Arrested Development:

The Cost of Suppressing Civil Society in Asia

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Executive Summary

The work of civil society has long been presumed to have a positive impact on development outcomes through substantial social and economic contributions. These include humanitarian, health, and social services, employment and community-building, and rights and governance advocacy for more inclusive, equitable societies.

This report takes a first step towards illuminating the link between civic space[1] and development outcomes such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It deploys an innovative analysis examining both macro-level data and case studies in Asia to demonstrate that protecting civic freedoms—such as the right to associate, and form and operate civil society organizations (CSOs)—is not only a human rights imperative, but a cornerstone of sustainable development.

This report also finds that the suppression of civil society organizations across Asia is undermining development outcomes. Millions of people have been deprived of critical support, weakening progress toward the SDGs. CSOs remain vital for equitable governance, life-defining services, and advocacy for marginalized groups. However, restrictive laws, harassment, and systemic exclusion have severely curtailed their ability to function effectively. To meet the SDGs and protect both equitable economic development and rights, the protection of civic space is essential.

KEY FINDINGS ON LINK BETWEEN CIVIC SPACE AND DEVELOPMENT

Strengthened governance and institutions: States that respect the right to freedom of association achieve stronger governance outcomes, including government effectiveness, judicial independence, and the rule of law (SDGs 16, 17). These gains manifest through improved public participation, more accountable electoral processes, fair and consistent laws, and reduced reliance on the military, forming the foundation for more inclusive, effective, and accountable institutions.

Economic stability and innovation: States that fulfill the right to association tend to improve public sector management, financial stability, and equitable resource use (SDGs 1, 8, 9). This has led to reduced corruption, increased tax revenue, better financial management, stronger social protections, increased aid flows to civil society and government, and a conducive environment for economic growth and innovation, ensuring development benefits are shared more equitably.

Improved health and food security: Respect for freedom of association is linked to improved universal healthcare delivery, lower maternal mortality, and increased im-

1 In this report, "civic space" represents the environment or conditions that allow people and civil society actors to operate freely, participate in the political, social, economic, and cultural life of their societies, and express their views without fear of reprisal. "Civil society" refers to the network of voluntary organizations (e.g., associations, CSOs, NGOs, INGOs), and citizens actively engaging in public life.

munization coverage (SDGs 2, 3). Associations combat food insecurity and undernourishment, ensuring marginalized populations have more equitable access to vital services.

Greater access to quality education: Upholding the right to association correlates with better educational outcomes, including increased years of schooling, better lower-secondary completion rates, and improved educational parity (SDG 4). These advancements enable more inclusive access to education, creating opportunities for future generations and addressing inequalities.

Equality and empowerment: States that fulfill the right to association regularly achieve greater gender equality and reduced inequalities (SDGs 5, 10). These outcomes include more equitable laws, improved women's access to justice, and protections against domestic violence and sexual harassment. Freedom of association also typically encourages fair access to State institutions and protection for minority rights, contributing to a more inclusive society grounded in human dignity.

Access to essential resources: Greater protections for freedom of association correspond with enhancements in universal access to clean water, sanitation, electricity, and clean cooking fuels (SDGs 6, 7, 11). These improvements benefit underserved communities, ensuring healthier and more sustainable urban and rural development, and addressing inequalities in basic resource distribution.

Environmental protection: Respect for freedom of association enables States to better protect the environment and biodiversity by promoting sustainable practices (SDGs 13, 14, 15, 12). Outcomes include reduced deforestation, improved conservation of species, and increased access to clean technologies, fostering climate resilience and environmental sustainability.

REAL-WORLD IMPACTS

Case studies from the Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam illustrate the tangible effects of suppressing the right to association. In the Philippines, the "red-tagging" of associations has crippled health, education, and disaster relief services in rural communities. In Cambodia, the exclusion of labor unions and grassroots associations has entrenched economic inequality and reduced access to essential services. In Vietnam, the suppression of environmental defenders has hindered efforts to address disasters and transition to renewable energy, leaving communities vulnerable to worsening pollution and natural calamities.

These examples underscore the socioeconomic costs of restricted civic space, with disparate impact on marginalized groups such as rural populations, women, and indigenous communities. Suppression disrupts service delivery, silences advocacy, and deepens inequalities, violating fundamental human rights and jeopardizing sustainable development.

A CALL TO ACTION

The evidence is clear: suppressing associations undermines human rights, entrenches inequality, and destabilizes development. Marginalized communities bear the heaviest burdens, with reduced access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. Contrary to authoritarian claims that civic freedoms threaten stability, the data shows that enabling associations to operate freely actually strengthens governance, resilience, and development outcomes.

Protecting civic space is not only a human rights obligation but an investment in a more equitable and sustainable future. Governments, international actors, and civil society in Asia and beyond must act collectively to safeguard the fundamental right to freedom of association. Without this commitment, countries risk not only losing developmental progress but also the capacity to respond to global challenges such as climate change and rising inequality.

“Contrary to authoritarian claims that civic freedoms threaten stability, the data shows that enabling associations to operate freely actually strengthens governance, resilience, and development outcomes.

1. Introduction: From Assumptions to Evidence

Associations—including CSOs, NGOs, and INGOs—play a critical role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promoting resilience, and protecting human rights across Asia.[2] They provide essential services, advocate for marginalized communities, and amplify voices often excluded from decision-making. However, in many parts of Asia, States have increasingly viewed independent associations as threats, implementing restrictive laws, bureaucratic hurdles, and targeted harassment to curtail their activities.

The SDGs envision a world of inclusive growth, environmental sustainability, and equitable governance. Yet, the suppression of civil society threatens to derail these ambitions. When associations are silenced, the ripple effects extend far beyond the organizations themselves, impacting the millions relying on their services.

While it is widely assumed that civil society suppression undermines development outcomes, there has been limited research specifically examining how these dynamics work out. Much of the existing literature focuses on mechanisms of suppression—such as restrictive laws or targeted attacks—without fully exploring their developmental impacts. A key informant told ICNL: *"As advocates, we tend to predict impact but fail to do actual measurements."*[3] This report seeks to fill this gap by connecting macro-level trends with micro-level case studies from Asia. It examines how limiting civic space affects key sectors like health, education, and environmental protection, holding countries back from achieving their development goals.

Through a combination of data analysis and qualitative case studies, this report highlights the tangible effects of suppression on communities, and posits how rights-respecting approaches are more likely to promote positive economic outcomes. It underscores that protecting civic space is not merely a matter of safeguarding rights, but a prerequisite for sustainable and inclusive development.

2 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs).

3 Association leader in Thailand; discussion on 12 October 2024.

2. Mechanisms of Control: How States Restrict Associations in Asia

All States in Asia[4] engage in some level of suppression of civil society, including what one key informant labeled *"drama-cracies"*—States that appear to allow certain liberties, such as the freedom to express criticism of the government, but systematically exclude associations from meaningful decision-making.[5] Suppression takes various forms, from restrictive legislation to harassment and violence. Although these measures are often justified under the guise of national security, their true impact is the erosion of essential services and advocacy efforts, leaving communities without critical support and amplifying existing vulnerabilities.

A. RESTRICTIVE MEASURES

Associations often become targets when their successes are perceived as threats to State control.[6] State targeting often occurs in response to local associations collaborating with international allies, leveraging external pressure to enact reforms—a phenomenon known as the "boomerang effect,"[7] in which States enact restrictive laws to hinder associations' operations, particularly those engaged in advocacy.[8]

Authoritarian States frequently try to draw a distinction between "political" and "development" associations, aiming to restrict those conducting advocacy while allowing service-oriented groups to operate under stricter oversight.[9] However, this distinction collapses in practice, as meaningful development often requires advocacy to address systemic issues.[10] For instance, health associations classified as "developmental" may be rebranded as "political" if they address reproductive or LGBTIQ+ health, areas deemed contentious by conservative regimes. Authoritarian States may not intend to hinder development but tolerate certain negative impacts in their effort to enforce control.[11]

Many authoritarian States formalize suppression through laws that impose burdensome registration and reporting requirements,[12] justify crackdowns and encourage

4 This report focuses primarily on Asia, but most of the trends and findings are widely applicable, and call for similar research to be conducted globally.

5 Association leader in Indonesia, discussion on 25 September 2024.

6 For instance, a key informant told ICNL: "Typically, the South Korean government does not target specific groups for attacks. However, since President Yoon Seok-yeol took office…he persistently targeted those attempting to report on his alleged wrongdoings." Association leader in South Korea; discussion on 7 October 2024.

7 The boomerang effect occurs when domestic associations send information to international associations intending to use international pressure to influence the State. Keck M. and Sikkink K. (1998), "Activists beyond Borders."

8 Banks N., Hulme D., and Edwards M. (2015), "NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited."

9 Rodan G. and Hughes C. (2012), "Ideological Coalitions and the International Promotion of Social Accountability."

10 Banks N., Hulme D., and Edwards M. (2015), "NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited."

11 Heinzel M. and Koenig-Archibugi M. (2023), "Harmful Side Effects." For instance, in 2017, Pakistan expelled international associations, including several dedicated to basic health services, viewing their loss as acceptable collateral damage in the pursuit of tighter oversight: The Guardian (2017), "'Illegal and primitive': Pakistan expels foreign aid groups in droves."

12 Lorch J. and Sombatpoonsiri J. (2022), "COVID-19 and Civil Society in Southeast Asia."

violence under claims of national security,[13] and use the judiciary to enforce executive directives.[14] These measures lead to self-censorship among associations,[15] discourage the establishment of new groups, and offer authoritarian States a veneer of legitimacy to deflect criticism.[16]

B. SELECTIVE EXCLUSION

Authoritarian States often undermine associations by selectively excluding them from policymaking.[17] Engaging only with groups deemed non-threatening, they marginalize critical associations, limiting their influence over decisions. This tactic allows States to curate narratives that align with their agendas while side-lining dissenting voices to reconfigure or reorganize civic space in the government's favor.[18]

Women's associations are frequently targeted in this process, as their work on gender equality or economic empowerment often challenges entrenched power dynamics and traditional norms.[19] Similarly, indigenous and environmental advocacy groups are excluded if they oppose government policies or corporate interests. By excluding these groups, authoritarian States maintain an appearance of inclusivity while silencing perspectives that could drive meaningful change.

C. CONSEQUENCES

Evidence suggests that restrictions on associations often achieve their intended effect, albeit at a significant cost to development outcomes and beneficiaries.[20] In countries like Ethiopia, Bangladesh, India, and Zambia, restrictive laws have led to the closure of human rights associations and weakened ad-

Women's associations are frequently targeted in this process, as their work on gender equality or economic empowerment often challenges entrenched power dynamics and traditional norms.

13 Poppe W. and Wolff J. (2017), "The contested spaces of civil society in a plural world."

14 Heinzel M. and Koenig-Archibugi M., (2023), "Harmful Side Effects."

15 Chaudhry S. (2022), "The assault on civil society."

16 Heinzel M. and Koenig-Archibugi M., (2023), "Harmful Side Effects."

17 Chimiak G., Kravchenko Z., and Pape U. (2024), "Civil Society and the Spread of Authoritarianism."

18 Global Policy (2021), "The Selective Closure of Civic Space."

19 Human Rights Watch (2024), "UN Meeting Blocks Afghan Women from Agenda, Participation."

20 Fransen L. and Dupuy K. (2024), "Death by Law: Restrictive Regulations and INGO Numbers."

vocacy efforts.[21] Global studies show that countries imposing multiple restrictions experience declines in the number of associations and reduced advocacy capacity.[22]

Economic impacts are also significant. Restrictive financial laws targeting associations, such as those enacted in India, have been shown to correlate with a 32% decline in bilateral aid flows,[23] hindering funding worldwide for both governmental and non-governmental development projects.[24] In aid-dependent countries, these regulations complicate operations and deter donor support, leaving marginalized communities without critical services.

Some associations adapt to these challenges by pivoting to less politically sensitive work, modifying their activities, or rebranding to avoid scrutiny.[25] For example, removing "rights" from organizational titles allows some groups to continue operating under restrictive regimes.[26] However, such adaptations may dilute the effectiveness of their original missions, leaving systemic issues unaddressed.

D. GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

Despite widespread reports of suppression, there is limited research on its direct and indirect impacts on development outcomes and beneficiaries.[27] Civil society and academic studies often focus on legal frameworks or specific incidents, such as forced closures or arrests, rather than exploring how these restrictions disrupt services and advocacy efforts. While the presumption that suppression undermines development is widely accepted, detailed analyses confirming these impacts remain scarce. The following chapters aim to address this gap, exploring how restrictions on associations in Asia directly affect communities.[28]

21 Heinzel M. and Koenig-Archibugi M. (2023), "Harmful Side Effects"; Scroll (2022), "Centre cancels foreign fund licence of NGO Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative."

22 Heinzel M. and Koenig-Archibugi M. (2023), "Harmful Side Effects."

23 Dupuy K. and Prakash A. (2017), "Do Donors Reduce Bilateral Aid to Countries with Restrictive NGO Laws?"

24 Gutiérrez J. and Avellaneda C. (2022), "The (Un)intended Effects of Regulatory Burden on Policy Effectiveness."

25 Banks N., Hulme D., and Edwards M. (2015), "NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?"

26 Dupuy K., Ron J., and Prakash A. (2015), "Who survived? Ethiopia's regulatory crackdown on foreign-funded NGOs."

27 Lorch, J. (2023), "Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation."

28 Springman J., Malesky E., Right L., and Wibbels E. (2022), "The Effect of Government Repression on Civil Society."

3. The Ripple Effects: Freedom and Macro Developmental Outcomes

This chapter builds upon the previous one by providing a data-driven examination of the macro-level relationship between the right to freedom of association and developmental outcomes across Asia, identifying where State restrictions on organizations may harm wider societal progress. By highlighting correlations between association rights and development indicators such as governance, health, education, and economic performance, this section underscores the tangible costs of suppressing civic space.

METHODOLOGY

The study examines how the right to association interacts with 267 developmental indicators across 23 countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia.[29] A bespoke Right to Association Rating was developed, incorporating key elements of associational freedoms,[30] and compared against metrics on the Sustainable Development Goals, economic growth, governance, and business outcomes.[31] Correlations were analyzed using Pearson coefficients,[32] with a focus on both raw and percentile-based comparisons to account for outliers and contextual variations.[33] Correlation scores above 0.4 or below -0.4 indicated a clear trend, which, while not establishing direct causality, suggests strong and influential relationships between association rights and development out-

29 The countries analysed in this study include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. Insufficient information on freedom of association was available for Brunei Darussalam and the Maldives. This analysis does not adjust for population size, which can affect results if smaller or atypical countries show outlier trends, such as Timor-Leste with low development scores or Singapore with high scores but limited association freedoms.

30 The bespoke Right to Association Rating was developed for this report and is calculated based on the average score of a further four bespoke sub-ratings. Multiple bespoke ratings enabled a more disaggregated review of each correlation with development outcomes to better understand whether the correlation was focused or broad. The first bespoke sub-rating was the Combined Freedom of Association Rating (CFAR), which measures how freely countries permit civil society organisations (CSOs) and combines indicators on CSO entry and exit, repression, independence, and public inclusion. The Combined Participation in Associations Rating (CPAR) reflects public involvement in civil society, based on indicators including public participation in CSOs, women's participation in CSOs, and public engagement in trade unions, political associations, and non-political associations. The Combined Consultation with Associations Rating (CCAR) evaluates how frequently policymakers engage with CSOs, using indicators such as policymakers' consultation with CSOs, breadth and independence of consultations, public participation rates, and the inclusion of consultations in policy deliberations. Lastly, the Women's Participation in CSOs Rating (WPCR) assesses the extent of women's participation in civil society.

31 Sources include the French Institutional Profiles Database, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, Sustainable Development Goal Indicators, Gender Indicators, the Doing Business Database, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project.

32 The Pearson correlation coefficient, denoted as *r*, ranges from -1 to +1, where +1 indicates a perfect positive correlation, 0 indicates no correlation, and -1 indicates a perfect negative correlation. The extent of correlation was interpreted as follows: 0.7 to 1.0 (or -0.7 to -1.0) indicates a strong correlation (variables are highly related), 0.4 to 0.69 (or -0.4 to -0.69) indicates a moderate correlation (a clear, though less strong, relationship), 0.1 to 0.39 (or -0.1 to -0.39) indicates a weaker correlation (a relationship exists but is not strong), and 0 indicates no linear relationship.

33 A raw correlation assesses general trends in how variables interact across the dataset, while a percentile correlation groups countries based on association ratings and development scores, allowing comparison among similar-ranking countries. Using both methods provides a fuller view: raw correlations show broad interactions, but extreme disparities can obscure nuanced patterns. Percentile-based correlations mitigate outlier effects by grouping countries into tiers, revealing relationships that may only emerge within similar levels of association or development. Stronger percentile correlations suggest that association rights might only substantially impact development once a threshold is met, highlighting how outliers and unique contexts can influence trajectories. The focus remains on linear correlations, though potential non-linear effects, such as varying impacts of repression based on severity, may warrant further investigation and regression analysis.

comes. The table below presents the association ratings for each country in Asia included in the study, with higher ratings indicating greater fulfillment of the right to association.

RIGHT TO ASSOCIATION RATING	
Afghanistan	0.56
Bangladesh	1.99
Bhutan	2.34
Cambodia	1.59
China	1.23
India	2.07
Indonesia	2.67
Japan	2.75
Laos	1.15
Malaysia	2.41
Mongolia	2.19
Myanmar[34]	1.43
Nepal	2.64
North Korea	0.32
Pakistan	2.29
Philippines	2.45
Singapore	1.90
South Korea	2.63
Sri Lanka	2.44
Taiwan	3.01
Thailand	1.96
Timor-Leste	2.52
Vietnam	1.92

34 Myanmar has recently shifted rapidly from an emerging democracy to an authoritarian military regime. This rating reflects several datasets from just before the 2021 coup up until 2024. If all datasets were from 2024, it is likely the rating would be lower.

> This study developed a bespoke Right to Association Rating, which incorporates key elements of associational freedoms and compares them against metrics on the Sustainable Development Goals, economic growth, governance, and business outcomes.

RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

Finding: Public engagement flourishes when barriers to association are removed.

The data demonstrates that the desire to organize and participate in independent associations is widespread across Asia. A strong correlation (0.9) between the fulfillment of the right to association and public participation indicates that where barriers to association are removed, people engage actively in civic life.

Where the right to association is respected, participation in governance and society increases significantly (0.89). People are more likely to join independent trade unions (0.69), independent non-political associations (0.85), and independent political associations (0.81). They engage in collective efforts across a range of areas, including social advocacy, political engagement, and labor rights. These findings highlight that the right to association is neither marginal nor imposed externally—it reflects the public's intrinsic interest in organizing to pursue common goals, amplify their collective voice, and defend their rights.

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Finding: Civil liberties, diversity, and accountability thrive where associations are free to operate.

The data confirms a strong correlation between respect for association rights and respect for other civil and political rights. Asian countries that protect the right to association also uphold individual liberty (0.85) and equality before the law (0.85). They protect freedom of expression (0.91), academic freedom (0.91), internet freedom (0.82), and media freedom (0.90). These correlations suggest that free association contributes to an open society, enabling public discourse and civic engagement without fear of censorship.

The right to association also correlates with respect for religious freedom (0.80) and protection against torture (0.80), reflecting the role civil society plays in promoting tolerance and accountability. Economic rights, such as property rights (0.65), are better protected in countries where associations flourish, illustrating how civic engagement reinforces individual ownership and stability.

These findings support the principles outlined in the 1993 Vienna Declaration, which underscores the indivisibility, interdependence, and interrelatedness of fundamental rights,[35] alongside more recent human rights discourse affirming that these rights are complementary and mutually reinforcing.[36]

35 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993), "Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action."

36 This language can be found across international discourse. For instance: United Nations General Assembly (2005), "World Summit Outcome"; United Nations General Assembly (2012), "Declaration of the High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels."

In contrast, Asian countries that restrict the right to association tend to be closed societies governed by authoritarian regimes that do not uphold any fundamental rights or commit to democratic values.

DEMOCRACY

Finding: Freedom of association reinforces democratic systems through pluralism and electoral integrity.

The data reveals strong correlations between association rights and democratic governance in Asia (0.88). Countries that uphold the right to association conduct freer and fairer elections (0.81) and maintain stronger electoral processes (0.43). Civil society plays a pivotal role in supporting democratic values by educating voters, monitoring elections, and promoting electoral integrity.

Countries protecting the right to association also tend to embrace liberal (0.84) and egalitarian (0.76) forms of democracy, protecting individual freedoms, promoting pluralism, and ensuring minority rights within their democratic frameworks. Additionally, these countries are more likely to practice participatory (0.87) and deliberative (0.86) forms of democracy, demonstrating how associative freedoms foster inclusive and thoughtful decision-making–elements essential to more democratic governance.

GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS

Finding: Working with associations fosters accountability, expertise, and social cohesion.

A moderate correlation exists between the fulfillment of the right to association in Asian countries and their government's overall effectiveness (0.52). When disaggregating the right to association into its component parts, government effectiveness correlates strongly with how much policymakers consult with associations (0.59), particularly those organizations inclusive of women (0.56). Effectiveness also has a moderate negative correlation with restricted association rights (-0.41) and limited public participation in associations (-0.43). Percentile analysis, eliminating outliers, reveals even stronger correlations: countries in higher percentiles of association rights show a sharp improvement in government effectiveness (0.92).

Government effectiveness correlates strongly with how much policymakers consult with associations, particularly those organizations inclusive of women.

This suggests that governments enabling associations and diverse participation tend to perform better in governance, while those that restrict associations generally perform worse. Associations provide specialized expertise and act as watchdogs to monitor government conduct, enhancing accountability. Furthermore, associations build trust between governments and the public, promoting social cohesion.

Strong to moderate correlations also appear between the right to association and specific aspects of government performance, including public sector management (0.65), structural policies (0.59), human resources management (0.60), and public administration (0.56). These correlations indicate that associations are not only essential in advocating for government accountability but also contribute to the development of effective governance systems, including systematic rules.

RULE OF LAW

Finding: Robust associations strengthen legal frameworks and limit executive power.

There is a moderate correlation (0.59) between protecting the right to association and adherence to the rule of law, suggesting that civil society helps hold States accountable and ensures laws are applied fairly. Associations act as watchdogs, monitoring State actions and promoting consistent law enforcement.

The quality of legislative and regulatory frameworks also improves alongside stronger association rights (0.60), particularly regarding law predictability and enforcement transparency (0.73). Civil society advocacy may lead to clearer laws and more reliable enforcement, reducing opportunities for arbitrary decisions.

Asian countries with robust association rights also exhibit stronger judicial (0.78) and legislative (0.81) constraints on the executive, reflecting the role of civic participation in maintaining checks and balances. Associations encourage public pressure to prevent executive overreach, empowering other branches of the State to hold the executive accountable.

Judicial independence also shows a moderate correlation with association rights (0.60), although weaker links with the speed (0.39) and enforcement (0.38) of decisions. These findings suggest that while civil society strengthens legal systems, structural barriers may still impede timely justice and effective implementation.

CORRUPTION AND TRANSPARENCY

Finding: Greater freedom of association exposes and reduces corruption.

Corruption is tied to the rule of law, as weak legal frameworks often create an environment in which it can thrive. The data shows a moderate correlation between protecting the right to association and reducing corruption across Asia (0.5). This relationship is particularly pronounced in specific anti-corruption metrics, such as reductions in bribery (0.77) and fewer gift demands by public officials (0.53). Countries that permit public participation in associations and engage in systematic consultations with associations exhibit lower corruption levels (0.76, 0.62).

These findings suggest that civil society acts as a crucial force in exposing corruption and advocating for stronger anti-corruption measures. Associations enhance public oversight, leading to more ethical governance practices.

Fewer correlations appear between association rights and State transparency indicators, such as the reliability of government accounts (0.21), government budgets (0.07), and accounts of State-owned institutions (0.17). There are also only small correlations to transparency in public procurement (0.14). This suggests that while civil society effectively confronts visible corruption, structural reforms—such as public accounting improvements—are less clearly susceptible to external influence. Transparency initiatives, particularly related to the economy, may require deeper internal reforms that associations are less equipped to affect directly.

ECONOMY

Finding: Financial management and public trust improve where associations operate freely.

While associations encourage effective governance, which positively influences economic outcomes, more direct correlations between the fulfillment of association rights and standard economic performance indicators such as GDP or GNI are not immediately apparent due to the complex interplay of governance, historical context, and structural factors.[37]

There are, however, clearer relationships in financial management. A positive correlation (0.44) between association rights and tax revenue as a percentage of GDP suggests that increased freedom of association may foster public trust in governments, correlating with greater willingness to comply with tax obligations.

Countries fulfilling association rights also demonstrate high financial sector ratings (0.67), equitable public resource use (0.64), effective budgetary management (0.64), and

37 This includes total, per capita, current, and growth measurements of GDP and GNI.

stronger financial management (0.62).[38] These findings suggest that civil society's influence helps ensure sound financial management and fair resource allocation.

EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Finding: Freedom of association enhances social protection.

Employment and social protection, which include measures like unemployment benefits and pensions, are important aspects of any country's economy. The data reveals a notable correlation (0.67) between the fulfillment of association rights and social protection ratings, suggesting that stronger associative rights may contribute to more robust social protection systems. Countries in Asia with greater freedom for associations appear better equipped to support these measures, likely through the advocacy and resources provided by civil society organizations.

There is insufficient data available for some Asian countries to determine clear correlations between association and employment rates, social insurance coverage, and safety net programs in the region—particularly for marginalized populations. However, journalistic investigations suggest significant employment in the non-profit sector and rising unemployment when associations are shut down.[39]

POVERTY

Finding: Fair resource distribution improves where associations are free.

Poverty indicators are also important factors in assessing an economy and equitable development. There is a moderate correlation (0.42) between protection of the right to association and the equal distribution of resources, which becomes particularly strong

> Associations are a vital part of broader efforts to tackle poverty, helping to build equitable systems that support long-term economic resilience and stability.

38 Further analysis of economic development performance is limited by a lack of reliable, comparable data for 11 of the 23 Asia Pacific countries. This data gap includes crucial insights into economic policy quality, resource mobilisation efficiency, equity in public resource use, as well as assessments of macroeconomic management, budgetary and financial management quality, and policies related to association and debt.

39 For example, India's non-profit sector accounts for approximately 2 percent of GDP and employs millions, with many of these jobs located in rural and underserved areas. The closure of associations due to regulatory changes, such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), has left thousands unemployed and deprived communities of critical services: Scroll India (2023), "FCRA licence crackdown has plunged India's non-profit sector into a crisis"; ICNL (2022), "The Regulatory Regime Debilitating India's Nonprofit Sector."

when countries are analyzed by percentiles (0.99). This suggests that Asian countries with robust civil society participation tend to distribute resources more equitably across the population.

While associations are instrumental in promoting resource equity, addressing extreme poverty requires multiple strategies, including economic policies and structural reforms at scale. Civil society complements these efforts by creating conditions for inclusive economic growth and amplifying voices advocating for systemic change. These findings underscore that associations are a vital part of broader efforts to tackle poverty, helping to build equitable systems that support long-term economic resilience and stability.

EQUALITY

Finding: Equitable governance flourishes alongside the freedom to associate.

The data shows that Asian countries that protect association rights are more likely to advance equality and non-discrimination. A strong correlation between association rights and equal access to State institutions (0.80) suggests that civil society promotes inclusion, ensuring that minorities engage with the State equitably. This relationship strengthens when outliers are minimized, with a near-perfect correlation (0.99) across percentiles.

A correlation with egalitarian policymaking (0.64) indicates that in countries where people can freely organize, States are more likely to promote fairness and justice. Similarly, States protecting association rights are more inclined to adopt policies that provide equal protection to all, safeguarding minorities (0.61).

Moderate correlations exist between association rights and equality among social classes (0.57), social groups (0.62), and fair treatment for foreigners, including migrants and refugees (0.55). However, weak correlations with urban-rural and sub-national inequalities (0.17, 0.2) suggest that while civil society supports national-level equity, local disparities remain challenging to address.

GENDER

Finding: Women are more empowered and their rights protected when associations are free and inclusive.

Gender equality is a cornerstone of inclusive development, and the data shows that respect for association is linked to women's legal and social freedoms. A strong correlation (0.81) with women's access to justice highlights how civil society empowers women to seek legal recourse, while a very strong correlation (0.93) with women's freedom of expression underscores the role of association rights in amplifying women's voices and fostering their civic participation.

Associations also play a role in shaping legal protections, as evidenced by a notable correlation (0.61) with domestic violence legislation. Similarly, a moderate correlation (0.59) with women's job opportunities and freedom to travel reflects how association-friendly environments support women's economic and social mobility.

There is a moderate connection (0.47) between association rights and broader empowerment of women, such as divorce rights, equal pay, and protections against sexual harassment. Correlations with contraceptive access, reduced gender-based violence, or life expectancy are less pronounced, suggesting that these areas may rely more heavily on targeted health and social policies rather than civic engagement alone. Nevertheless, strong correlations with educational opportunities for girls highlight how civic engagement fosters gender equity in education, demonstrating the transformative potential of association rights for future generations.

EDUCATION

Finding: Freedom of association encourages more schooling, especially for girls.

The data reveals a modest correlation between the fulfillment of association rights and educational attainment across Asian countries, including primary (0.2), lower secondary (0.22), and upper secondary (0.17) completion rates, as well as adult literacy (0.12). This suggests that while association rights contribute to educational outcomes, they function within broader systematic frameworks necessary for widespread improvements.

A more substantial impact emerges when examining specific policies. A moderate correlation (0.47) exists between association rights and policies on expected years of schooling for children, which strengthens significantly (0.87) when countries are grouped into percentiles to mitigate the influence of outliers. This relationship is particularly pronounced in policies for girls' expected schooling years (0.53). Similarly, a moderate correlation (0.4) between association rights and educational equality intensifies (0.97) when analyzed by percentile, with the strongest link between educational equality and the extent of government consultation with associations (0.49).

Association rights also correlate with girls' lower secondary completion rates (0.54) and show a moderate link (0.47) with lower secondary completion rates overall, though the correlation with primary school completion remains lower (0.16). Educational parity at both primary and secondary levels is closely tied to women's participation in civil society (0.72, 0.8), underscoring the role of women's civic engagement in promoting gender equality in education. These findings suggest that association rights may foster environments that better support higher educational levels, especially for girls.

HEALTH

Finding: Universal public health systems and food security benefit from freedom of association.

There is a moderate correlation between association rights and the coverage of basic healthcare services across Asian countries (0.42), which strengthens significantly in percentile analysis (0.77). This suggests that countries with active civil societies are more likely to deliver healthcare services universally. Similarly, a moderate correlation with health equality (0.45) implies that civic engagement helps promote equitable health outcomes by advocating for marginalized groups.

While no significant correlations initially appear between association rights and increased healthcare capacity, strong correlations emerge in percentile groupings. These include hospital beds (0.68), nurses (0.76), and surgeons (0.72), indicating that civil society freedoms are linked to healthcare infrastructure indirectly.

Though there are no clear direct correlations with birth rates or life expectancy, freedom of association correlates with reduced maternal mortality (0.45). Women's participation in civil society shows particular importance, correlating with health equality (0.42), complete birth registrations (0.52), lower malaria incidence (0.52), and improved female life expectancy (0.47). This highlights the role of women's civic engagement in ensuring accurate health data and influencing broader health outcomes for all.

High correlations between association rights and immunization rates—DPT (0.66), HepB3 (0.65), and measles (0.64)—suggest that civil society plays an important role in vaccination efforts. Associations mobilize resources, raise public awareness, and facilitate access to healthcare services, reinforcing their importance in public health initiatives.

The connection between association rights and food security is also evident, with correlations in reducing moderate or severe food insecurity (0.62) and undernourishment (0.57). These findings suggest that associations enhance food security by advocating for sound nutrition policies and ensuring vulnerable populations receive adequate nourishment, further linking civic engagement to health outcomes.

> Countries with active civil societies are more likely to deliver healthcare services universally.

ENVIRONMENT

Finding: Freedom of association supports environmental protection and sustainable practices.

Civil society's role extends to environmental protection, as shown by a strong correlation between the fulfillment of the right to association and access to clean fuels and cooking technologies (0.83), suggesting that associations help drive demand for sustainable energy solutions.

While the absence of other strong raw correlations points to a complex relationship influenced by external factors, clearer patterns emerge in percentile analysis. A high negative correlation with increases in deforestation (-0.89) indicates that countries respecting association rights tend to experience lower deforestation rates, as civil society advocates for environmental protection and sustainable practices.

Moderate negative percentile correlations with threats to bird species (-0.61) and mammals (-0.62) further suggest that associations play a key role in biodiversity conservation through policy advocacy and raising public awareness. These findings demonstrate that civil society engagement is instrumental in promoting sustainability and conservation efforts.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Finding: Access to essential infrastructure often improves where associations can operate.

A strong correlation (0.66) between the protection of the right to association and access to electricity highlights the link between civic engagement and essential infrastructure. However, the correlation is less strong in rural areas (0.44), suggesting that while associations help drive infrastructure development, other structural factors may limit electricity access in rural contexts.

Association rights show less correlation with telecommunications indicators. No significant links were found with fixed broadband, telephone subscriptions, or internet use, indicating that civil society has an unclear impact on these areas.

Similarly, association rights show less correlation with transport infrastructure coverage or strength, suggesting that transport development depends more on State initiatives and regional projects than on civil society input. The complexity of logistics and geography may also explain the limited influence of association rights on transport systems.

In water and sanitation, modest correlations appear. A moderate correlation (0.4) exists between association rights and universal water and sanitation coverage. A medium correlation (0.55) with access to safely managed rural sanitation suggests that civic engagement may indirectly support water infrastructure in rural areas. While weaker

than in the energy sector, these correlations indicate that association rights can enhance access to basic services, especially in underserved areas.

PRIVATE SECTOR

Finding: A business-friendly climate emerges alongside freedom of association.

There is a moderate correlation (0.53) between the fulfillment of the right to association and the overall ease of doing business, suggesting that association-friendly environments foster conditions conducive to business. The connections between association rights and specific business indicators, such as the time needed to start a business or local regulations, are less clear.

A moderate correlation (0.45) with administrative barriers suggests that stronger association rights may lead to a reduction in bureaucratic hurdles, creating a more accessible environment for business formation. Similarly, correlations with general business strength indicators (0.45) indicate that participatory association environments support business growth, even if the direct impact on metrics like new business density remains limited.

The significant correlations found between association rights and the rule of law are less clear regarding contract enforcement and other legal rights essential for business operations, although a medium correlation (0.57) emerges with intellectual property protections. Additionally, anti-counterfeiting measures correlate (0.56) with association rights. These correlations imply that environments fostering association rights tend to strengthen intellectual property frameworks. This may result from a culture of transparency and rule of law promoted by civil society engagement, which benefits both businesses and associations.

There is a moderate correlation between the fulfillment of the right to association and the overall ease of doing business, suggesting that association-friendly environments foster conditions conducive to business.

CONFLICT

Finding: Freedom of association helps counter excessive militarization.

The data shows unclear relationships between the fulfillment of association rights and indicators of violence, crime, or conflict in Asian countries, including ethnic, religious, or social conflicts or violent activities linked to criminal or political organizations.

On one hand, this suggests that allowing people to form associations freely does not automatically reduce tensions. On the other hand, it challenges a common narrative promoted by authoritarian States in the region that unrestricted civic freedoms inherently threaten social stability.[40] The lack of clear correlation refutes the claim that civic freedoms and societal harmony are incompatible.

A strong negative correlation (-0.61) exists between association rights and the proportion of the workforce employed by the military. Countries with robust associations tend to rely less on military personnel, indicating that strong associations can offer alternatives to militarization. By addressing societal needs that might otherwise be handled by military structures, associations act as a stabilizing force, helping to balance security with civic engagement.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The correlations highlight the multifaceted role of associations in achieving the SDGs in countries across Asia. Where association rights are upheld, beneficiaries experience tangible improvements in governance, democratic integrity, social equity, and essential service delivery. Conversely, suppression of civil society diminishes these gains, leaving communities without advocacy or support. However, the findings also underscore areas where associations alone cannot address systemic challenges, such as economic growth or extreme poverty reduction. This suggests that associations must operate alongside supportive State policies and broader structural reforms to maximize their developmental impact.

The table below summarizes the findings according to specific SDGs, and the following chapters delve deeper into specific country contexts, illustrating how restricted civic space translates into developmental stagnation and social inequities across Asia.

40 BBC (2024), "Hong Kong national security law: What is it and is it worrying?"

REPORT FINDINGS: EXPECTED IMPACT OF FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION ON EACH SDG

SDG	Impact	SDG	Impact	SDG	Impact
	More equitable resource distribution		Improved access to electricity		Decreased deforestation, improved access to clean fuels
	Reduced undernourishment		Better social protection		N/A[42]
	Improved universal healthcare delivery, increased immunization, and reduced maternal mortality		Greater ease of doing business		Decreased deforestation
	Increased access to education, particularly for girls		More equality, equal access to services, and egalitarian governance		More efficient governance, increased democratization, less corruption, less militarization
	Protected women's rights, including access to justice and economic opportunities		Improved access to clean fuels		Greater participation, better representation
	Greater universal water and sanitation coverage		N/A[41]		

41 Insufficient indicators for Asia to identify the likely impact of freedom of association.

42 Insufficient indicators for Asia to identify the likely impact of freedom of association.

4. On the Ground: Case Studies of Development Under Threat

While data demonstrates a clear macro-level relationship between the right to association and development outcomes, case studies offer vital insights into the lived realities behind the statistics. This chapter examines how suppression manifests in Asia, focusing on the Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam, chosen to represent varying levels of authoritarianism. Each example highlights specific forms of civic space restrictions and their immediate developmental consequences. Together, these cases underscore the societal and developmental costs of repressing civil society.

A. METHODOLOGY

This chapter draws on discussions with civil society leaders across Asia and desk research into academic studies, intergovernmental reports, and advocacy publications. The mixed-methods approach integrates firsthand accounts from those directly affected with broader policy analysis to provide concrete, context-specific insights into how suppression impacts associations and the communities they serve.

B. RED-TAGGING IN THE PHILIPPINES

Despite transitioning from authoritarian rule to democracy in 1986, the Philippines remains affected by elite capture, arbitrary justice, and violence.[43] Associations are regularly subject to attacks, prosecutions, and operating restrictions.[44] The practice of "red-tagging"—labeling civil society actors as communists, subversives, or terrorists—has become the State's primary tool of suppression.[45] This has devastated health, education, and disaster relief services, particularly in rural and impoverished areas.

Red-tagging encourages violence against civil society actors,[46] including killings and sexual violence,[47] and directs State agencies to target associations through expanded legislative tools. Laws such as the Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act (2012) and the Anti-Terrorism Act (2020) have entrenched these practices, enabling measures like account freezes by the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC)[48] on

43 Freedom House (2024), "Philippines."

44 IBON international (2020) "On the outbreak of state crackdowns v/s dissent."

45 Inquirer (2019), "CHR asked to probe red-tagging of human rights group."

46 Amnesty International (2019), "Philippines: Stop 'red-tagging', investigate killings of activists." For instance, associations like Karapatan, a prominent human rights group, have been openly labeled as "communist fronts," making staff and activists targets for harassment, death threats, and violence. In 2019, two Karapatan members were murdered shortly after the Duterte presidential administration publicly branded the association subversive.

47 Rappler (2019), "Rights group leader gets death and rape threats on Human Rights Day." See also Human Rights Foundations (2023), "Red-Tagging in the Philippines: A License to Kill", and Columbia University (2024), "Red-Tagging in the Philippines: The Modern McCarthyism Threatening Freedom of Expression."

48 PhilStar (2024), "'Terrorism financing' cases filed vs activists."

tenuous grounds of "funding terrorism."[49] Many staff and volunteers from red-tagged associations have faced prosecution, with at least one jailed as of March 2024.[50] A key informant told ICNL: *"These laws are emblematic examples of such policies which cause great harm to CSOs."*[51] Red-tagging disproportionately affects associations working with marginalized communities, environmental resources, and rural development, severely undermining their ability to deliver essential services to vulnerable populations.[52]

Red-tagging has become a pervasive tool to target associations providing critical services to marginalized communities across the Philippines. The Rural Missionaries of the Philippines (RMP), which has served rural poor and minority populations for over five decades, including by fighting impunity,[53] saw its operations crippled after being accused of terrorist financing by the Department of Justice.[54] The AMLC froze RMP's bank accounts, and the National Telecommunications Commission blocked its website,[55] disrupting programs in sustainable agriculture, rural education, disaster preparedness, and health services, affecting tens of thousands of beneficiaries.[56] RMP staff, including four nuns, were also arrested on terrorism charges.[57] Similarly, the Community Empowerment Resource Network (CERNET), which supported farming and fishing communities, was forced to halt operations after its staff faced terrorism financing charges, depriving beneficiaries of legal, educational, and livelihood support.[58] Neither association has been able to assess the full scale of harm to their beneficiaries as their limited remaining capacity has been redirected toward finding alternative groups that may be able to deliver some form of support. As a key informant told ICNL, *"their operations have been greatly affected, resulting in the halting of development and humanitarian projects for rural and poor communities."*[59]

The effects of AMLC's actions have been particularly devastating in emergency responses. The Leyte Center for Development (LCDe), a key disaster responder in Eastern Visayas,[60] estimates that freezing its accounts in 2024 deprived at least 20,000 people of critical aid during the typhoon season.[61] An LCDe staff member stated: *"It is us who*

49 Amnesty International (2023), "Human rights in Philippines."

50 Amnesty International (2023), "Human rights in Philippines."

51 Secretary general of a human rights organisation in the Philippines; discussion on 10 October 2024.

52 CODE NGO (2020), "2020 Civil society organisation sustainability index."

53 ABS-CBN (2022), "Lawyers' groups defend nuns, others charged with terrorism financing."

54 Philstar (2022), "Rural missionary work affected by terrorist financing raps, group says."

55 Philstar (2019), "Another Belgian NGO defends partners tagged as rebel fronts."

56 ABS-CBN (2022), "Church-based org RMP slams terrorism financing charges vs nuns."

57 ABS-CBN (2022), "Lawyers' groups defend nuns, others charged with terrorism financing."

58 Rappler (2024), "23 Cebu development workers post bail in terrorism financing case."

59 Human rights lawyer in the Philippines; discussion on 3 October 2024.

60 Philstar (2024), "'Weaponizing' anti-terror laws against dev't workers."

61 New Humanitarian (2024), "How the Philippines is using anti-terrorism laws to freeze disaster NGOs."

are now asking for food. We have no money to even buy food and basic essentials. How ironic."[62] The freeze also forced the closure of LCDe's community healthcare program, leaving large rural communities without medical support.[63] LCDe's donor, the Citizens' Disaster Response Center (CDRC), which has over 11 million beneficiaries and partnered with the government on disaster response, also saw its accounts frozen simply for sub-granting funds to LCDe.[64] Without operational resources, the CDRC was unable to provide food aid, rehabilitation, or disaster preparedness, leaving entire communities vulnerable.[65]

Red-tagging has not only affected large-scale emergency responses but also grassroots efforts to counter the effects of the Covid-19 epidemic on the most marginalized. The State's National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) accused volunteer-run food "pantries" set up to distribute food among the poor of being communist fronts.[66] The Quezon City Police District amplified these claims, prompting harassment that forced many to close temporarily.[67] Volunteers were arrested under the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act (2020) for spreading "fake news" and under the Penal Code for "disobedience to authority."[68] Over 350 pantries reportedly operated nationwide, each serving about 1,000 beneficiaries.[69] The food pantry closures left thousands of impoverished Filipinos without vital food aid during a national emergency and likely had an even worse impact on women, who are often primary caregivers.

The education of highly marginalized children has also suffered due to similar suppression. Civil society Lumad schools, previously recognized by the Department of Education for ad-

> The Leyte Center for Development (LCDe), a key disaster responder in Eastern Visayas, estimates that freezing its accounts in 2024 deprived at least 20,000 people of critical aid during the typhoon season.

62 Inquirer (2024), "Red-tagged NGO cries foul after bank accounts frozen."

63 New Humanitarian (2024), "How the Philippines is using anti-terrorism laws to freeze disaster NGOs."

64 CDRC serves as lead convenor of DRRNetPhils, a partner to the Philippine government's National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC): New Humanitarian (2024), "How the Philippines is using anti-terrorism laws to freeze disaster NGOs."

65 Inquirer (2024), "NGO questions AMLC power to freeze its bank accounts at CA."

66 Washington Post (2021), "Community pantries offer reprieve from covid-19 hardships in the Philippines."

67 Manila Standard (2021), "'Communist' tag halts community pantry for a day."

68 Philstar (2020), "Critical but not seditious,' journalist, artists say of papers in halted Bulacan relief drive."

69 Inquirer (2020), "Despite 'red-tagging,' community pantries rise to 350, says advocate."

dressing literacy gaps among indigenous communities,[70] where just 1 in 10 children can read,[71] were red-tagged and accused by military leaders of being communist training camps.[72] President Duterte openly threatened children studying there, declaring: *"Leave. I'm telling those in the Lumad schools now to get out. I'll bomb you."*[73] Nearly all Lumad schools have since ceased operations, with 162 permanently closed, including 55 after the State took away their operating licenses.[74] Many schools faced raids, during which 13 teachers were arrested and accused of "kidnapping" children, "trafficking," and "child abuse."[75] At least 5,000 indigenous children who attended Lumad schools because they were excluded from or underserved by State schools have, therefore, lost access to education, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and denying them opportunities for social and economic advancement throughout their lives.[76]

Red-tagging has also contributed to increased environmental destruction. The National Federation of Sugar Workers was labeled a communist front before nine of its members were murdered.[77] Land rights lawyer Benjamin Ramos, affiliated with the association Karapatan, was also red-tagged and killed.[78] In the Sierra Madre mountains, where associations have opposed mining and dam projects, including 50 new proposals,[79] at least 270 environmental defenders have been killed.[80] Kalikasan People's Network for the Environment reported before the Senate that environmental destruction caused by mining, deforestation, and dams led to catastrophic floods costing US$862 million and affecting eight million people; they were subsequently red-tagged.[81]

This violence and militarization of civic space[82] has created a climate of fear that has stifled civil society, divided its leadership,[83] and undermined community organization,[84] leading to weakened environmental monitoring and advocacy.[85] At the local level, the

70 Social Text Journal (2021), "Writing to Resist, Writing to Remember: Lumad Youths' Narratives in the Time of Duterte."

71 Rappler (2020), "Teaching without schools? Lumad education under lockdown."

72 Many Lumad schools were operated by an association called the Salugpongan Ta' Tanu Igkanogon Community Learning Center: Rappler (2019), "DepEd formally shuts down 55 Lumad schools in Davao."

73 Rappler (2020), "Teaching without schools? Lumad education under lockdown."

74 Inquirer (2021), "'Lumad' schools and the right to education."

75 Inquirer (2024), "A tale of two 'rescue missions'."

76 Inquirer (2021), "'Lumad' schools and the right to education."

77 ABS-CBN (2018), "PNP claims slain Negros farmers' org is Red legal front."

78 LA Times (2020), "Philippine human rights workers are being systematically killed in a growing war on dissent."

79 Mode Shift (2016), "Gina Lopez: What Determined Activism Looks Like."

80 BBC (2023), "Sierra Madre: Fighting to save what's left of a vital rainforest."

81 National Committee of the Netherlands (2020), "Dangerous red-tagging of environmental defenders in the Philippines."

82 Agenzia Fides (2023), "The arrests of missionaries, nuns, priests, lay people accused of supporting communist armed groups continue."

83 Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (2022), "Philippines: Indigenous opposition to mining project falters due to fatigue and pro-mining shift by govt."

84 Human Rights Watch (2023), "Philippines: Officials 'Red-Tagging' Indigenous Leaders, Activists."

85 Journal of Political Ecology (2021), "Quarantining activism: COVID-19, frontline defenders and intensifying extractivism in the Philippines."

resulting civil society vacuum has led to reduced environmental land management,[86] an increase in unchecked logging,[87] and marine destruction.[88] More broadly, it has shown how the red-tagging of associations has seriously undermined the country's ability to address climate issues, protect vulnerable communities, and pursue sustainable development.

C. CAMBODIAN UNION BUSTING

Cambodia's suppression of associations has facilitated environmental destruction and worsened economic inequality. Cambodia, like the Philippines, began transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy over 30 years ago, but has since fallen under oppressive single-party rule.[89] The State's strategy has been to coerce and co-opt independent associations into non-confrontational service delivery while banning unregistered, informal, or grassroots campaigning[90]—a process derisively termed shifting "from shouting to counting."[91] Associations face limited options but to adapt to this suppression,[92] allowing government-affiliated or organized associations (GONGOs) to dominate public discourse, side-lining genuine advocacy groups.[93] As one informant told ICNL: *"[associations] are now often GONGOs or government mouthpieces."*[94]

The Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations (LANGO), enacted in 2015, is the State's principal tool of suppression alongside violence. It imposes burdensome registration requirements, grants broad discretion to government ministries over approvals, and demands "political neutrality" from associations, curtailing their independence.[95] At least one association has been permanently closed under LANGO,[96] others have faced temporary suspension for failing the neutrality provision,[97] and some have been forced to change their strategic approach.[98] The Anti-Corruption Law and accounting rules build upon LANGO by imposing intrusive asset declarations on civ-

86 Bulatlat (2024), "Civil societies sound alarm over gov't use of terror financing charges to paralyze their services."

87 Earth Journalism Network (2024), "Sierra Madre: Indigenous Peoples Face Environmental Turmoil in the Philippines."

88 Journal of Political Ecology (2021), "Quarantining activism: COVID-19, frontline defenders and intensifying extractivism in the Philippines."

89 Freedom House (2024), "Cambodia."

90 Curley (2018), "Governing Civil Society in Cambodia: Implications of the NGO Law for the 'Rule of Law.'"

91 Norman D. (2014), "From shouting to counting: civil society and good governance reform in Cambodia."

92 Lorch J. (2023), "Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation."

93 Norén-Nilsson A. (2024), "Non-state actors and anti-corruption work in Cambodia: Gaps, opportunities, and synergies."

94 Human rights association leader in Cambodia; discussion on 28 September 2024.

95 ICNL (2024), "Cambodia."

96 Phnom Penh Post (2017), "Breaking: PM says prominent human rights NGO 'must close'."

97 Devex (2017), "Cambodia's controversial NGO law snares its first victim."

98 Lorch J. (2023), "Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation." Associations, such as Human Rights Cambodia, have been forcibly co-opted by the State into changing their overall strategy away from holding the State accountable through advocacy to supporting the State to change through dialogue.

il society leaders, deterring many from leadership roles,[99] and sanctioning closures.[100]

The effect on beneficiaries has been a significant reduction in access to essential services in marginalized areas of Cambodia, as associations avoid working there to evade State suppression. A study found that national organizations were 25% less likely to seek funding for projects in these areas and would forgo as much as a third of their income to avoid the risk.[101] This avoidance impacts not only advocacy groups but also those focused on service delivery.[102] Consequently, marginalized communities receive fewer development services where they are most needed.

LANGO has also had a negative effect on Cambodia's environment, undermining conservation efforts and accelerating deforestation.[103] Associations like Mother Nature, which suspended operations in 2021 amid criminal charges,[104] have seen their members imprisoned.[105] Land rights group Equitable Cambodia was suspended in 2017,[106] and conservation group Cambodia WildLife Forest Fisheries Protection and Conservation NGO was suspended in 2020.[107] In one of Cambodia's largest forests, the State banned the unregistered Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN),[108] replacing the group and its regular forest patrols with a GONGO.[109] A government spokesperson claimed that PLCN and its partners *"favor policies that would cause more disputes, anarchy, and lawlessness."*[110]

LANGO (Cambodia's restrictive NGO law) has also had a negative effect on the local environment, undermining conservation efforts and accelerating deforestation.

99 Human Rights Watch (2018), "Cambodia: Repeal of Abusive Associations Rule."

100 CamboJA News (2023), "Hun Sen Threatens to Dissolve NGOs That Don't Report Financials."

101 International Studies Quarterly (2022), "The Effect of Government Repression on Civil Society."

102 International Studies Quarterly (2022), "The Effect of Government Repression on Civil Society."

103 Environmental activists have also faced violent repression, such as Chut Wutty who was killed in 2012 for exposing forest crimes: Radio Free Asia (2021), "Authorities Release Five Cambodian Activists Detained Days For Entering Forest Without Permission."

104 Radio Free Asia (2024), "10 Cambodian environmental activists sentenced to prison."

105 The Guardian (2024), "Cambodia jails 10 environmentalists in 'crushing blow to civil society.'"

106 Human Rights Watch (2018), "Cambodia: Repeal of Abusive Associations Rule."

107 Voice of America (2020), "Conservation NGO Suspended for Allegedly not Providing Adequate Documentation."

108 Voice of America (2019), "US Pulls Prey Lang Funding, Redirects Resources to Local Groups."

109 Phnom Penh Post (2021), "Gov't Rejects Logging Claims."

110 Phnom Penh Post (2021), "Gov't renews vow to guard Prey Lang"; Amnesty International (2021), "Cambodia's Prey Lang: how not to protect a vital forest."

The suppression and exclusion of PLCN have had devastating consequences for the Prey Lang Forest and the communities who depend upon it as deforestation has surged.[111] Since 2016, 38,000 hectares of forest—nearly nine percent—have been lost,[112] including 9,000 hectares in 2020,[113] a 20% increase over 2019, when a football pitch-sized area of trees was cut down every hour.[114] A PLCN member remarked, *"We are the real forest protectors [but] these forests are ruined."*[115] Meanwhile, the State and its GONGOs claim large-scale illegal logging has been eradicated.[116] Prey Lang's deforestation reflects a nationwide trend: local associations, proven effective at monitoring illegal logging, are silenced, leading to increased deforestation, a loss of biodiversity, and a threat to climate goals.[117] Since 2001, Cambodia has lost over half its total tree cover,[118] with two-thirds of forestry concessions facing local protests amid intimidation,[119] making it one of the highest deforestation rates globally.[120]

A year after adopting LANGO, the government introduced the Trade Union Law (2016) to target unions that had previously organized massive protests of over 100,000 people.[121] The government had labeled union leaders as gangsters, anarchists,[122] and terrorists[123] and created a chilling effect by having leaders like Chea Vichea killed.[124] The Trade Union Law (2016) replicated LANGO's (2015) approach of promising rights protection while enabling selective exclusion. It imposed burdensome requirements, such as individually registering each union member—a process requiring years of administration.[125] This promoted a managerial approach to unions[126] and led to "dissent dampening"[127] and the "cowing and dividing" of unions.[128]

111 Amnesty International (2021), "Cambodia's Prey Lang: how not to protect a vital forest"; Amnesty International (2021), "Cambodia: Widespread illegal logging in Prey Lang rainforest amid ban on community patrols."

112 Voice of America (2019), "US Pulls Prey Lang Funding, Redirects Resources to Local Groups."

113 Amnesty International (2021), "Cambodia's Prey Lang: how not to protect a vital forest."

114 Radio Free Asia (2021), "Authorities Release Five Cambodian Activists Detained Days for Entering Forest Without Permission."

115 Voice of America (2019), "US Pulls Prey Lang Funding, Redirects Resources to Local Groups."

116 Amnesty International (2021), "Cambodia's Prey Lang: how not to protect a vital forest."

117 The Guardian (2021), "Indigenous peoples by far the best guardians of forests – UN report."

118 Radio Free Asia (2024), "Can 1 million saplings save Cambodia's forests?"

119 McKenny B., and Tola P. (2002), "Natural Resources and Rural Livelihoods in Cambodia."

120 Global Initiative (2022), "Cambodia's illegal logging structures."

121 Asia Monitor Resource Centre (2014), "A week that shook Cambodia."

122 Washington Post (2014), "Four dead in Cambodia garment strike."

123 The World (2014), "Treating garment workers in Cambodia as terrorists."

124 Strangio S. (2014), "Hun Sen's Cambodia."

125 Lawreniuk S. (2022), "Zombie resistance: Reanimated labour struggles and the legal geographies of authoritarian neoliberalism in Cambodia."

126 Norman, D. (2014), "From shouting to counting: civil society and good governance reform in Cambodia."

127 Dornschneider-Elkink S., and Edmonds B. (2022), "Does Non-violent Repression Have Stronger Dampening Effects than State Violence? Insight from an Emotion-Based Model of Non-violent Dissent."

128 Strangio S. (2014), "Hun Sen's Cambodia."

The Trade Union Law's (2016) impact on union beneficiaries was immediate. Struggling to comply with the regulations, unions saw the number of complaints taken to the employment arbitrator drop from an average of 18 awards per month to just six, leaving thousands of workers without redress for employment violations.[129] The decline of garment worker unions has correlated with wage stagnation; annual wage increases fell from 20% before the law to just 3% afterward.[130] Garment workers, mostly women, now disproportionately shoulder financial burdens, holding 20% of Cambodia's loans despite comprising just 5% of the population.[131] Without union protections, employment practices have entrenched gender-based exploitation, undermining hopes that mass employment would challenge traditional gender norms.[132] More broadly, the suppression of union activity has weakened Cambodia's ability to ensure equitable economic growth, reduce poverty, and achieve gender equality.

D. ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION IN VIETNAM

Vietnam's authoritarian government has exacerbated the effects of environmental disasters and hindered climate change efforts through its suppression of associations. Vietnam, unlike Cambodia and the Philippines, has never transitioned away from authoritarianism and remains extremely suppressive for civil society.[133] Fundamental rights, including freedom of association, are severely restricted, and human rights defenders face intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrest, torture, and long prison sentences.[134] The State controls civil society by establishing GONGOs or co-opting registered groups, ensuring they align with government goals while shutting down unregistered independent groups and imprisoning their members.

Decree No. 12 (2012) imposes stringent registration and operational requirements, mandating alignment with State policies. Any deviation can lead to suspension or dissolution, with the State wielding broad discretion to deny registration or penalize organizations for vaguely defined offenses such as "violating national interests." Decree No. 93 (2019) tightens control by requiring government approval for foreign funding and imposing invasive monitoring. A key informant told ICNL: *"Government policy is to control all INGOs and all foreign aid money going to [government-approved] NGOs in Vietnam."*[135]

129 Lawreniuk S. (2022), "Zombie resistance: Reanimated labour struggles and the legal geographies of authoritarian neoliberalism in Cambodia."

130 Clean Clothes Campaign (2023), "Cambodian garment workers: never paid enough to escape the debt."

131 Clean Clothes Campaign (2023), "Cambodian garment workers: never paid enough to escape the debt."

132 Lawreniuk S. (2022), "Zombie resistance: Reanimated labour struggles and the legal geographies of authoritarian neoliberalism in Cambodia."

133 Human Rights Watch (2024), "Vietnam."

134 Amnesty International (2024), "Human rights in Viet Nam."

135 Refugee rights organisation leader from Vietnam; discussion on 3 October 2024.

The suppression of associations amplified the impact of the 2016 Formosa environmental disaster on Vietnam's central coast. A toxic spill from a Taiwanese factory poisoned the sea, killed marine life, and destroyed livelihoods.[136] With most environmental associations under government control[137] and regarded as revenue sources, critical issues went unchecked.[138] A key informant told ICNL: *"These organizations were for a time tolerated, probably to attract international aid for a green economy, until they were no longer useful."*[139] Emerging independent groups sharing information about the spill, particularly online,[140] were seen as national security threats,[141] leading to widespread detentions, including women and children, some tortured with electric shocks.[142] High-profile detainees included Pham Doan Trang, sentenced to nine years for researching and reporting on the spill, and Hoang Duc Binh, serving 14 years for attempting to organize a union for affected fisher people.[143]

This suppression delayed public awareness of the spill, increasing risks to health and livelihoods. Initially, the State covered up the disaster, claiming it was caused by a toxic algae bloom and represented no threat to the public.[144] Later, it downplayed the impact, claiming only 200,000 people were affected and the effects would last 50 years.[145] Independent associations, however, identified up to five million severely impacted individuals and highlighted a likely 100-year recovery, doubling compensation demands.[146] Without independent as-

Emerging independent groups sharing information about a toxic marine spill, particularly online, were seen as national security threats, leading to widespread detentions, including women and children, some tortured with electric shocks.

136 A total of 115 tons of dead fish washed ashore, with 140 tons of dead aquatic products and 67 tons of oysters recorded. Up to 60% of coral reefs and large portions of seaweed were destroyed: Green Trees (2019), "An Overview of the Marine Life Disaster in Vietnam."

137 Green Trees (2019), "An Overview of the Marine Life Disaster in Vietnam."

138 Environmental associations received over US$677 million between 2020 and 2022: Civicus (2023), "Vietnam: 'The government hates losing face and has zero tolerance for criticism.'"

139 Human rights organisation leader from Vietnam; discussion on 3 October 2024.

140 Huffington Post (2017), "Mass Fish Deaths in Vietnam Highlight the Country's Press Freedom Problem."

141 Civicus (2023), "Vietnam: 'The government hates losing face and has zero tolerance for criticism.'"

142 Green Trees (2019), "An Overview of the Marine Life Disaster in Vietnam."

143 Human Rights Watch (2021), "Vietnam: Free Prominent Blogger."

144 The New York Times (2016), "Toxic Fish in Vietnam Idle a Local Industry and Challenge the State."

145 Fan M., Chiu C., and Mabon L. (2020), "Environmental justice and the politics of pollution: The case of the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel pollution incident in Vietnam."

146 Green Trees (2019), "An Overview of the Marine Life Disaster in Vietnam."

sociations to monitor and advocate, many communities lacked information and representation,[147] leaving countless individuals excluded from compensation schemes or unaddressed.[148] Some unsuccessfully sought redress abroad,[149] while local authorities, overwhelmed with complaints, often responded with violence instead of solutions.[150] Little was invested in sustainable recovery, leaving affected areas vulnerable to future disasters.

State suppression has also harmed the public by undermining efforts to address climate change and denying access to environmental resilience funds. In 2021, Vietnam pledged at the UN to phase out coal power by 2040[151] and signed the $15.5 billion Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) to decarbonize its economy.[152] However, it quickly backtracked, rejecting the JETP's requirement for independent civil society monitoring—essential for fair and transparent implementation.[153] In 2021, leaders of the Vietnam Sustainable Energy Alliance (VSEA), who had successfully pushed for the net-zero pledge, were detained, silencing key advocates.[154] By 2022, GreenID's founder, who questioned the government's commitment, was also imprisoned, silencing one of the few women in Vietnam's patriarchal public policy space.[155]

In 2023, State suppression deepened with Directive 24, restricting associations further and blocking foreign funding for projects deemed "sensitive," including net-zero initiatives.[156] That year, the State also imprisoned Ngo Thi To Nhien, director of the Vietnam Initiative for Energy Transition Social Enterprise (VIETSE), the only association still tasked with supporting JETP.[157] VIETSE's closure left communities without essential information on energy transition developments, halting oversight and reporting.[158] Without independent oversight, the JETP stalled,[159] with no funds disbursed as of May 2024,[160] depriving the public of promised environmental and economic benefits.[161]

147 Project 88 (2024), "Apocalypse soon? A lack of progress and participation in Vietnam's G7-funded energy transition."

148 Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (2016), "Vietnam: Over 1,000 villagers file complaints with local authorities over alleged slow and unfair compensation for harms caused by Formosa Plastics' toxic chemical spill."

149 International Federation for Human Rights (2022), "Supreme Court should consider repression of human rights in Vietnam in ruling over environmental disaster."

150 Radio Free Asia (2016), "Vietnamese Villagers Petition Local Government About Formosa Payouts."

151 AP News (2023), "Long-awaited Vietnam energy plan aims to boost renewables, but fossil fuels still in the mix."

152 AP News (2023), "Vietnam's plan for spending $15.5 billion for its clean energy transition to be announced at COP28."

153 Nature (2021), "The broken $100-billion promise of climate finance — and how to fix it."

154 Dang Dinh Bach, Mai Phan Loi, Hoang Thi Minh Hong, and Bach Hung Duong: Reuters (2022), "Vietnam says environmentalist jailed for tax evasion, not activism."

155 Nguy Thi Khanh: Reuters (2022), "Vietnam says environmentalist jailed for tax evasion, not activism."

156 Project 88 (2023), "An analysis of secret Directive 24."

157 Consultants Le Quoc Anh and Duong Viet Duc were also arrested: The Guardian (2023), "Vietnam detains energy thinktank chief in latest arrest of environmental expert."

158 Project 88 (2023), "Understanding the arrest of Ngo Thi To Nhien."

159 Nature (2021), "The broken $100-billion promise of climate finance — and how to fix it."

160 Reuters (2024), "Exclusive: Vietnam forfeits billions of dollars in foreign aid amid anti-graft freeze, document says."

161 AP News (2023), "Germany alarmed by detention of Vietnam climate activist, warns on coal phase-out pact with Hanoi."

The vacuum left by the State's total suppression of associations working on the climate emergency has harmed the public. With no accountability, the State has prioritized coal over renewable energy, exacerbating climate vulnerabilities. In 2023, coal imports rose 61%,[162] alongside reopened mines[163] and new coal plant funding,[164] reversing commitments to phase out coal. Electricity generated by coal surged from 18% in 2010 to 40% in 2023, worsening air pollution and intensifying environmental challenges.[165] Without independent associations to advocate for sustainable policies, these harmful decisions remain unchecked, jeopardizing the health, livelihoods, and resilience of Vietnam's people.

E. SUPPRESSION ACROSS ASIA: OTHER REGIONAL EXAMPLES

The suppression of associations detailed under varying levels of authoritarianism in the Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam has similarly deprived marginalized communities in other Asian countries of critical awareness of their rights as well as access to essential services.

In China, the Foreign NGO Law (2017), originally targeting democracy-building and human rights organizations, has significantly harmed communities reliant on public health, social services, and environmental associations.[166] Beneficiaries faced immediate service gaps as local associations reported a 10% drop in funding, leading to the withdrawal of critical development programs.[167] Six months after the law's adoption, only 1% of the anticipated 7,000 foreign organizations had registered—primarily business-related groups like chambers of commerce rather than those directly contributing to development outcomes.[168] Many foreign donors halted funding entirely, leaving local associations unable to provide essential services to their communities.[169] Although the full extent of the impact remains unclear due to China's suppressive environment, those most affected were likely from already excluded and underserved populations lacking access to State support.

In Indonesia, Law No. 17 on Societal Organizations (2013) and its 2017 amendment allowed the State to ban and dissolve associations without judicial oversight,[170] leading to a shrinking civic space and emboldening the government to suppress associations

162 Reuters (2024), "Vietnam's coal use and emissions set new records."

163 Reuters (2023), "Vietnam boosts coal imports as it promises investors no more power cuts."

164 Chinhphu (2023), "VĂN BẢN PHÁP LUẬT KHÁC."

165 Radio Free Asia (2024), "Vietnam's clean energy transition is failing, pressure group says."

166 Cardozo Law Review (2019), "The "Foreign Agent Problem": An International Legal Solution to Domestic Restrictions on Non-Governmental Organizations."

167 German Marshall Fund of the United States (2024), "Hope Is with the People: Why China Should Welcome Back Foreign NGOs."

168 Feng C. (2017), "The NGO Law in China and its Impact on Overseas funded NGOs."

169 Feng C. (2017), "The NGO Law in China and its Impact on Overseas funded NGOs."

170 ICNL (2024), "Indonesia."

that challenge its narrative.[171] This suppression has directly impacted conservation efforts, such as monitoring orangutan populations, where the State claims its programs have led to population increases.[172] However, independent researchers and their associations have been banned by the Ministry of Environment for asserting that orangutan populations are continuing to decline everywhere.[173] Organizations like the Greenpeace Forest Campaign and the Indonesian Caucus for Academic Freedom warn that such suppression restricts access to reliable environmental data, undermining efforts to combat poaching and address the climate crisis.[174] This has left ecosystems increasingly vulnerable and deprived local communities of crucial environmental protections and resources.

In Pakistan, the State's 2015 mandate requiring associations to register or face closure escalated with a 15 percent tax on associations in 2017.[175] In 2018, 27 international organizations, including ActionAid, Plan International, Marie Stopes, and World Vision, were ordered to shut down for allegedly working in unauthorized regions.[176] These organizations, critical to disaster response, health, and education services, collectively

In 2018, 27 international organizations in Pakistan were ordered to shut down for allegedly working in unauthorized regions. These organizations, critical to disaster response, health, and education services, collectively supported 8.7 million people.

171 Robet R., Fauzi IA., and Darningtyas R. (2023), "NGOs say civic space shrinking fast in Indonesia."

172 The Jakarta Post (2022), "Forestry Ministry responds."

173 The Jakarta Post (2022), "Orangutan conservation needs agreement on data and trends."

174 Mongabay (2022), "Menyoal Surat 'Daftar Hitam' Peneliti dari Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup."

175 The New Humanitarian (2017), "Pakistan's new NGO tax will hurt those most at risk, say humanitarians." India, covered in detail in a separate ICNL report due for publication in 2025, has suppressed associations similarly to Pakistan, primarily through the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (2010) which was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2022. The law requires that associations have licenses to receive foreign funding, which can be revoked for activities deemed "political" or against the "national interest." Implementation of the law has led to a 32 percent drop in NGOs eligible for foreign funding, from 23,592 in 2018 to 16,029 in 2024. For more information, see: ICNL (2021), "India's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act" and ICNL's forthcoming report.

176 Reuters (2017), "Pakistan closes 27 NGOs in what activists see as widening crackdown"; AP News (2018), "Pakistan kicks out 18 charities after rejecting final appeal." The aforementioned ICNL report documents that in India, international organizations like CARE, Oxfam, and Compassion, and domestic associations like Leads Trust and Apne Aap, have similarly been forced to scale back or shut down, leaving thousands unemployed, many of whom came from within the beneficiary community. Compassion stopped supporting 147,000 children, and Leads Trust ended its assistance to over 10,000 schools in marginalized Dalit and tribal areas, all of whom will now struggle to continue their education. For more information, see: CSO Coalition@75 (2023), "India's Million Missions–75 Years of Service Toward Nation-Building"; Scroll (2022), "Centre cancels foreign fund licence of NGO Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative"; Compassion (2017), "Compassion International Begins Withdrawing Its Operations in India"; The Wire (2020), "'FCRA Being Used to Crack Down on NGOs, But Why No Transparency on PM-CARES?'"

supported 8.7 million people.[177] Their closure affected millions of impoverished Pakistanis,[178] terminating 6,000 local jobs and halting services worth $124 million.[179] ActionAid withdrew services for 1.4 million people,[180] while Plan International ceased programs for 1.6 million children.[181] Médecins Sans Frontières closed its last two medical operations, leaving vulnerable populations in tribal areas without essential care.[182] Local NGOs, often dependent on international donors, have also been forced to scale back operations, leaving millions without the critical support they once provided.[183]

F. IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The case studies presented in this chapter reveal striking similarities in how association suppression impacts communities across Asia. In the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, and beyond, restrictive laws, targeted attacks, and deliberate suppression of associations have deprived millions of people of access to essential services, sustainable development initiatives, and advocacy for their rights. In every case, marginalized communities—including rural populations, indigenous groups, women, and the poor—have borne the brunt of these policies, facing worsened health outcomes, environmental degradation, and reduced access to education and economic opportunities.

177 Devex (2018), "As Pakistan cracks down on NGOs, civil society questions next steps."

178 Civicus (2018), "Pakistan shuts down and kicks out 18 International NGOs, with 20 others facing expulsion."

179 Devex (2018), "As Pakistan cracks down on NGOs, civil society questions next steps."

180 ActionAid (2018), "ActionAid Pakistan closes after 28 years supporting marginalised communities."

181 Plan International (2018), "Plan International shuts down operations in Pakistan."

182 Devex (2018), "As Pakistan cracks down on NGOs, civil society questions next steps."

183 The New Humanitarian (2018), "Pakistan's NGO crackdown prompts widening alarm among aid workers."

5. Charting a Path Forward: The Cost of Suppression and the Imperative for Action

The findings of this report reveal the profound and far-reaching consequences of suppressing associations across Asia. The macro-level data underscores a strong relationship between the right to association and positive developmental outcomes, while the case studies provide vivid, human-centered insights into how such suppression unfolds in practice. Across sectors like health, education, and environmental protection, restrictive policies systematically dismantle civil society's ability to serve its beneficiaries, cutting off access to essential services, deepening existing inequalities, and undermining development outcomes.

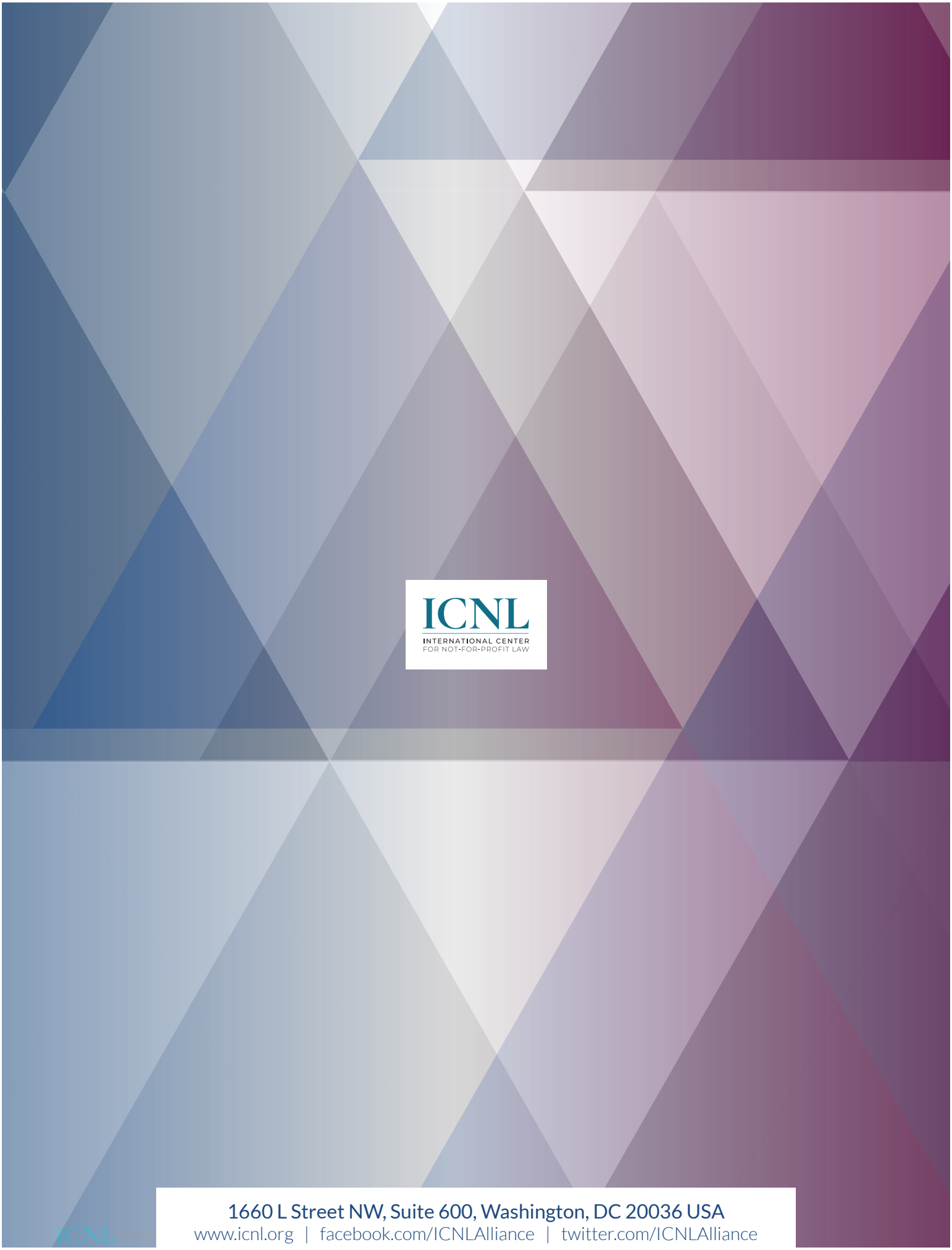
In the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, and beyond, the suppression of associations has directly harmed communities by silencing advocacy, disrupting service delivery, and fostering environments of fear and mistrust. The Philippines' suppression of education and disaster relief programs, Cambodia's targeting of labor unions, and Vietnam's suppression of environmental experts all show how closing civic space undermines collective action and consequently deprives those most in need. These patterns mirror similar trends in China, Indonesia, India, and Pakistan, where restrictive laws and harassment have stymied civil society's capacity to address pressing developmental and humanitarian challenges.

The parallels between data-driven analysis and lived realities are undeniable. Suppression of civil society stifles innovation, erodes accountability, and weakens resilience, leaving States ill-equipped to address crises effectively. This report demonstrates that protecting the right to association is not just a matter of democratic governance, but an essential foundation for equitable development, environmental protection, and long-term stability.

Urgent action is needed to safeguard civic space across Asia. Governments, international actors, and civil society must work together to resist the growing wave of authoritarianism and ensure that associations can operate freely. Without such protections, the developmental and humanitarian costs will continue to mount, deepening inequality and undermining prospects for sustainable progress. Countries in Asia and beyond can avoid the trap of authoritarian stagnation by embracing a collaborative approach, and protecting civil society to maximize sustainable development—for the benefit of all.

Annex

CIVIL SOCIETY REGULATIONS IN ASIAN COUNTRIES	
Afghanistan	Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (2005)
Bangladesh	Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulations Act (2016)
Bhutan	Civil Society Organizations Act (2007)
Cambodia	Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations (2015)
China	Foreign NGO Law (2017), Charity Law (2016), Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations (1998)
India	Indian Trusts Act (1882), Societies Registration Act (1860), Maharashtra Public Trusts Act (1950), Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (2010), Indian Companies Act (2013)
Indonesia	Law No. 17 on Societal Organizations (2013)
Japan	Promotion of Specified Non-profit Activities Act (1998), Public Interest Corporations Law (2008)
Laos	Decree on Associations No. 238 (2017)
Malaysia	Societies Act (1966)
Mongolia	Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (1997)
Myanmar[34]	Organization Registration Law (2022)
Nepal	Association Registration Act (1977)
North Korea	None
Pakistan	Charities Registration and Regulations Act (2019), Policy for NGOs/NPOs receiving Foreign Contributions (2021)
Philippines	Revised Corporation Code of the Philippines (2019), Securities and Exchange Commission
Singapore	Societies Act (1966), Charities Act (1994), Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (2021)
South Korea	Act on the Establishment and Operation of Public Interest Corporations (1983), Civil Act (1958), Social Welfare Services Act (1970)
Sri Lanka	Voluntary Social Services Organization Act (1980), Societies Ordinance (1891)
Taiwan	Civil Associations Act (1942)
Thailand	Civil and Commercial Code (1925)
Timor-Leste	Law No. 5 on Non-Governmental Organizations (2005)
Vietnam	Decree No. 93/2019/ND-CP (2019), Decree No. 12/2012/ND-CP (2012)



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