



Response to Shrinking Civic Space in Zimbabwe

PRFT's Response to the Civic Space Campaign in Zimbabwe

The Poverty Reduction Forum Trust (PRFT) joins other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Zimbabwe campaigning against the shrinking of civic space in Zimbabwe. The continued discussions around and voices on civic space have coincided with the calls for dialogue as a way of resolving social, economic and political issues. The recognition of dialogue as an important platform of resolving issues brings about the discussion to widen rather than suppress the civic space and ensure that civic players have platforms and avenues to influence the socioeconomic and political discourse in the country. It is PRFT's submission that the civic space is widened to accommodate marginalized voices. As we participate in this campaign against shrinking civic space, we share our perspective of what we have been doing as an organization to adapt to the shrinking civic space through a variety of actions.

Limiting the space in which civic actors operate essentially restrain the contribution of civil society organizations in development processes and platforms. CSOs contribute significantly to development through fostering citizen participation in governance processes, exercising accountability in governance, policy advocacy, and providing essential basic services to marginalized communities. Civil society benefit from policies, regulations and legislation that ensure that they are held to the same standards of professionalism, accountability and transparency that they demand of other actors such as Government and Private sector. It is therefore paramount that legal framework is fairer and not applied selectively to silence critical voices, especially of marginalized groups such as Youths, Women and People Living with Disabilities. This will enhance their contribution to the development process and enhance inclusive growth of the economy.

The PRFT is currently piloting a Resilient Roots Accountability Initiative (RRAI) which seeks to establish genuine grassroots links by being accountable to primary constituents (PCs) as a way of adapting to the shrinking civic space. The objective of the pilot project is to enhance primary constituents understanding of PRFT's work and its mandate through setting up a feedback collection and information dissemination mechanism. PRFT's Accountability Feedback Mechanism consist of a **citizen report card** as the main tool, the Community Advisory Committee (CAC)¹ and Interface meetings which help PRFT systematically

¹ CAC is a community based group which includes local ward councillor, traditional leader, social workers and members of the community, disaggregated by age, gender, and class. This committee is used as community foot soldiers for the organisation, interacting and engaging the wider community including those that do not participate directly in PRFT activities and collecting feedback

validate its actions and strategies through its constituencies-led monitoring of the organization's program and progress. PRFT's is piloting this project in Dora, Mutare Rural where it has been conducting its Rural Basic Needs Basket (RBNB) programme since 2015 and currently the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) programme which started in 2017. The RRAI project is increasing PCs' participation and giving feedback to PRFT's programmes in an effort to discredit forces that may attempt to delegitimize PRFT's work as 'anti-national', 'politically motivated' or 'runners of foreign agents'. The RRAI is conceived on the background of deepening understanding of PRFT's work in PCs and viewing PCs as agents of change rather than passive recipients of PRFT's work. The hope is that, PCs will represent the interests of and associate themselves with work of the organization in a way that will help the organization adapt to the shrinking civic space.

The need for civil society organizations to adopt the same transparency and accountability standards that they demand of others, government and private sector propelled PRFT to undertake the RRAI pilot project. PRFT firmly believes that establishing grassroots legitimacy should go over and above minimum public engagement strategies towards transformational change in way the CSOs work, involve primary constituencies and mobilizing them. Strengthening PCs accountability lessens the likelihood of being wrongly accused of misconduct, corruption, and enables more effective responses when being discredited.

Key Recommendations

- CSOs should innovate around finding effective ways of strengthening grassroots links such as being accountable to PCs as a first step to enhance public support base and strengthen the position of an institutionalized civil society.
- CSOs should advocate for a dynamic and plural civic space through a variety of actions which includes awareness raising, education and dialogue on civic space with government and local authorities given that limited civic space provides for governments and public institutions which are less likely to be responsive to citizens' requests.

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