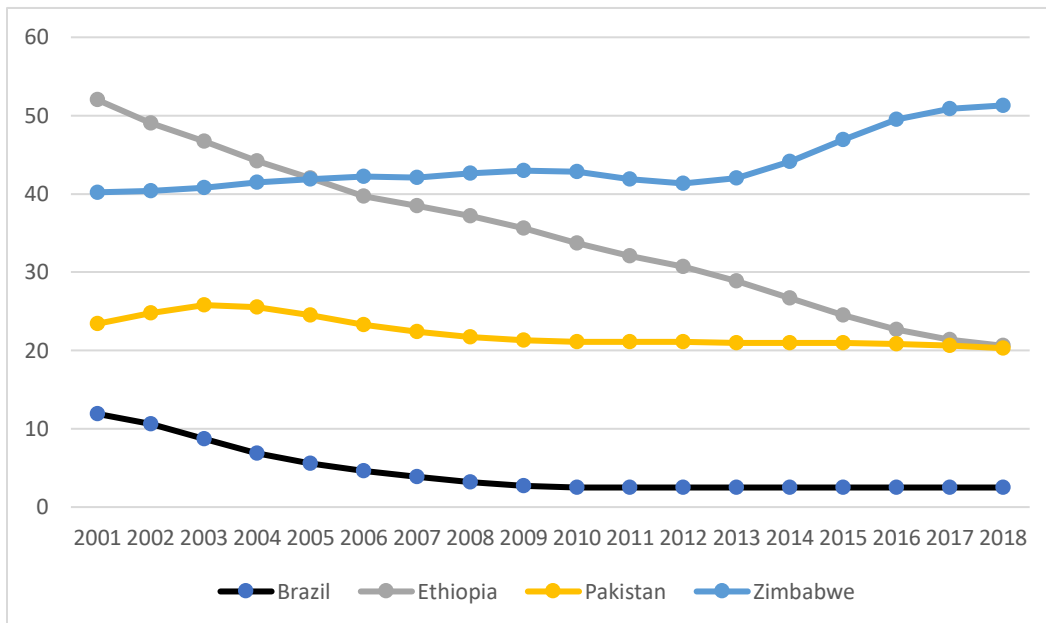
Figure 1 % of population living in poverty in case study countries
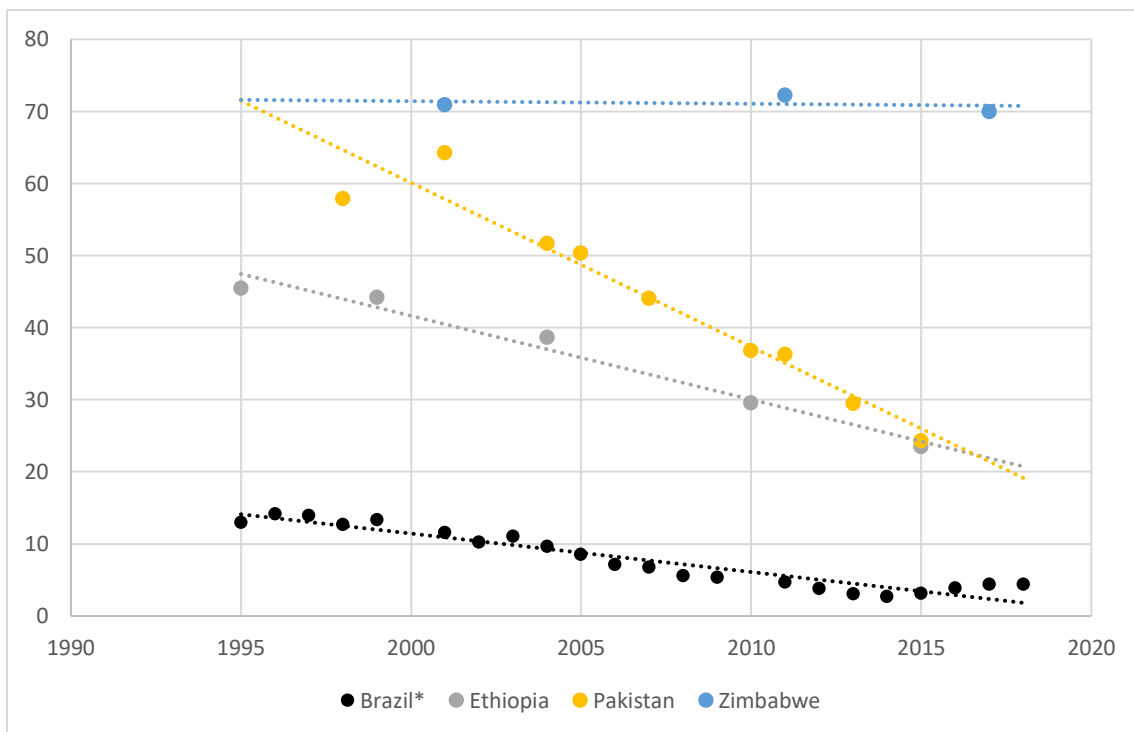
*Note: 1 *Brazil figures are based on a $1.90 poverty line based on 2011 purchasing power parity (PPP) figures. All other countries present the headcount ratio from the national poverty line (unavailable for Brazil).*

Source: 1 World Development Indicators [accessed 9 June 2020]

Figure 2 Prevalence of undernourishment in case study countries, 2000-2018

Fieldwork was conducted in each country in 2018, including key informant interviews and participatory workshops with civil society actors to explore trends in civic space and poverty and hunger, with a particular focus on groups experiencing political and socio-economic marginalization. Some of the research was curtailed because potential participants feared reprisal. Between 15 and 28 key informant interviews were undertaken in each country, mostly with civil society representatives and a small number of government actors and business representatives.

4. Changes in civic space and the impacts on poverty and hunger: insights from Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe

This section explores the nature of the political settlement and trends in civic space for each of the five country case studies, exploring how these have played out in programs and policies for poverty and hunger. Each country case describes i) how the dynamics of the political settlement shaped the fit between civil society and the state; ii) how civic space is changing, and the implications for iii) policy influence and feedback and iv) service delivery by civil society groups.

[NOTE: These country case studies draw on published working papers that will be cited after peer review]

Brazil

Until the impeachment of President Dilma Roussef in 2016, Brazil was known for its innovative policies and programs arising from a unique degree and form of civic participation in public policymaking. These had particularly benefited groups most affected by extreme poverty and hunger, notably indigenous and Afro-Brazilian populations. The events of 2016 saw this situation change rapidly, as a rightward lurch in the political leadership saw the relationship between state and civil society abruptly deteriorate: the space for civil society to participate in pro-poor and hunger reduction policies shrank, reflecting their shrinking power within the political settlement; budgets and other provisions were cut or reduced.

Of the four cases, the Brazilian political settlement features the most competitive and democratic polity, yet democracy has coexisted with entrenched racialized, geographic and class inequalities rooted in historic injustices and discrimination. Still one of the most unequal societies on earth, almost three decades of imperfect and unequal democracy saw a flourishing of civil society engagement with state poverty and development policies, particularly under the Workers' Party (PT) government of 2003-2016. The PT government actively encouraged and enabled civic engagement with policy dialogue, monitoring, and feedback. The 'fit' between civil society and the state had been close and effective in creating and delivering pro-poor and hunger-reducing social protection and human development programs: inequalities began to decline, and the poorest and most marginalized saw relatively rapid development gains, as their organizations contributed to designing and delivering policies for them. These programs were on a sufficient scale that the gains started to show up in a reduction of poverty and hunger; see Figure 1. The innovative *Bolsa Família* conditional cash transfer scheme was emulated around the world, as were participatory budgeting initiatives. This progress coexisted with continuing systemic violations of territorial and other rights of Brazil's 'traditional peoples and communities' (PCTs, including indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities). Their historic marginalisation is a direct cause of the high prevalence of extreme poverty and malnourishment among many PCTs (FIAN BRASIL, 2016).

The relationship between civil society and the state changed from mutually supportive and constructive to hostile in 2016 when President Dilma Roussef was impeached, and a right-wing government led by Michel Temer took power. National councils were hollowed out by removing civil society members, or left inactive; indigenous civil society representatives were deterred from attending meetings. This limited the scope for state-civil society to co-construct development policies and for civil society to monitor or hold government to account for their implementation. In one example, the Temer Government set up a National SDG Commission in 2016, but included only one organization of the rural poor (the council for small-scale resource harvester communities, CNS). The right-wing government reduced budgets of pro-poor programs and cancelled some outright. The austerity measures were directed at programs targeted to the most vulnerable populations, including PCTs. *Bolsa Família* is one of the world's largest efforts to combat poverty and eliminate hunger. In 2013, it reached 14 million households, mostly led by women. This dropped to 12.7 million by July 2017 (Madeiro, 2016; MDS, 2018). From 2017, adjustments for inflation were minimized. The 2018 Draft Budget Law eliminated the budget allocation for *Bolsa Verde*, which had combined cash transfers with environmental conservation activities for families living in remote regions of Brazil, including the Amazon. The *Programa Brasil Quilombola* (PBQ), launched in 2004 with the objective of consolidating government policy for *quilombola* (Afro-Brazilian) people has in effect been defunct since 2016.

The events of 2016 also paved the way for right-wing forces in the National Congress to use institutional measures to curb formal civic space for indigenous land rights actors. The rural caucus ('*bancada ruralista*') that represents agribusiness and other rural landowning interests in the National Congress secured a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into two government bodies responsible for land

indigenous peoples in 2016. This resulted in the indictment of over a hundred prosecutors, anthropologists and indigenous leaders, for allegedly providing fraudulent evidence in support of indigenous land rights claims. However, it included no investigation of actual rights violations, and indicted no large landowners (Tubino, 2017). Bills have been proposed that make it easier for the police to use force to remove activists from occupied land and criminalize activist land occupations and to classify the struggles for land and housing rights as 'terrorist' activities. These bills threaten the Constitutional rights of indigenous and *quilombola* communities. There is growing impunity for violence against rights defenders and the rural poor, amid a sharp rise in rural violence in recent years, including the assassination of movement leaders and massacres of peasants and indigenous people (CPT, 2018).

Along with the consequences of the economic crisis and rising unemployment, austerity has contributed to an increase in the number of people living in extreme poverty after years of steady reduction, rising from 13.34 million in 2016 in 2016 to 14.83 million in 2017 (see Figure 1) (Villas Bôas, 2018). Progress on hunger has flatlined (see Figure 2), but since the economic crisis started in 2013 and not as a direct result of the rightward political shift or the accompanying squeeze on civil society. Under the government of Jair Bolsonaro, progressive civil society actors have lost any authority they had to influence budgets and policy agendas. The Brazil case illustrates how civic space impacts on poverty and hunger through the disappearance of formal policy spaces for civil society participation, and in the lack of protection against reprisals, which has licensed violence against indigenous and environmental rights activists. Brazil's democracy remains vibrant, if increasingly contentious, however, and mass advocacy and critique of government policies remains viable.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's political settlement had featured a dominant party state under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a ruling coalition presiding over an ethnically based federal structure, since the overthrow of the Derg regime in 1991. After 15 years of relatively open civic space, the government clamped down on civil society groups from 2005. But it remained a broadly developmental state, with strong elite commitment to poverty and hunger reduction. Restrictions on civil society appear to have had indirect and medium-term effects on development progress, reducing policy space and increasing exclusion, and curbing NGO activities. Through the 2000s, government policies and programs helped the country make relatively rapid progress on poverty and hunger reduction, particularly through support to agricultural development and social protection. Yet recent episodes of acute food insecurity and conflict have again highlighted the limitations of a political settlement that prohibits contestation or dissent, and indicate that headline poverty reduction figures cannot compensate for rising inequality and the silencing of marginalized and excluded groups.

When the EPRDF took power in 1991, Ethiopia began to open up its institutions and economy, including civic space. International development donors thronged to invest in CSOs to promote liberal values of rights, equality and social justice (Reimann, 2006). CSO numbers grew from 70 in 1991 to 2,300 by 2007 (Dessalegn 2008; Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015). However, civic space narrowed after the 2005 elections, when the EPDRF experienced significant electoral losses, and accused foreign-funded civil society of opposing it in foreign interests (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009). The Civil Society Proclamation required all CSOs to re-register with a new Federal Charities and Societies Agency, and made advocacy, campaigning and rights-based work illegal for any organization receiving more than 10 per cent of their income from foreign sources (Dupuy, Ron and Prakash, 2015). CSOs were required to spend at least 70 per cent of their income on direct service delivery instead of human rights or awareness-raising work.

The numbers of registered NGOs and CSOs dropped substantially. The 2008 Mass Media Proclamation and 2009 Terrorism Law led to mass arrests of journalists, activists and opposition politicians. The government enforced full and partial internet and social media lockdowns on multiple occasions, partly in response to the emergence of online cross-ethnic youth movements. In 2015 the EPDRF declared victory in the national elections with 99 per cent of votes. In subsequent years tens of thousands of protestors and suspected opposition activists were arrested, and reports of torture were widespread (Freedom House, 2017). A state of emergency was twice promulgated.

As noted above, economic growth and poverty reduction are compatible with closed civic space: Ethiopia is a case in point, having achieved both rapid economic growth (World Bank 2017) and relatively rapid progress on reducing poverty since 2000 (World Bank, 2015)(see Figure 1). Hunger levels also dropped sharply, more than halving over a period of two decades (Tura, 2019). Inequality had been low in regional comparison (World Bank 2017) but rose between 2005 and 2010 (World Bank 2016). Agricultural sector growth largely drove poverty reduction, which was supported by investment in the social sector (World Bank, 2015). With donor support, the Government initiated a food aid and social protection scheme called the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in 2005. PNSP is substantially donor-funded but draws on governmental mass organizations, as well as international NGOs and local civil society to help deliver services – although not to hold the government to account over the program. Critics argue that the PSNP has been used to benefit party loyalists and entrench EPRDF political control at the local level, noting that in the absence of civil society there are no independent checks against corruption or program errors. Without free speech and an independent media to verify them, official poverty and hunger statistics are viewed with some skepticism (Mandefro, 2016).

Agricultural investments and the PSNP are also acknowledged to have increased food security and helped protect the poor from drought (Cochrane and Tamiru, 2016). In 2015, during the most repressive period of its rule, the EPRDF organized what was widely regarded as a highly effective emergency relief program to address widespread drought. No excess mortality was reported, and the price of food grains was kept stable (De Waal, 2018). However, while respondents acknowledged the EPRDF's achievements in reducing poverty and tackling hunger, some argued that the Government could have succeeded faster and farther had it partnered constructively with civil society in relation to marginalized and minority groups (see also Tura, 2019). Centrally driven programs lack the flexibility and responsiveness to local needs that CSOs could muster; restrictions on spending meant NGOs could no longer afford to reach marginalized and remote populations. Women's rights programs suffered in particular, and legal aid work stopped. Many NGOs and CSOs adapted their programming to provide more services and do less rights-based work; the costs of such adaptation to the quality and scale of their provisioning went uncounted but are likely to have been substantial. The greatest loss has been to the responsiveness of public services to marginalized populations. The protest movement in the Oromo region which in 2018 succeeded in unseating the ruling group after violence and state repression illustrated the high cost of closed space, and the political consequences of failures to hear the voice of marginalized groups. Since 2018, Ethiopia's civic space has started to reopen; as one of the largest countries with a large population living with poverty and food insecurity, the implications for civic engagement with policy space and service delivery deserve to be tracked closely in the period since 2018.

Pakistan

Pakistan has formally been a competitive democracy since 2008. Yet despite regular elections and political turnover, power continues to be exercised to mainly benefit the enduring alliance of military, economic and administrative elites (Akhtar, 2018), through 'dominance by an elite who does not support human capital investment in the masses' (Easterly, 2001, p. 3). But the politics of poverty and

hunger shifted following the turmoil of the 2007 economic and political crisis that brought an end to direct military rule, and the official view of social protection underwent a paradigm shift (Gazdar, 2011). Almost two-thirds of the population was living with poverty in the early 2000s, but this proportion dropped to half by 2005, and continued to fall, to 24 per cent by 2015 (see Figure 1). Progress on hunger has been slow, and the proportion of undernourished Pakistanis stayed stable at just over 20 per cent since 2008 (see Figure 2).

Civil society played a role in democracy and anti-corruption struggles, raised awareness of the effects of the economic crisis on the population living with poverty or vulnerability, and helped in the humanitarian and development response to the natural disasters Pakistan experienced in the 2000s. Despite the visible contribution by civil society, and the uphill challenge the country faces to meet the SDGs, democratization has not to date meant more generous civic space, nor has civil society been able to engineer a closer fit with the state. Civil society interviewees reported efforts to restrict their activities over the decades, across regime types. Under the present democratic system, governments have clamped down on civic groups in the name of security and national sovereignty since 2013, using arbitrary orders, new laws, denunciations, and violence to instill fear among human rights defenders and the liberal democratic sections of civil society. Influences and motivations appear to include Chinese perspectives on human rights and development, as China becomes a more significant development partner in Pakistan.

A 2017 policy to eject more than 30, mostly international, NGOs is a good example of closing civic space in Pakistan; analysis of its likely effects on services to some of the poorest and most marginalized groups illustrates the pathways through which such restrictions impact on poverty and hunger. Groups tackling violence against women, providing health, family planning, and education services, humanitarian assistance and relief, microfinance and other livelihoods programs, and farming and agricultural support services were among those closed. On aggregate these NGOs served millions of Pakistanis in some of the most remote and under-served regions of the country, focusing on marginalized groups and women. In Pakistan, this episode makes it possible to quantify the direct impacts of closing civic space on people facing poverty and hunger. However, the broader and longer-term impacts on public policy of a civil society that is too cowed or de-legitimated to speak on behalf of marginalized and poor populations cannot be measured so easily, and will need to be assessed through more sustained analysis of civil society engagement in the policy process.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe features an unambiguously predatory regime, in which political and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a political-military-business elite and serves their material interests. In the past 20 years, the country has experienced successive economic shocks and food crises due to drought and gross economic mismanagement. These have worsened poverty and hunger levels in Zimbabwe (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Civic space was severely restricted between 2000 and 2008, when the ruling ZANU-PF party faced political challenge from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which had emerged from an alliance of civic organizations and labour unions. In 2002, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) came into effect, further empowering the Zimbabwe police. Civic groups, priests and NGOs have been the major targets of POSA; hundreds of MDC rallies were banned, and MDC members and activists arrested for treason (Dorman, 2016). A highly restrictive Media Law and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act introduced in 2002 have curtailed the independent media and foreign journalists (Sachikonye, 2002; Raftopoulos and Phimister, 2004; Ndlovu, 2015). The 2004 Non-Governmental

Organizations Bill increased scrutiny of human rights groups and stopped them receiving foreign funds. Opposition leaders, journalists and human rights activists faced surveillance, harassment and repression. Political violence peaked in 2008, after which the Southern African Development Community helped broker a Government of National Unity (GNU, 2009-2013). By then, hyperinflation and economic decline had caused acute economic crisis.

Between 2000 and 2008, severe food insecurity caused by successive droughts and the economic crisis forced the government to allow humanitarian organizations to operate (Chinyoka and Seekings, 2016). In 2003, the 'Policy on operations on non-governmental organizations in humanitarian and development assistance' set out stringent registration, clearance and reporting requirements. Humanitarian agencies reported challenges accessing the politically sensitive group of ex-farm workers, who had been displaced during the land reforms (citation to be added, post-review 2019: 21). In 2004 President Mugabe expelled WFP and humanitarian actors, very likely to prevent them from accessing rural areas during the 2005 election (Chinyoka & Seekings 2016). After the elections, the Government allowed food aid to resume. By 2008 nearly 7 million people – over half the population – received donor-funded food aid (ibid.). Undernourishment declined, but politics still interfered with humanitarian operations. Interviewees reported that some locations where people needed relief were inaccessible to INGOs, because they were known opposition supporters (citation to be added, post-review 2019, p.21). NGOs were allowed to deliver inputs or technical assistance, but not to speak of rights or attempt to hold government accountable.

The Government of National Unity period offered some opportunities for a closer fit between civil society and the state, especially in MDC-controlled ministries. Some of the most repressive elements of the POSA and AIPPA were revoked and some media restrictions lifted. Western funds poured in: the EU and its member states provided more than USD 2 billion for assistance to education, water, sanitation, health, agriculture and food aid (Freeman, 2014; Muchadenyika, 2017). As conditions stabilised, food aid beneficiary numbers dropped to 1.8 million in 2010. A cash-for-work programme and a new Harmonised Social Cash Transfer aimed at the poorest 10 percent were introduced. Humanitarian actors and NGOs working on agriculture and food security found their access and collaboration with government improved. Since donors limited civil society funding to humanitarian or good governance projects, CSOs were less well-resourced to focus on macroeconomic and development policy (Dorman 2016: 203). During and immediately after the GNU, many were preoccupied with the Constitution; few focused on macroeconomic policy and budget oversight and there has been limited capacity to hold the government to account over its failure to manage macroeconomic shocks, currency crises and inflation. After the 2013 elections, which brought ZANU-PF back to power, economic growth fell from 2.3 per cent in 2015 to 0.5 per cent in 2016.

Interviewees recalled that after 2013, the ZANU-PF government resorted to bureaucratic measures rather than direct harassment or violence to limit the operations of civic actors. International donors distrusted the ZANU-PF government, and were reluctant to fund food aid. Humanitarian actors interviewed reported that district officials interfered with decisions about which areas should receive relief. In some areas ZANU-PF took charge of the food distribution and used its local networks to channel relief to its supporters, excluding alleged opposition members. Interviewees noted that organizations had to withdraw from politically sensitive areas or cut programs that had reached thousands of Zimbabweans, indicating that closing civic space not only created the conditions for poverty and hunger, but also prevented actors from taking action to mitigate or relieve it. Even under conditions when the government needed civic actors to help deliver food aid, its political interests prevented it from engineering a workable fit in its relations with civil society. Old and new restrictions

on civil society combined to thwart efforts to influence policy and to provide much-needed basic services.

5. Conclusions

This article has attempted to trace how new rules, regulations, and other restrictions on civil society actors have affected action to address poverty and hunger. It moves beyond a simple analysis of restrictions on civil society freedoms, to focus instead on how such restrictions affect the 'fit' between civil society and the state. This includes both its freedom to operate without fear, and its capacity to engage with the state when needed, whether that is to collaborate and complement, or to contend and critique. This article argues that what matters is not only whether power is taken away from civil society actors, but how that power is used by governments, which in turn depends on how political power is maintained and exercised, or on the political settlement, in that country.

The methodological strategy used here examined restrictions on civic space in Brazil, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe, representing a range of types of political settlement and civil society-state relationships. Each had undergone discernible changes in civic space. We traced the impacts on civil society participation through restrictions on the mechanisms through which civil society can a) influence policymaking and b) contribute to service delivery on issues of poverty or hunger. The mechanisms selected enabled us to observe civil society both in a complementary role to the state (filling gaps with private action), and in contention with the state (raising demands on behalf of aggrieved groups, holding the government to account for its actions). As our case studies illustrate, civic action on hunger and poverty suffers, as we would expect, in the more contentious areas of policymaking. But civic actors have also been prevented from providing services to the most marginalized and disempowered groups in each society. Progress towards reducing poverty and hunger in the short- and medium-term depends on both kinds of relationships, and on civil society actors attaining the kind of fit with the state that can make both possible.

The magnitude of the impacts on poverty and hunger, as well as their precise pathways, differed across the countries. However, the adverse impacts in each context were concentrated on some of the most marginalized and disempowered groups: the rural poor, racialized, indigenous or minority groups. In each setting, these groups were most likely to have had government or civil society services cut or curtailed, with direct and adverse effects on their vulnerability to poverty and hunger. This was true even in countries like Ethiopia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe that had experienced recent disasters, food crises, or economic shocks, in responding to which civil society had played a significant role. Where governments seek to orient NGOs away from advocacy or 'political' work and towards services, they frequently also end up with cuts in those services.

Rapid poverty reduction rates in Pakistan, and similarly fast improvements in hunger in Ethiopia, highlight again that headline poverty and hunger levels can be consistent with restrictions on civil society. But Brazil's recent gains have been reversed, in part because of a rightwing political shift that halted spending on social protection for the poorest. By contrast, in Ethiopia, adverse impacts have

been less obvious; civic space was restricted, but service-providing organizations continued, and the government shoulders more of the task of reducing hunger and poverty, with some effect.

In each setting, civil society groups faced threats or actual violence: participation in public policymaking, agenda-setting, and scrutiny or informed critique has become highly constrained. The case studies indicate clearly that despite the great differences across settings, and the varieties of 'fit' between states and civil societies, restrictions on civic actors have the overall effect of excluding the most marginalized and disempowered from either participating in policies that affect their primary concerns, or from receiving services that they need. Each of these countries (with the possible exception of Ethiopia) is likely to fail SDG 16 on peaceful and just institutions; each would also fail on the 'core' SDGs 1 (eradicating poverty) and 2 (eradicating hunger) because restricted civic space has meant reversals and entrenched positions against inclusive forms of development. The groups being 'left behind' by development are likely to increase in number, and to face worsening conditions of poverty and hunger.

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