

## ResiliencyPlus Rapid Feedback: Reflections on the difference between R+ and traditional capacity building approaches

### INTRODUCTION

The USAID-funded Illuminating New Solutions and Programmatic Innovations for Resilient Spaces (INSPIRES) program, led by Internews, has undertaken work to increase the understanding of the drivers of closing civic and political space and to strategically respond to the growing trend of closing civic and political space. Since launching in October 2018, the INSPIRES consortium (Internews, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), DevLab at the University of Pennsylvania, PartnersGlobal, and Results for Development (R4D)) has undertaken work to contribute to three complementary objectives:

1. Develop Innovative Analysis to Deepen Understanding of Civic Space Drivers and Inform Programmatic Priorities for Civil Society (Machine Learning)
2. Test ResiliencyPlus Framework Interventions (ResiliencyPlus)
3. Empower Local Partners to Address Civic Space Threats Effectively (Flexible Response Funds)

As the second objective of INSPIRES, ResiliencyPlus (R+) is a 12-month mentorship and networking intervention that provides support for civil society organizations to improve their organization's level of resiliency. Drawing on research and insights from the latest academic and practitioner thinking on resiliency, the process includes multiple stages to help participating organizations understand their strengths and weaknesses, examine their external civic space environment, build a roadmap to increase their resiliency, and implement that roadmap, making sure to pause, reflect, and adapt as needed.

Since 2018, INSPIRES has supported 66 organizations across 11 countries through the R+ process. For every R+ cohort completed before August 2023, the INSPIRES consortium undertook qualitative data collection and analysis to answer three learning questions regarding these activities:

1. What strategies did partners implement to support preparedness of actors for civic space shifts?
2. What changes do we observe in organizations' behavior, operations, and/or strategies, and are these changes associated with greater organizational resilience?

3. What evidence do we have about preventative strategies associated with stronger capacity of in-country actors to:
  - a) be resilient to changes in the information, legal, and financial space, and
  - b) connect with key stakeholders, including their constituencies and other civil society organizations, in the face of changing civic space?

In addition to the evaluations undertaken for each cohort of organizations, the consortium leveraged an in-person convening with participating organizations in the third and final cohort of R+ to collect rapid feedback on the following key questions<sup>1</sup>:

- How do participating organizations define and understand the concept of “organizational resilience” in the face of changing civic space after participating in R+?
- What do participating organizations and coaching teams see as the key differences between traditional organizational development models and resilience building models such as R+, if anything?

Feedback on these questions was captured by a small research team at Results for Development (R4D) via a series of in-person collaborative discussions with participants at an R+ learning event held in Nairobi, Kenya in July 2023. This brief highlights key learnings and reflections shared by participants during the discussion, and aims to serve as a useful set of lessons and food for thought for other program implementers, donors, and civil society champions going forward.

## LIMITATIONS

Participants at the R+ learning event in Nairobi included participating organizations and coaching teams from Uganda, Tanzania, and Kosovo - three out of the six countries that participated in the third cohort of R+ under INSPIRES. As such, the results shared in this brief reflect perceptions from a subset of R+ participants and are not necessarily representative of all perceptions and experiences from that cohort.

## STRUCTURE OF THIS BRIEF

The rest of this brief is organized around key findings on each of the two rapid feedback questions listed above, starting first with R+ participant reflections on definitions of resilience, followed by their reflections on key differences between the R+ model and traditional capacity building approaches. A management response from the PartnersGlobal team has been incorporated at the end of this brief to indicate the program’s responsiveness in utilizing the information provided by this rapid feedback activity.

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<sup>1</sup> These questions were identified in partnership with R+ participants, consortium partners, and USAID given their interest in understanding program participants’ perspectives on the ways in which R+ was different from other more traditional capacity building approaches, if at all.

## DEFINITIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

The ResiliencyPlus framework defines organizational resiliency as “the ability of an organization to have the adaptive capacity necessary to prepare and recover quickly from the impacts of a dynamic and quickly changing external environment.”<sup>2</sup> While this definition was provided to participating organizations at the beginning of their journey through the R+ process, we wanted to explore how those same organizations define and understand this concept after their participation in the program. Below are key findings from the discussion.

By the end of the R+ process, all participating organizations in Kosovo, Uganda, and Tanzania described the concept of “organizational resiliency” in slightly different ways. However, there were some common elements and language that was used across different organizations’ definitions, including around:

- **The end goal** - Several organizations emphasized that resiliency is the ability of an organization to not only *survive* in the face of civic space threats, but to *thrive* and even grow despite those threats.
- **What is required to be a resilient organization** - Most organizations agreed that becoming a resilient organization requires both a holistic understanding of their operating environment, as well as a multi-faceted approach to addressing any vulnerabilities. For example, most organizations explained that civic space threats can come from inside or outside the organization, and resiliency requires an organization to overcome both. They noted that resilience also requires an organization to not only be aware of those threats but to have concrete strategies in place to deal with those threats - and that those strategies must include both organizational policy changes and effective people management.

*“Becoming a resilient organization is both an art and a science.”*

*“When thinking about resilience, it’s important to remember that civil society organizations are made up of human beings. They bring the soul of the organization and without them, you don’t have anything.”*

<sup>2</sup> ResiliencyPlus Framework: <https://www.partnersglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Resiliency-Framework.pdf>

During the discussion, participants were also asked to reflect on the factors of civil society resiliency that were most important to them given their organization's internal and external context. All organizations provided a list of several factors that were most important for their organization, with all factors related in some way to the civil society resiliency factors from the R+ framework, shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Factors of civil society resilience from the ResiliencyPlus Framework**



The following factors were most frequently cited by organizations during the discussion:

- **Resource mobilization and diversified revenue streams** - Financial preparedness was a factor overwhelmingly cited by organizations across all three countries (Tanzania, Kosovo, and Uganda). Participants explained that given constantly changing donor priorities, an organization's ability to secure sufficient financial resources, including from non-donor sources, was of utmost importance for their longer-term resilience.
- **Staff wellbeing and retention** - Organizations across the three countries emphasized the importance of maintaining a focus on staff wellbeing and mental health as organizations can only thrive if the people who make up the organization are receiving the support and resources they need.
- **Collaboration with other civil society organizations** - This factor was cited by organizations in both Tanzania and Uganda, who noted that their ability to leverage

networks of other like-minded organizations would be important for them to effectively respond to civic space shifts.

- **Contingency planning** - Organizations from Tanzania and Kosovo both cited this factor as one that is particularly important for their organizations' resilience. They explained that while uncertainty is inevitable as a civil society organization, creative planning upfront can help an organization more effectively prepare and respond to threats that emerge.
- **Strong, trusting relationships with constituencies** - In addition to contingency planning, organizations from Tanzania and Kosovo also emphasized the importance of their organizations' relationships and engagement with constituents, which they noted are essential for their organizations' legitimacy as a civil society actor.

Finally, while each set of factors listed above was specific to organizations' internal and external context, all organizations strongly emphasized the interconnectedness of these factors in supporting their longer-term resilience.

## KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RESILIENCYPLUS AND TRADITIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING APPROACHES

From the outset, ResiliencyPlus was intended to challenge traditional organizational development models, which aim to capacitate civil society organizations to be sustainable under conditions that are conducive to civic participation. While this type of support remains important, the R+ model acknowledged that the impacts of closing civic space around the world would require a modified approach to help organizations effectively navigate quickly changing conditions.<sup>3</sup> Below are the key programmatic differences that PartnersGlobal envisioned when R+ was initially designed:

- R+ sought to put organizations “in the driver’s seat” regarding what they need versus taking more of a diagnostic approach as seen with more traditional organizational development models.
- R+ aimed to provide regular and quality interactions with trained coaches and placed a strong emphasis on peer-to-peer learning.
- R+ intended to help organizations take actionable steps to implement organizational changes by providing foundational resources and tools, while also working to capacitate organizations to continue making changes beyond the formal end of the program
- Lastly, R+ aimed to create a sense of ownership over any organizational adaptations that were made

During the rapid feedback discussions led by the R4D research team, participating organizations and coaching teams were asked to reflect on what they - as R+ participants - saw as the biggest differences between other traditional capacity building programs they had been a part of and resilience building programs such as R+, if anything. The following differences were most frequently cited across participants:

- **Supportive, ongoing accompaniment.** While traditional organizational development programs also leverage the expertise of external coaches, trainers, and consultants, the extent of that support often ends after initial training sessions. R+ coaches took it a step further, providing ongoing accompaniment to help organizations apply the knowledge and resources they received in training and follow up on progress. Organizations further described R+ coaches as being “very invested in their process” which was noted as a particularly valuable and distinguishing feature of the R+ model.
- **Holistic approach to organizational development.** R+ support was based on an assessment that explored multiple areas of an organization’s development, rather than just focusing on 1-2 areas or the organization where there may be urgent capacity gaps.

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<sup>3</sup> Resiliency+ Framework: <https://www.partnersglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Resiliency-Framework.pdf>

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This helped participating organizations surface sometimes “unconventional” areas - such as staff wellbeing or diversified funding - that are important for resilience, but organizations maybe had not thought about before in other capacity building programs they had completed.

- **Unrestricted grant funding.** Some organizations noted that other capacity building programs they completed had also included a small amount of funding, while others said this was the first time they had received financial resources in addition to information and tools. However, even for organizations who had received grants previously, they emphasized that the grant provided through R+ was especially useful because it offered flexible and unrestricted funding, and that the reporting process was “more straightforward.”
- **Participatory nature.** Compared to other capacity building programs, R+ prioritized staff ownership of the process, involving multiple if not all organization staff members at different stages of the process.

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