A YEAR END REVIEW

TOGETHER PROJECT REPORT 2019

Engage ● Convene ● Facilitate ● Inform ● Guide ● Support

Princess Bazley-Bethea, Manager, InterAction
INTRODUCTION

In the face of an unforgiving regulatory environment and an inaccurate risk calculation on the part of the financial services sector that is often exacerbated by disinformation within public discourse, vulnerable INGOs and CSOs around the world have begun collaborating to share, learn, and act in response to shrinking civil society space. Since January 2017, the Together Project has served as a hub of advocacy and solidarity for U.S.-based NGOs that provide vital development and humanitarian relief around the world, and confront discrimination or targeted prejudicial regulations in the U.S. due to their operating principles or religious faith.

The Together Project enables members to share information and develop strategies in response to shrinking civil society space experienced by these NGOs. InterAction actively represents organizations vulnerable to direct attacks, or indirect impacts of laws, regulations, or policies that have a chilling effect on their ability to function. The coalition brings attention to these issues, educates relevant policy-makers and officials, convenes and facilitates conversations to explore and identify solutions, connects NGOs with each other, and builds solidarity.

Over the past three years, we have seen the NGO community come together in solidarity for InterAction members during various attacks. The issues that the Together Project tackles, like bank de-risking, disinformation campaigns, and material support regulations, are not easily won victories. Yet the dedicated core members of the Together Project Coalition are committed to this effort now more than ever.

The Together Project is made possible through the support of its Founding Members: Islamic Relief-USA; American Relief Agency for the Horn of Africa (ARAHA); Helping Hands for Relief & Development; Zakat Foundation of America; United Mission for Relief and Development (UMR), and InterAction.
A YEAR OF ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION

EXPERT BRIEFINGS
- U.S. Humanitarian Assistance and Banking Challenges with the U.S. GAO
- Untangling a Marriage of Convenience: AML & CFT with the Global Center on Cooperative Security
- Material Support 101 with George Foote of the Dorsey Law Firm, LLC

MEETINGS AND EVENTS
- Representation at the U.S. Dept. of Treasury Charities Outreach Meetings
- Presentation: World Bank 2019 Spring Meetings, Civil Society Policy Forum
- Presentation: International Civil Society Centre (ICSC) 2019 Innovator’s Forum in Berlin
- InterAction’s Disinformation Toolkit Presentation and Webinar at InterAction
- Weaponization of Disinformation Session at InterAction’s Forum and the .ORG Forum
- Positive Public Image Session on Communications and Media Training at InterAction Forum
- Together Project Annual Solidarity Breakfast Event
- Together Project Advocacy Team Capitol Hill Weeks

ACHIEVEMENTS
- The Together Project initiative is Selected as a Case Study for ICSC’s 2019 Innovation Report
- Successful advocacy to both House Financial Services and Senate Banking Committees for the inclusion of two provisions in the Bank Secrecy Act that benefit NGOs and address de-risking
- Informing advocacy for New Guidance from the Dept. of Treasury affirming the unimpeded flow of assistance to Venezuela and NGO access to financial services
- Community Sign-on letter from over 80 U.S. Humanitarian and Development NGOs Denouncing Discrimination and Intolerance in the wake of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

FINANCIAL ACCESS ISSUES

Organizations are increasingly experiencing difficulty in accessing financial services, whether through delayed or refused wire transfers to fund field activities or through closed accounts or refusal by financial institutions to open new accounts. Challenges in delivering money to the field can result in delayed or cancelled implementation of projects in the field; avoidance of engaging in programming where needed; limitation on types of programming that can be implemented in contravention of sectoral best practices; jeopardizing of staff safety and threatened the viability of highly rated and legitimate charitable organizations. InterAction and Coalition Members will create and engage in strategies for coping mechanism and policy advocacy approaches to respond to the shrinking access to financial services experienced by these organizations.

DISINFORMATION ATTACKS & RESPONSE

Developing and deploying responses for anticipated disinformation strategies and techniques used by states and nonstate actors is an evolving area of practice. NGOs will need to equip their staff to develop dynamic ways to identify and respond to disinformation and move from ad hoc response systems to more strategic and streamlined actions. These strategies include identifying the risk of disinformation and creating plans to mitigate this risk. In response to this complex problem, InterAction published a Disinformation Toolkit to initiate a conversation on how disinformation impacts NGOs with significant participation from the Together Project. It draws on desk research and interviews with civil society organizations and international aid organizations providing direct development and humanitarian assistance around the world.

<table>
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<th>Country</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: Social media and messaging app users include those who said they use one or more of the seven specific online platforms measured in this survey.


PEW RESEARCH CENTER
POSITIVE PUBLIC IMAGE

InterAction and Coalition Members seek to create and foster positive message branding, effective use of social media, and challenge disinformation in all of its forms. The Together Project allows for a safe space for members to engage each other as well as elicit support from community peers. Through a united front led by the Together Project, maligned NGOs proactively overcome attempts to undermine and discredit NGOs who provide life-saving and life-altering assistance across the globe.

GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

Building collective capacity, raising awareness, and connecting organizations within global civil society are goals for the Together Project. Shrinking civil space is a reality for civil society organizations worldwide while Coalition Members and others within InterAction are feeling the effects of such practices at home in the United States. The Together Project remains engaged with global and domestic leaders such as CIVICUS, the International Civil Society Centre, and the Charity & Security Network to be at the forefront of response and action for civil society amplifying the U.S.-based NGO voice.

NEW DEVELOPMENT

Civil Society Program

InterAction is developing its work around protecting and strengthening civil society, which includes community groups, NGOs, labor unions, indigenous groups, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and other organizations that work in the interests of citizens. Civil society is a vital component in cross-sectoral approaches to build resilient communities, assist governments in responding to humanitarian crises, and enable engaged and citizen-responsive societies.

The Civil Society Program includes the Together Project, the Democracy, Rights, and Governance Initiative, and the Strengthening Partnerships Initiative with plans to expand in 2020.
LOOKING AHEAD

DISINFORMATION & DISCRIMINATION

Current data show NGOs trying, but struggling, to protect themselves and respond to active disinformation campaigns globally—much work is needed to support them against powerful regimes that leverage the immense reach and speed of digital social media platforms. InterAction members are under attack by campaigns created to exploit vulnerabilities of the internet and social media that perpetuate the spreading of false information online by antagonistic think tanks. The disinformation is further weaponized when it is presented as factual evidence before Congress and regulatory or financial services stakeholders, threatening the funding and operational status of members globally. Disinformation campaigns impinge upon the space for civil society actors by silencing dissent; defaming political rivals; and encouraging disdain and attacks against journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society groups. Additionally, the Together Project identified through advocacy and various stakeholders’ dialogues that the technical operational issues crippling some NGOs, such as bank de-risking, are both driver and a consequences of disinformation attacks.

Expansion Opportunities:

- Third-Party Validator Report: The Truth about Disinformation Campaigns
- Hotline for Domestic and International Organizations Experiencing Disinformation
- Positive Public Image Insights: NGO Narratives focused on Due Diligence, Compliance, and Effective Aid Delivery

The Together Project hosted an in-person only presentation and training on the Disinformation Toolkit at InterAction. The webinar option reached nearly 50 CSO leaders, spanning 10 U.S. states and four countries.
NGO SOLIDARITY AND ADVOCACY

Solidarity is vital for NGOs across InterAction’s membership and the Together Project. The exponential effect of displaying a united interfaith front when an organization experiences discrimination often extends beyond support to that specific organization, deepening public morale and strengthening the posture for the entire NGO sector domestically and abroad. Countering the unintended effects of restrictive, discriminatory government regulations when they are viewed as vital to national security is not an easy topic to broach in the current political climate. To this end, education and advocacy are priorities to foster a better understanding of the various challenges and provide a voice to under-represented organizations. The Together Project has built relationships with the Department of Treasury and on Capitol Hill with the House Financial Services Committee, Senate Banking Committee, and the Foreign Affairs Committees in both chambers. This strategic and frequent advocacy positions the Together Project to work directly with relevant USG staff to find a solution quickly and effectively when the coalition is notified of a disinformation attack, a banking challenge, or similar pressing challenges.

Expansion Opportunities:

- Senior Leadership Solidarity Roundtable
- Interfaith Case Studies: U.S. NGOs Working Together at Home and Abroad
- Newly Designed Comprehensive Together Project Online Resource Library
TO LEARN MORE AND GET INVOLVED

For further information on how InterAction and its members are working ‘together’ to address the ongoing challenges related to shrinking civil society space, please contact Princess Bazley-Bethea, Together Project Manager, at pbazleybethea@interaction.org.

Also, please visit our webpage at www.interaction.org/togetherproject.

FOUNDING ORGANIZATIONS

American Relief Agency for the Horn of Africa strives to alleviate the suffering from hunger, illiteracy, diseases, and poverty in the Horn of Africa, as well as help the east African community in Minnesota.

Helping Hand for Relief and Development integrates resources for people in need. They strive to provide immediate response in disasters, and effective programs in places of suffering, for the pleasure of God.

United Muslim Relief integrates their global partners’ services to provide comprehensive Muslim relief and development aid to underserved communities. UMR blends advocacy, youth mobilization, disaster response, aid delivery, and empowerment through education.

Zakat Foundation fosters charitable giving to alleviate the immediate needs of poor communities and establish long-term development projects that ensure individual and community growth.

Islamic Relief - USA alleviates suffering, hunger, illiteracy, and diseases worldwide and provides aid in a compassionate and dignified manner. They provide rapid relief in the event of disasters and establish sustainable development projects.

ABOUT INTERACTION

InterAction is a convener, thought leader, and voice for nearly 200 NGOs working to eliminate extreme poverty, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people.