



CSO Advocacy and Managing Risk in Hybrid Regimes: An Exploration of Human Rights Organizations in Colombia

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Abstract The following study examined advocacy strategies of human rights CSOs in Colombia; how they defended and expanded civic space for vulnerable populations, managed risk and characterized their relationships with INGOs. Twenty-six organizational leaders were interviewed. Results indicate that when under pressure, CSOs mitigate their mission, focus on culturally expressive activities, and avoid regions or topics. Proactive strategies used to advance the mission ranged from influencing policy incrementally through inside channels; ‘cloaking’—dis-simulating the confrontative nature of activities and framing them as apolitical; joining coalitions for protection, legitimacy, and influence; appealing to national and international courts, and the media; and appealing to transnational networks for support. Human rights INGOs enabled CSOs to be more assertive in their advocacy by extending a variety of resources, including funding, legitimacy, global visibility, and some degree of physical protection. The study contributes to our understanding of how human rights CSOs advance democracy in hybrid regimes.

Keywords Colombia · Civic space · Advocacy · Managing risk

Introduction

The following study examines advocacy strategies employed by Colombian civil society organizations (CSOs) in their efforts to enhance the human and civil rights of marginalized populations and the ways that partnering nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) have supported and/or constrained their mission and goals. Since 2010, there has been a global turn away from democratization as governments have restricted civic space through illiberal legislation, administrative restrictions, funding limitations on transnational organizations, state sponsored stigmatization, intimidation, physical harassment, and violence (Appe et al., 2017; Borgh & Terwindt, 2014; Buyse, 2018; Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; CIVICUS, 2020; Hossain et al., 2018; Lust & Waldner, 2015). Efforts to repress or reconfigure civic space have especially targeted civic actors who represent social justice, human rights, marginalized, and Indigenous groups working to support land restitution, the environment, and natural resources subject to extractive industries (CIVICUS, 2017; de la Torre, 2017, 2019; Nygård, 2017).

CSOs engaged in promoting human and civic rights are dedicated to deepening democracy by transforming political, legal, and cultural conditions through their advocacy activities. Advocacy encompasses a wide range of activities intended to influence decision makers and publics with the intention of combatting the structural causes of poverty and injustice. There is little practical guidance available for CSOs working in repressed civic space because the literature on advocacy presupposes a liberal government “with

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the authority and competencies to make and enforce policy” and legal rights (Carré et al., 2020; van Wessel, 2023, 219). Hybrid and authoritarian regimes lack these protections. For example, hybrid regimes exhibit several elements of democracy (free elections, *de jure* civil rights) as well as non-democratic features that reflect political-cultural practices such as “authoritarianism, competing or parallel authorities,” restricted press, and “human rights abuses by state and non-state actors” (Carothers, 2002; Chandler, 2000; Epstein et al., 2006; Morlino, 2008, p. 8). Infringements on CSOs in these environments include disappearances, “surveillance, harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, injury, and death... physical attacks, and protracted legal harassment. Websites and social media platforms are [routinely] blocked, and internet activism is heavily monitored” (Arriaza, 2022; Basset et al., 2017; CIVICUS, 2017, 3; Gellman, 2021; Gómez-Quintero, 2014; Pinto, 2015, 2018).

Colombia is a prototype of how civic space is repressed in hybrid regimes. Democratic principles figure prominently in the 1991 constitution which supports civil rights for Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples and recognizes NGOs as legitimate actors in the policy process. But over the past fifty years, and most decidedly since the 2000s, civic spaces in Colombia have been subject to violent repression. Colombian Presidents have denounced NGOs working for human rights, environmental causes, and Indigenous groups as terrorists linked with FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and other left-wing insurgent groups, framing them as criminal actors (Appe, et al., 2017; Brittain, 2007; Tate, 2009). When past-President Iván Duque Márquez was elected in 2018, he repeatedly deployed the military in response to peaceful assemblies and protests. Hundreds of civilians and dozens of human rights, Indigenous and labor leaders were killed or ‘disappeared’ because of their activism (Jaramillo & Fieser, 2020; Turkewitz, 2021). Between 2016 and 2020, an estimated 500 human rights defenders were killed (United Nations Office of Human Rights, 2020). But in recent years, the nation has taken a hopeful turn. In 2016, a peace accord was signed between the government and FARC. In June 2022, Colombia elected as President a former Bogotá Mayor, economist, and leftist guerrilla member, Gustavo Petro, and as Vice President, Francia Márquez an Afro-Colombian, human and environmental rights defender. The trajectory of human and civic rights in this new political environment is yet unknown, except for the worrisome fact that Petro is starting to show animosity towards the press (www.lasillavacia.com).

The purpose of this research is to advance our understanding of how leaders of CSOs with missions in human and civic rights advocate in environments where civil society is not so civil. There is a remarkable lack of

research directed to how CSOs advocate in politically constrained environments despite that it is commonplace for nonprofits to pursue emancipatory and social justice missions (van Wessel, 2023, 224). Moreover, there is little attention in the literature to how CSOs manage risk, although 85% of the world’s population lives in nations where civic space is categorized as obstructed, repressed, or closed (CIVICUS, 2023; van Wessel, 2023). In the neighboring literature of social movements, the role of leadership has also been ‘under-studied and under-theorized’ despite its criticality to strategy (Ganz & McKenna, 2014, 185; Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). Finally, the work of CSOs in repressed civic space is of import because CSOs lay the foundation for democracy through their development of citizenship, contributions to social cohesion, and the generation of institutional accountability (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Lorch, 2017).

In the following sections, we define our terms and examine literature that provides insights into how leaders navigate constrained civic space. We provide a review of the methodology and themes that emerged from a series of 26 in-depth interviews conducted with the executive directors of CSOs (23) and INGOs (3). The final section of the paper presents an analysis of the findings and their implications.

How Civil Society Organizations Create Civic Space in Adversarial Environments

This research project focused on civil society organizations (CSOs), defined by the UNDP as “voluntary organizations with governance and direction coming from citizens or constituency members, without significant government-controlled participation or representation” (UNDP, 2013, 123). Terms used for nonprofit organizations (NGO, INGO, NPOs and CSO) are contested and for purposes of both simplicity and accuracy, we employ the UNDP definition of CSOs because it best describes organizations selected for this study. Their shared characteristic is independence from direct government control and management (UNDP, 2013, 124).

We employ the Gramscian definition of civil society as an inherently political domain of problem solving and struggle where power relations and ideas about progress can be rationally and critically discussed in the interest of the common good (Chambers, 2002; Edwards, 2010; Gramsci, 1971; Habermas & Berg, 1991). This characterization recognizes civil society as ‘an emancipatory space where the social logic of citizens can shape their worlds in the face of oppressive structural forces’ (Mitlin et al., 2007, 1702). Recently, scholars in legal and human rights have turned to the use of ‘civic space’ to reference tangible elements of civil society that enable or constrain freedoms of expression. Civic space is.

The freedom and means to speak, access information, associate, organise, and participate in public decision-making—is essential to the healthy functioning and development of any society’, and ‘an essential precondition for human rights, social justice and accountable governance’ (Malena, 2015: 11).

CSO engagement of civic space occurs in arenas, or spheres of influence “where struggles around a particular policy or political issue take place” (Borgh & Tewindt, 2014, 29). Similar to a policy subsystem, each sphere (land restitution, mining, and human rights) contains its own actors, rules of interaction, focal points of power, and protections or marginalization accorded to segments of the population (Borgh & Tewindt, 2014). For example, arenas such as human rights often include transnational networks and are able to pressure governments where “channels between domestic groups and their government are blocked” (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, 12).

There is a limited literature on how CSO leaders advance their missions in hybrid regimes (See Borg & Tewindt, 2014; van Wessel, 2023). Pressures against CSOs in authoritarian regimes are more overt, whereas the *de jure* commitment to democracy in hybrid regimes generates ambiguity around strategy and risk (Borgh & Tewindt, 2014). Moreover, there are vast differences in organizational capacity to respond, based on whether CSOs are large and networked internationally, or small, informal organizations. In order to be effective advocates, CSOs require particular capacities: They need to build legitimacy (van Wessel, 2023); the ability to generate evidence; to represent the interests of their constituency; to work collectively; effective messaging; rapport with institutional actors; and the capacity to analyze the political arena (Elbers & Kamstra, 2020). Employed strategically, these capacities enable CSOs to establish countervailing power for their constituencies, “a core dimension of accountability” that diminishes and neutralizes power advantages of institutional actors and fosters opportunities for bargaining and redress (Fox, 2020, 3; Fung & Wright, 2003).

Strategies of influence are characterized in the literature as reactive or proactive, individual or collective (Borg & Tewindt, 2014) and insider versus outsider (Lang, 2013; Onyx et al., 2010). CSOs may employ several strategies simultaneously. Their efforts may be cooperative, they may covertly challenge established interests but frame activity as cooperative, or they may engage in open conflict with the state through protests, court cases, or use of the media. Herein, we describe each.

Reactive efforts are defensive responses most often employed by individual organizations. They do not advance the mission so much as reduce the vulnerability of staff, the workspace, and the community served. Reactive

efforts can involve hiring security, avoiding particular regions, activities, or organizations associated with the left. In some instances, CSOs advance their mission by ‘cloaking,’ presenting an appearance of compliance, but continuing mission-related activity by framing it as apolitical through a change in terminology or delivery formats, such as incorporating the mission in service delivery, or using art to protest or send a message (Borgh & Terwindt, 2014).

Proactive strategies “seek to claim or reclaim political space by tackling [root] causes of injustice ... and holding accountable those responsible” (Borgh & Terwindt, 2014, 170). They are most often pursued as collective responses with the intention of building influence both within and across policy arenas, and for CSO protection (Biekart et al., 2023; Ganz & McKenna, 2014). Cooperative networks offer the advantage of building legitimacy across networks, they provide opportunities to pool resources, expand capacity to hold actors and institutions accountable, broaden constituencies, provide access to more power holders, and foster dialogues that generate long-term strategies (Borgh & Tewindt, 2014; Elbers & Kamstra, 2020; van Wessel, 2023). In one unusual example, Cheng and Chan (2017) found that collectivist leadership, a horizontal network of ‘multiple decision-making platforms led by informal leaders’ has been used by NGOs in high-risk environments because it enabled organizations to persist when formal leaders could be identified and arrested.

Essential to proactive strategies is the framing of organizational communication, a tactic reviewed extensively in both NGO and social movement literature. Frames are “cognitive structures that guide perceptions and representations of reality” (Fiabane et al., 2014, 821). Framing is used for myriad purposes to: craft a community identity (Ganz & McKenna, 2014), articulate an injustice framework, leverage support from other organizations against a shared target (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), foster social accountability (Fiabane et al., 2014), and to disguise, or cloak, organizational intentions. For example, framing has been successfully employed to shift a national narrative of NGOs as terrorists to one of NGOs as human rights victims (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

Advocacy strategies have also been characterized as either insider or outsider (Lang, 2013; Onyx et al., 2010). Insider/direct efforts involve working for incremental change from inside institutions by securing access to horizontal and vertical channels of influence (Lang, 2013). This poses a risk of cooptation because building channels of influence involves negotiating legitimacy with institutional actors (van Wessel, 2023). By contrast, outsider/indirect strategies are intended to generate public support and influence policy. They are openly confrontational, intended to disrupt policy, mobilize and empower

marginalized populations, and educate the public through activities such as protests, demonstrations, litigation in national or international courts, and media exposés of institutional corruption and powerful actors (Borgh & Tewindt, 2014; Lang, 2013; Onyx et al., 2010). While outsider tactics are described as less sophisticated, CSOs may use them for ideological reasons or because they see no institutional support for their mission.

CSOs have the option to engage the state through the judiciary, by submitting complaints to prosecutors and the police, and seeking redress through national and international courts. The efficacy of engaging the judiciary is unclear. For example, van der Borgh and Terwindt found it to be the least favored option (2014) in their study. However, they do note that the judicialization of civic space conflicts is becoming increasingly popular. The larger purpose may be that it draws national and international media attention to injustices or demonstrates that the legal system is compromised (Borgh & Tewindt, 2014). But it removes the struggle from the arena of actors involved and legal decisions may have little impact on their circumstance.

In summary, CSO capacity to advance the mission in hybrid regimes requires organizational legitimacy, compelling messaging, strong alliances, and capacity to discern both opportunities and precarity in the environment (Borgh & Tewindt, 2014; Ganz, 2005; van Wessel, 2023). There are no data indicating which of these strategies is most effective as their use is context driven. The most commonly referenced strategy is to create networks and alliances for protection and to enhance impact. Covert forms of resistance (cloaking) are intended to mitigate the adversarial nature of an activity. More overt forms of resistance frequently generate retaliation from state and non-state actors. In short, effective strategies are a matter of judgment and opportunity. “The character, structure and clout of an organization is informed by the place it occupies in social space” (Gordon, 2008, 26).

Methodology

An interpretive epistemology guides this research. Interpretive research is useful when there is only incipient knowledge of a subject and researchers seek to identify key issues rather than defining them at the start (Yanow, 2007, 2017; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). The main tenet of an interpretive lens is to unveil the meanings people make of their experiences in specific situations mainly through narratives. To that end, we interviewed Colombian CSOs and INGO leaders to understand how they assessed their work in local and regional communities in relation to enhancing democratic spaces. This involved

the use of open-ended questions followed by an in-depth interpretation process. The researchers followed an interpretive logic for understanding and explicating interview material (Haverland & Yanow, 2012) with the intention of understanding how executive directors interpreted their ability to actualize their organizational mission in the environment.

This study is based on primary data drawn from 26 semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face with executive directors of CSOs (23) and INGOs (3) between 2012 and 2019. The CSOs selected for this study have the following characteristics: (1) they are grassroots, community-founded organizations engaged in identity formation, (2) they represent marginalized populations that include Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, rural, women and LGBTQ + populations seeking civil liberties, (3) they perform essential functions as mediating institutions, representing their communities in the public sphere, (4) they are engaged in legal and other peaceful forms of resistance, and (5) central to their efforts is the generation of democratic goods (human and civil rights, social justice). These CSOs encompass the diverse efforts of collective action, political intervention, social service delivery, and/or watchdog activity over government and business sectors (Appel et al., 2017). Given that the intention of the CSOs selected is to influence policy and/or advance civil liberties for their communities, all organizations are pursuing human rights agendas.

CSOs are referred to by pseudonyms and all executive directors (EDs) spoke on the condition of anonymity. All CSOs were locally established and dedicated to either Indigenous groups’ rights (including land restitution, governance, and community rights), protecting civil liberties (freedom of speech, assembly and association), or human rights under siege from state and parastatal violence, peace building and community building, social justice issues (LGBTQ + rights, victims of violence, forced disappearance, human trafficking, and women’s rights). We selected INGOs whose missions explicitly supported human rights and whose leading officers were willing to speak to us. The authors reached out to organizations by email and phone using professional contacts. We selected research participants through a snowballing technique, beginning with known contacts and contacting others recommended by previous contacts, and so forth. Interviews were pursued until we reached an “optimum” level—that is, until we had gathered enough narrative data indicative of similarities and differences to help us understand how the informants lead organizations in the midst of a challenging civic space. Interviews were conducted with executive directors in Spanish; they included the presence of a Colombian national and lasted between 45 min and two hours. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of

analysis. In addition to interviews, the study drew on secondary sources in the form of organizational reports, white papers, government reports, and press releases.

This research project took place over the course of an eight-year period beginning in 2012 with the presidential administration of President Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) and continued through to the administration of President Iván Duque (2018–2022). During the first phase of the research, in 2012, sixteen CSO executive directors (EDs) and two INGO directors were interviewed in Bogotá and Medellín following the described format. Initial interviews were used to formulate more structured questions for a second round conducted during 2018/2019. In the second phase, ten more interviews were conducted with EDs of CSOs and one of an INGO located in Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali. EDs included in the first round were subsequently contacted via email for follow-up questions. Data collected over the ten-year period show the progressive weakening of freedom of speech as well as the tenuous protection of minority rights (such as LGBTQ and Indigenous communities).

We followed two levels of analysis: first-and second-level interpretations. In the first level, the interviews were conducted and respondents answered ten semi-structured questions, prompting storytelling regarding their work and the external challenges they faced when pursuing missions. This first interpretive phase (people's interpretations of their own experiences) yielded copious descriptive "data" for analyzing during the second phase. The second-level interpretive phase (interpretations of first-level interpretations) involved the three researchers interpreting the narrative accounts: listening to the recordings, reading the transcripts in Spanish, and taking notes on emerging themes. This step was followed by a discussion process among the researchers, corroborating accuracy of meaning, agreeing upon salient themes, and deciding on their proper translation into English to preserve contextual meaning. Finally, researchers sought corroboration of the interpretations by interviewees and made appropriate changes when necessary—to ensure the internal validity of the narrative "data."

Interpretive research (e.g., ethnography, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and narrative analysis) does not fall along the canons of quantitative empirical approaches, including generalizability, replicability, and external validity (Elías, 2020). Thus, the present study may not be replicated to the same conclusions (more interpretation is always possible), or its findings generalized to other settings (interpretive methods is founded on the premise that context and experience shape reality as understood at a specific juncture). Nevertheless, it offers important lessons that advance our knowledge by helping us understand similar situations in the Global South and also some Global

North settings. The findings shed light on the practical strategies that CSOs tap on while attempting to achieve their missions in an otherwise threatening environment.

Findings

Executive directors were asked to discuss how they advanced their missions and to frame organizational activities in terms of risk. For context, EDs were asked to think in terms of a stop light: Green refers to safe activities, yellow means proceed with caution, and red indicates activities that are dangerous to organizational leadership, staff, or community members. The themes that emerged from our interviews are reviewed below.

Reactive and Defensive Responses

Reactive responses were not intended to advance the mission so much as survive. Executive directors indicated that the safest way to proceed in constrained civic space is to mitigate the mission: identify the means to be as apolitical, neutral and nonconfrontational as possible.

One ED said,

Our organization has been acting under the green light. We have not been under the yellow light yet because we try to be careful. When an artistic group is going to [join us] we use some filters so we can agree with those persons... because we have had the experience with some singers who have come with their own hard repertoire, and it has been shocking. We do not want the community to think we are guerrilla sympathizers, because automatically we are linked with them.

Yet another ED summarized his approach accordingly,

We stick with the technocratic and research approach accompanied by a strong story. We draw interested people into the narrative and point journalists to the human-interest stories. The intention is to keep people as safe as you can and not incite more political dissent than you need to.

Organizational activities described as safe for proceeding (green light) were culturally expressive activities focused on art, dance, traditional medicine, or education. EDs of small community-based organizations that represent Indigenous communities noted that cultural activities were the *only* activities allowed by local governments.

The need to avoid particular regions was referenced by an ED working in land restitution. The property restitution plan of 2010, or 'Victims Law,' was highly anticipated by hundreds of thousands displaced by the armed conflict and the subsequent takeover of their lands by wealthy

individuals. After the law was passed, several groups returned to their homelands and were killed. The ED noted that his organization had removed employees and staff from these regions.

Proactive Strategy #1: Cloaking: Frame Mission-Related Activity as Supportive of Government Initiatives

Executive directors indicated that fear of reprisal was a deterrent to more open pursuit of mission and they made efforts to appear cooperative and keep a low profile, most particularly if their mission pertained to politically charged issues. EDs spoke of advancing their mission by framing organizational programs as neutral pursuits the government would otherwise support, such as activities that foster economic progress, job training, or micro-enterprise. EDs indicated that data and reports submitted to the media were written with attention to ideological neutrality and they attentively cross-checked facts. One director noted that to avoid appearing adversarial he provided all relevant data to the government prior to press announcements. “I do not surprise them.” EDs provided examples of how they avoid politically charged issues or contact with organizations associated with controversy.

An example of cloaking, or hiding an inherently political activity, was offered in a discussion of the sale of software for the development of websites. An ED described this not as a proactive effort to generate transparency or to create a stronger CSO voice, but as a simple, technological advancement made available to all. The ED who sold software used by nonprofits to create websites described it as follows: “selling software is like recipes—the coding is open and available for adaptation and exchange—in fact, we are making website structures available for all local governments in Colombia.”

EDs directors indicated that to minimize conflict, they avoid publicly shaming power holders, both state and non-state entities. An ED explained the importance of avoiding an open denunciation of the government in the press but instead pursuing resolution through the courts when his organization was attacked.

Our computers have been stolen three times, our [telephone] lines have been tapped, but if I were to have gone to the press, we would have been negatively labeled and it would have drawn the attention of the paramilitaries. So, I went to the prosecutor’s office.

Directors of CSOs that advocate for the protection and rights of women or LGBTQ + individuals indicated that their ability to act is determined by whom had perpetrated the violence. “If he is a powerful person, there is little we can do to help.” They spoke of the importance of maintaining a façade of cooperation when advancing a mission

that challenged established interests. In Colombia, open challenges to the economic interests of elite parastatal actors pose a high risk, as noted by Indigenous leaders who work against extractive mining.

Proactive Strategy #2: Build Coalitions and Digital Media for Protection and Legitimacy

Popular media is a masterful tool used by CSOs to frame purpose, to reveal transgressions by powerful actors, to disperse risk, share resources and expertise, and generate the countervailing power necessary to hold powerful actors accountable (Ali, 2011; Brunetti & Weder, 2003; Brysk, 2000; Hossain et al., 2018; Themudo, 2013; Wooley & Howard, 2017). In searching the internet, we were able to discern that most of the EDs in the study actively employed digital media to advance their missions and generate support but they were reticent to speak of it in interviews.

Several organizations were members of ‘networks of transparency’ intended to counter government accusations of criminality and to assert legitimacy and purpose in the public sphere. One of the most widely recognized ‘transparency networks’ was DIAL (Diálogo Inter-Agencial en Colombia), an umbrella organization for CSOs engaged in humanitarian aid, and an organized response to forced displacement. DIAL accorded CSO members a degree of image protection, legitimacy, and funding, but an unintended consequence of membership was that CSO messaging became more conservative and the restraint generated some resentment. Membership required that all CSOs review and agree on media-related statements. One ED offered, “Everyone has to be in agreement with the language because we don’t want to negatively affect our work in particular regions or with people.”

A human rights network leader recounted a high-risk experience that involved the decision to suspend dialogue with the government policy network, the Mesa Nacional de Garantías (MNG). MNG is a group of senior officials of the government, human rights organizations, and social sector CSOs whose purpose is to determine future actions pertaining to human rights. The network sent a detailed letter to the Ministry of the Interior indicating their reasons for taking distance from the MNG, asserting that the MNG was essentially a means for the Colombian government to “lavar la cara,” or present a positive image to then-President Obama, and thereby sustain US funding. The ED considered this risky because it escalated the problem of human rights in Colombia to an international level, putting the Colombian president under scrutiny by the US government. In fact, the US Congress temporarily suspended funding to Colombia as a result and when the president returned to Colombia, he met with the human rights group for the first time.

(See <https://mcgovern.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=396377>).

Proactive Strategy #3: Insider Tactics: Build Institutional Relationships to Shape Policy

EDs who considered themselves successful in establishing institutional channels of influence were asked to provide examples of how (they believed) they had influenced policy. A few spoke of working with coalitions to draft and introduce legislation. In one unusual example, an ED spoke of how their coalition had successfully challenged a forestry law by engaging scientific experts to write a policy paper on the implications of the law for the environment, the economy, and Indigenous populations. The interorganizational group organized a forum at a well-known university and invited several key officials, including the Ministry of Environment, a representative of the private sector, and representatives of Indigenous and Afro-Colombians (who own substantial collective properties in the region to be affected by the forestry legislation). Previous Ministers of the Environment were in attendance. The resulting report reflected strong opposition to the legislation from the Attorney General, several former Ministers of the Environment, and the newspaper *El Tiempo*. This example illustrates how organizational actors who were networked in the public sector (government, and a university) created a high-profile event and successfully opposed powerful interests without retaliation.

Proactive Strategy #4: Appeal to State Institutions for Support

In hybrid regimes, an appeal to the police or the courts may be more performative than effectual in resolving claims brought by a CSO on behalf of a community. However, in this study, CSO EDs provided numerous examples of seeking redress by appealing to the judicial system, including filing with the attorney general when they experienced threats or sabotage. Note that one ED did not inform the media because it could provoke reprisal from non-state actors (perhaps related to his CSO mission). In another case, an ED of a CSO dedicated to protecting journalists from harassment and violence asserted that they inform media when journalists are threatened or censured and also pursue legal action. This ED noted that their activities fall into the cautionary zone.

We get a record of the threat, search what kind of work the journalist is doing and, according to the severity of the case, we make public announcements

on different levels [and even] a direct announcement to the authorities [including] the prosecutor's office.

For human rights CSOs, the strategy of pursuing court resolution is a costly, long-term endeavor that requires substantial funding, often provided by INGOs. The benefit is not necessarily the legal outcome, but media attention directed to injustices suffered by their constituency that will range across national and international networks.

Proactive Strategy #5: Increase Influence and Legitimacy Through International Alliances

EDs spoke of how INGO alliances provided buffering from coercion and violence and generated some deference, if not legitimacy. Nonetheless, security for organizational leadership and staff remained a necessary component of daily life. Several EDs (funded by European INGOs) described their INGO relationship as highly significant foremost, because they had no domestic source of funding. INGOs provided resources for judicial action as well as fighting legislation, thereby obligating government and private institutions to acknowledge the claims of Indigenous, ethnic and Afro-Colombian communities, even if they remained difficult to enforce. In addition, EDs spoke of how university-community research linkages and the resulting publications were a vital source of support. Although they brought no remuneration, they assisted in elevating the concerns of a community to an international level, especially in the case of mining and extractive industries.

In this study, all international alliances were considered valuable resources to advance CSO missions. INGO alliances expanded the strategic capacity of CSOs because they counter-balanced the influence of powerful domestic actors. They elevated and amplified CSO claims to a global level, where they then reverberated back in the form of international pressure on the government. In some cases, the support (Human Rights Watch) was as simple as the act of witnessing, protecting community leaders by having international workers accompany them in their daily lives.

The lack of tension expressed by CSOs regarding their INGO relationship may pertain to their shared commitment to human rights. An anomaly involved the International Red Cross (IRC), which plays a critical role in identifying and collective the 'disappeared' by working with non-state actors. While particular CSOs openly demonstrate the deaths of community members, the IRC maintains a neutral political stance because they would be unable to negotiate with non-state actors if they were to take a stance.

Proactive Strategy #6: High Risk Activities

EDs described as ‘high risk’ any activity that publicly exposed misdeeds or corruption by government institutions, industries, non-state actors, or the media. (Media outlets in Colombia are privately owned by a handful of individuals closely aligned with the conservative sectors.) All forms of peaceful demonstrations were categorized as yellow or red. Activities that openly pressured institutions for equity, inclusion, civil liberties, or revealing corruption fell into the yellow or red zones. An ED who advocated for finding the ‘disappeared’ and the truth behind their disappearance noted, “We have no green light activities. Everything we do is in the red zone.” Human Rights Watch (HRW), an international advocacy organization exhibited the most overt forms of denunciation of government. “[They] generate a lot of public outcry and then the director leaves the country” noted another ED. The leader of HRW is free to be overtly confrontational because he is not subject to retaliation or violent repercussions. It must be noted that what constitutes high risk activity is not solely based on strategy, it is also based on the community affected, the interests challenged, and whether there are counter-pressures from transnational networks. In this study, Indigenous CSOs were the most conservative in terms of advocacy strategies and they had the least support from domestic networks.

Organizations often employed a range of advocacy strategies simultaneously. For example, one ED had founded a human rights commission and built a network of professionals dedicated to human rights in Colombia. The organization has established channels of influence within the government (insider tactics) and the ED is an active participant in transnational human rights networks. Activists who have become formidable adversaries of government and non-state actors live with constant security for themselves and their families.

Analysis

In the case of organizations working for the civil and human rights of Indigenous, Afro-Colombians, women, LGBTQ + populations, and the displaced, a range of advocacy strategies were identified and are categorized in Table 1. This table elaborates Borgh and Tewindt (2014) categorization of advocacy tactics as individual or collective, and reactive or proactive by presenting strategies along a continuum of risk, from cooperative to openly challenging. For example, in the category of green are insider tactics that represent the organization working for incremental change. The next category of ‘avoidant, or disguised pursuit of mission’ involves CSO activities that are a response to some degree of risk. The CSO may be defending staff or mitigating the mission, or disguising the

challenge that programs present to existing power holders. Moderate risk activities (yellow) involve open engagement in conflict with actors in the environment through established state institutions (courts, media), as well as appeals to transnational networks. There is a strong impetus for establishing the legitimacy of political claims and being predictable. Strikes and demonstrations are moderate to high risk. For example, university students and their parents protesting the cost of education do not engender the risk of a demonstration over the ‘disappeared.’ High risk activities are open denunciations of state institutions and high-profile actors, revealing corruption or injustices.

We found that reactive and proactive strategies are not dichotomous but fall along a continuum. Overall, CSOs that were part of cooperatives were more assertive in their claims and perceived that the collectives had enabled them to build legitimacy, protection, and counter accusations of criminality. Most surprising was the example of a human rights network that suspended dialogue with the Colombian government, resulting in (temporary) suspension of funding from the US, and a long-awaited meeting with the Colombian president *without reprisals*. It may indicate that internal escalations of claims are treated differently, or that insider tactics combined with supportive pressure from international actors can be effectual.

It is nearly impossible for executive directors to discern the tipping point where strategies move from cautionary to the red zone of harassment, violence, and death. It depends on a combination of factors: the population lodging the claims, whether the activities de-legitimated high-profile actors and entrenched economic and political interests, and whether the involvement of transnational human rights networks provided some degree of buffering. For some CSOs, the mission, alone, presents enough of a challenge to institutional norms for violence to be a daily threat. We reference the witnessing of Human Rights Watch, accompanying community leaders in daily activities, and the deaths of young community leaders of LGBTQ + and women’s groups in the recent past (CIVICUS, 2022). In fact, the strategies of community leaders of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations were the most conservative of all CSOs in the study.

Conclusion

The question of how leaders of Colombian CSOs working for human and civil rights strategically pursue their missions reveals a complex leveraging of resources, opportunities, and risk. Their experiences are not unusual for most of the world. In fact, the work to defend and expand civic rights is gaining relevance as democratic principles are under siege in even the most stable democracies.

Table 1 Advocacy strategies

	Individual organizations	Collective organizations
Openly adversarial relationships with power holders	<i>High risk tactics</i> No activities identified by individual CSOs in this study	<i>High risk tactics</i> Open challenges to institutions & high-profile actors through outsider tactics (demonstrations, strikes, boycotts) that generate public awareness, public exposés of misdeeds, ‘naming and shaming’ Borgh and Terwindt (2014). Engagement of transnational networks for support
Open assertion of claims	<i>Moderate risk tactics</i> Press conferences, negotiating between high profile actors to resolve conflict, engagement of state: judicialization of complaints, e.g., filing with prosecutor. Effort to present self as cooperative, accurate and predictable (no surprises)	<i>Moderate risk tactics</i> Engagement of state: judicialization of complaints, filing with prosecutor, fighting legislation, escalating issues to international arenas: courts, UN, transnational networks for support. Street protests and strikes
Avoidant or disguised pursuit of mission	<i>Reactive/Defensive responses</i> Hire security, engage in cultural activities (arts, dance, music) avoid regions or sensitive topics, pursue mission through service delivery. Avoid with political topics or CSOs	<i>Dissimulated proactive strategies</i> Frame activities as apolitical, cooperative, and non-challenging: job training, micro-enterprise, web design software Seek protection, legitimacy and resources through alliances and networks
Cooperative behaviors	<i>Low risk insider tactics</i> ‘Team player,’ build vertical and horizontal channels of influence, establish legitimacy with institutional actors, work cooperatively within existing legal and regulatory system for incremental change (draft legislation); significant risk of cooptation	<i>Low risk insider tactics</i> ‘Team player’: build vertical and horizontal channels of influence as part of coalition; establish legitimacy with institutional actors, work within existing legal and regulatory system for incremental change (draft legislation); hold high profile policy-related discussions with state actors, significant risk of cooptation

Considerations of future research include a better understanding of how insider strategies shape civic space. Is the combination of insider tactics and pressure from transnational networks an effective strategy? How is internet use expanding transnational networks and fundraising? How common is it for CSOs to cloak intentions and present a façade of cooperation with power holders? In this study of human rights CSOs, INGOs and transnational human rights networks were a critical source of support. What is the norm in other policy arenas?

The CSOs in this study represent an embattled component of civil society that continues to push for accountability from institutional actors and work toward laws that support justice and social inclusion for vulnerable and under-resourced populations. Given the waning of democratic principles in governments across the globe, this complex topic merits further investigation.

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