



Struggle Across Borders

Report on the Experience and Needs of Exiled Activists and Human Rights Defenders in Canada

June 2024

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Executive Summary

Human rights and civic space are under attack. Globally, we are witnessing a concerning trend of shrinking civic spaces and democratic backsliding, with an increasing number of countries adopting repressive measures against civil society activists and human rights defenders (HRDs). Against this backdrop, Cooperation Canada and Resilient Societies collaborated on a research project funded by IDRC, aiming to explore the unique experiences and needs of exiled activists and human rights defenders living in Canada. With a view towards needs-based and evidence-informed responses, research findings will help inform the mission, vision, and strategic programming of Resilient Societies, an emerging platform for enhancing the voice and agency of activists, HRDs, and grassroots civil society organizations. Resilient Societies is currently being incubated at Cooperation Canada. Conducted over a period of four months, the research project started with initial consultations with key stakeholders from civil society, academia, and government, followed by focus group discussions in three Canadian cities: Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto. In total, twenty-seven activists and human rights defenders in exile participated in this research.

This project uncovered significant insights about:

- **Adaptation and support systems in Canada:** Participants highlighted the need for robust support systems to foster the resilience of exiled activists and human rights defenders in Canada. Collaboration with relevant government agencies was deemed essential to streamline immigration pathways and provide sustainable support.
- **Risks of activism and transnational repression:** This research underscored the unique risks faced by exiled activists and human rights defenders, necessitating tailored training for public safety institutions and the development of clear policies to safeguard fundamental freedoms and human rights.
- **Recognition and capacity building:** Improved integration within Canadian institutions, targeted training programs, and enhanced networking opportunities emerged as crucial elements for empowering exiled activists and human rights defenders and promoting collaboration within the community.

Outlined in the final section of this report, these research findings lead to a number of recommendations for policy and practice. In summary, to support exiled activists and human rights defenders in Canada, it is crucial to streamline immigration processes through legal assistance and prompt document acquisition, building on Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's global human rights defenders stream. Networking opportunities should connect exiled activists with local communities for mutual support. A multi-stakeholder task force within Canada should be established to address transnational repression by enhancing digital security and legal protections and advocate for public safety policy reforms. Capacity-building initiatives should focus on employment, mentorship, and training in political engagement and organizational resilience, and there is expressed value in establishing a secure, comprehensive platform to facilitate collaboration between and with exiled activists and human rights defenders. Establishing virtual communities and peer support groups will also further strengthen solidarity and resilience.

Background

Civil society activists, including human rights defenders and journalists, operate in increasingly hostile and restrictive environments as the number of countries with closed and repressive civic spaces continues to increase. The Civic Monitor's (2022) annual report reveals that in 2022, "more people lived in countries with closed civic space than ever," stating that civic space worsened in 15 countries in 2022 and improved in only ten countries.¹ Attacks against civil society activists have increased in number and complexity. State and non-state actors continue to target civil society activists and human rights defenders as a tactic to erode accountability, suppress dissent, and consolidate their grip on power. They use various tools and tactics to oppress civil society activists, ranging from restricting the legal and regulatory environment to arbitrary detention, torture, and killing. These circumstances have pushed an increasing number of activists into exile both for safety and as a coping mechanism.

While in exile, civil society activists face a myriad of challenges, including dealing with the trauma and pressure of displacement and exile, economic and integration hurdles, and loss of relevance and identity. While adapting to new circumstances can prove challenging for activists, exile and relocation also present opportunities to reorganize themselves, demonstrate relevance and agency, and reclaim civic space, provided host countries create enabling environments, including the availability of resources, tools, and skills to continue their activism in both homeland and hostland.² It has been long recognized that exiled and diasporic activists can greatly contribute to enriching both civil society and international development spaces in their host countries.³

Canada has a long history and tradition of providing peace, safety, and solace for at-risk communities. Canada's culture of respect for diversity and pluralism, international human rights priorities and commitments, and its capacity to resettle refugees have made it a desirable destination for at-risk activists from countries with closed and repressive environments. However, little is known about the challenges and opportunities facing democracy activists, human rights defenders, and journalists once they resettle in Canada. While migrants' and refugees' social and economic contributions to Canada are widely studied and recognized⁴, there is limited understanding and recognition of the needs, existing dynamics, challenges, and opportunities facing exiled activists and human rights defenders in Canada.

In 2023, Resilient Societies (RS) entered its incubation phase through a strategic agreement with Cooperation Canada. While its own independent entity, RS has leveraged Cooperation Canada's networks and expertise within civil society, international cooperation, and Canada's policy and political context to rapidly make an impact. By entering into this agreement, RS has contributed to Cooperation Canada's efforts of advancing its mission to foster partnerships and collective efforts for a safer, fairer, and more sustainable world. During this incubation phase, Cooperation Canada offers administrative support to help RS develop the institutional infrastructure needed to function independently in Canada, along with comprehensive technical assistance, including fundraising support.

1 Civic Monitor, *People Power Under Attack*, 2022, <https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings/>

2 Light, D. 1992. "Healing their Wounds: Guatemalan Refugee Women as Political Exiles." *Women & Therapy* 13 (3): 297-308; Mencutek, Z. S. 2021. "Refugee community organisations: capabilities, interactions and limitations." *Third World Quarterly* 42(1): 181-199; Rządtki, L. 2022. "We Are All Activists": Exploring Solidarities in Activism By, With and For Refugees and Migrants in Hamburg. New York: Columbia University Press. Quinsaat, S. M. 2019. "Transnational contention, domestic integration: assimilating into the hostland polity through homeland activism." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(3): 419-436.

3 Cohen, N. 2011. "Rights Beyond Borders: Everyday Politics of Citizenship in the Israeli Diaspora." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37 (7): 1137-1153; Laguerre, M. S. 1998. "Diasporic Politics: Border-Crossing Political Practices." In *Diasporic Citizenship: Haitian Americans in Transnational America*, edited by M. S. Laguerre, 157-175. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Mutambasere, T. G. 2022. "Diaspora Citizenship in Practice: Identity, Belonging and Transnational Civic Activism Amongst Zimbabweans in the UK." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48 (3): 732-749.

4 Akbari, A. H. 1989. "The Benefits of Immigrants to Canada: Evidence on Tax and Public Services." *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques* 15 (4): 424-435; Picot, G. 2008. *Immigrant Economic and Social Outcomes in Canada: Research and Data Development at Statistics Canada (Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series)*. Statistics Canada.

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2008319-eng.pdf?st=dlCujblJ>; Government of Canada. 2022.

Immigration Matters in Health Care.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/campaigns/immigration-matters/growing-canada-future/health.html>;

Government of Canada. 2022. *Immigration Matters in Business*.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/campaigns/immigration-matters/growing-canada-future/business.html>.

With a view to inform a comprehensive response to the evolving needs of exiled activists in Canada and in closed space societies, this project examined the needs and experiences of exiled activists and human rights defenders living in three Canadian cities. Findings from this study led to a series of recommendations on how best to support this community within Canada. On the other hand, the findings will help develop the strategic and programmatic vision of Resilient Societies. This study is thus part of a broader effort by RS to better understand the needs of exiled civic space and human rights activists from repressive and closed civic spaces who conduct their work in Canada and abroad, and to provide responsive support and create pathways for network development and spaces for coordination and democratic discourse amid highly challenging circumstances.

Methodology

A two-step approach was used for this project, consisting of a pre-assessment stakeholder consultation followed by a series of focus groups with activists and human rights defenders in exile. The pre-assessment phase drew on the expertise of key stakeholders to validate and refine our approach, leading to the second phase comprising of focus group discussions.

In total, twenty-seven individuals participated in one of our four focus groups in Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto. Participants were recruited based on their recognized contributions in advancing the claims of their relative social group, originating from a wide range of geographies: Afghanistan, Balochistan, Bangladesh, China, Haiti, Iran, Myanmar, Pakistan, Senegal, Sudan, Syria, Togo, and Ukraine. Participants identifying as female were more numerous than those identifying as male, and the majority of participants were between the age of 31 and 40.

Each focus group session examined two categories of questions, the first about the changing nature and emerging difficulties of homeland civic engagement, and the second asking participants to share their perspectives on ways their activism could be supported in Canada.

Key Findings

The most frequent theme across all four focus groups was capacity building, involving statements on how activists and human rights defenders can be better supported to conduct their work while living in Canada. This was often tied to statements related to the relative lack of recognition they endure while in exile. Statements on adapting to the Canadian landscape often occurred in close proximity to discussions around the support systems available to them. And finally, talk around risks related to activism also brought forward discussions on transnational repression.

Adaptation and Support Systems in Canada

New immigrants in Canada, especially exiled activists and human rights defenders, face significant financial challenges that impact their ability to continue their activism. High inflation and rising housing costs exacerbate these difficulties. For instance, 39% of recent immigrants in Ontario spend over 30% of their income on rent.⁵ This financial strain leads to psychological stress and hinders their ability to focus on activism. Many participants noted the disempowering effect of relying on social assistance, a stark contrast to their previous roles as self-sufficient, educated professionals in their home countries.

⁵ Canadian Rental Housing Index. (2022). Immigrant households. https://rentalhousingindex.ca/en/#immigrants_prov

Participants emphasized the need for better recognition of their skills and qualifications to facilitate smoother adaptation and empowerment. As explained by Kira during a focus group discussion, “[we] have a different background [but we have] skills which we received back in our countries. We can use [them], we just need to modify them ... Canada needs to help people to understand how they can use their skills.” Participants suggested that Canada should offer educational equivalences, additional training, and support to help them adapt their skills to the Canadian job market. This approach would enable them to contribute more effectively to their new communities and regain a sense of agency and purpose.



“As a community, we need to find ways to train people to become better activists. Every single activist I know has learnt on their own, but if we were trained properly on how to be systematic and consistent, then we would be more effective in our efforts.”

- Yihan Wei, Chinese Human Rights Activist and Dissident

The lengthy and complex immigration process in Canada poses another significant challenge. As of March 2024, there were 186,665 pending immigration cases, with an average wait time of 29 months for protected persons and convention refugees.⁶ These delays create a sense of liminality and suspension, affecting newcomers’ ability to settle and integrate effectively. Participants expressed frustration with the inefficiencies of the system, which also affects their family members’ ability to reunite with them.

Access to non-administrative support services, particularly mental health resources, varies widely and is often insufficient. Participants highlighted the importance of such support to help newcomers cope with the trauma of displacement and the challenges of starting anew in Canada. Better mental health services and interventions in terms of access and quality are crucial for aiding their adaptation and maintaining their well-being.

Although intersectionality was not a major focus in the discussions, it emerged that identity factors such as race, language, and gender do influence access to resources and support services. One participant noted that the color of one’s skin or their proficiency in French in Quebec can determine the level of support received. This aligns with broader findings that discrimination and systemic barriers affect newcomers’ experiences and access to services in Canada.⁷ In summary, for exiled activists and human rights defenders in Canada, financial stability, recognition of their skills, efficient immigration processes, and adequate mental health support are critical for their successful adaptation and empowerment. Addressing these issues can enhance their ability to continue their important work in their new home.

⁶ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. (2024, April 15). Recent trends. <https://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/statistics/Pages/volume-reports.aspx>; Government of Canada. (2024b, March 18). Check processing times. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/application/check-processing-times.html>

⁷ Lin, S. L. (2022). Access to health care among racialised immigrants to Canada in later life: A theoretical and empirical synthesis. *Ageing and Society*, 42(8), 1735–1759. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X20001841>; Machado, S., Wiedmeyer, M. Ling, Watt, S., Servin, A. E., & Goldenberg, S. (2022). Determinants and Inequities in Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) Care Access Among Im/Migrant Women in Canada: Findings of a Comprehensive Review (2008–2018). *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* (Vol. 24, Issue 1). Springer US. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-021-01184-w>; Pottie, K., Ng, E., Spitzer, D., Mohammed, A., & Glazier, R. (2008). Language Proficiency, Gender and Self-reported Health. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 99(6), 505–510. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03403786>.

Risks and Transnational Repression

Across focus groups, participants confirmed that they felt relatively safe in Canada compared to their counterparts in their home countries. As expressed by Elianne, “Despite being far, we are safe here because we are not on the territory. However, we have close friends and family who are still in Haiti. And there can be consequences for them. We need to be cautious.” Many participants confirmed that they could not freely engage in activism, having to work discreetly to avoid endangering those still in their home countries. This reflects a broader pattern of transnational repression, where authoritarian regimes use “proxy punishment” to silence dissent abroad by targeting the activists’ social groups back home. This phenomenon of transnational repression involves a range of tactics, including harassment, arrests, and threats to family members, which compel activists to self-censor and limit their public engagement. Activists from Afghanistan, China, Syria, and Iran reported feeling unsafe due to the potential reach and severity of these tactics, even in a diverse country like Canada. High-profile incidents, such as the assassination of a Sikh leader in 2023, heightens these fears. Chinese activists cited increased institutional and economic cooperation between China and Canada, including training programs for Chinese law enforcement in Canada, as factors that contribute to a sense of vulnerability among dissidents.



“Once we’re on this side, we become more beneficiaries than actors. For the first few years, we think about ourselves, and the process of applying for asylum is traumatic. When you get here, your head is not focused on activism. Human rights defenders should benefit from financial assistance, integration support and psychological resources because before we can be activists, we need to be standing on our own two feet.”

- Georges K. Schneider, Executive Director, Afrique Arc-en-Ciel

Participants also expressed concerns about the lack of effective responses from local authorities when reporting acts of transnational repression. Instances of harassment and smear campaigns were often dismissed or inadequately addressed by police, leaving activists feeling unsupported. This aligns with previous research, which found that victims of transnational repression often avoid dealing with the police, fearing it might worsen their situation.⁸ Several participants called onto government agencies to better support activists and human rights defenders in exile by defining transnational repression and establishing dedicated agencies to handle such cases.

Uncertainty related to formalizing their immigration status in Canada further complicates activists’ engagement in their work. Canada’s complex and slow immigration system, with its overlapping and sometimes contradictory mandates, constrained activists in the continuation of their work. The fear that activism could negatively impact their asylum or citizenship applications leads many to limit their public activities. Others also noted that pushing against Canadian policies could result in delays or complications in their immigration processes, reinforcing a cautious approach to their activism. As explained by Etienne, “...as someone who is currently waiting for asylum I cannot travel, on social media I need to be prudent.”

⁸ Al-Jizawi, N., Anstis, S., Barnett, S., Chan, S., Leonard, N., Senft, A., & Deibert, R. (2022). Psychological and Emotional War. Citizen Lab. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/120575/1/Report%23151--dtr_022822_lowres.pdf.

Recognition and Capacity Building

Focus group participants frequently noted the lack of recognition for their contributions to civic space and their varied skills that could benefit Canada. While some activists gained access to opportunities through public recognition, many “unsung heroes” found themselves having to abandon human rights-related work. One participant highlighted this issue, pointing out that many grassroots activists ended up working in unrelated fields such as retail or restaurants, losing touch with their previous work and expertise. This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who lamented that their extensive knowledge and experience were not being utilized in Canada. Another participant succinctly captured this frustration, stating that life experiences seemed to have little value in their new context.

Participants expressed deep frustration over the lack of recognition, especially from the Canadian government and, to a lesser extent, within the non-profit sector. One participant noted the limited opportunities to speak with organizations or the government, which gave a sense that their voices were not valued. Another participant, who reported having attempted several times to provide their insight to Global Affairs Canada, emphasized that those with deep knowledge about their home countries were not being recognized for their expertise. Like others, they suggested that exiled activists and human rights defenders could provide valuable insights if given the chance. This participant proposed the creation of a fellowship program for exiled activists to help them build their careers in Canada and gain relevant work experience.

Another repeated suggestion was the development of a platform to list experts by their thematic and regional expertise, creating a secure database for vetted stakeholders to access. One participant shared their experience from another country, where a similar database linked qualified individuals to relevant ministries. Participants envisioned a “dictionary of experts,” akin to LinkedIn but specifically for human rights defenders, to help connect them with opportunities in Canada.



“Activism in exile is a complicated affair. One has to rely on the first-hand experiences of others; those who are left behind in an unsafe environment. Even when we manage to fight back the guilt of survival and decide to become the voice for those who are silenced, there is always the question of whether my representation can cause more harm to those whose experiences I share. As has been the case in many closed spaces such as Afghanistan, cyber insecurity has led to arrests and prosecution and disappearances. And when we raise awareness and speak for those arrested in our countries of origin, there is not much interest in Canada to support those activists.”

- Ghazaal Habibyar, Civil Society Activist

Capacity building was another critical area discussed, with a focus on continuing activism work and engaging with government and civil society organizations. One participant highlighted the need for systematic training for activists, as many had learned through personal experience rather than formal education. Other participants pointed out the importance of understanding how to engage with different levels of government and political organizations, emphasizing the need for training in political engagement and advocacy. This would enable human rights defenders to navigate the complex landscape of Canadian governance and better advocate for their causes.

Additionally, participants identified the need for assistance with the administrative and logistical aspects of transitioning their organizations to Canada. Some mentioned the challenges they faced in registering and managing their organizations, noting that better support in this area would facilitate capacity building. Administrative hurdles slowed down their work significantly, highlighting the need for resources to help newly arrived human rights defenders integrate their efforts into the Canadian context.

Exiled activists also underscored the importance of digital security training. With much of their work now conducted remotely, protecting data has become crucial. Participants expressed a need for increased capacity in this area to safeguard their communications and activities.

To supplement these suggestions, participants called for stronger networking opportunities to connect with one another. One participant described the scattered nature of activist voices upon arrival in Canada, which limited collaboration. They proposed creating platforms or networks to facilitate connections and share knowledge among activists. Another participant suggested a mentorship program, similar to their experience with an academic risk program, to help new activists navigate their new environment. Others proposed regional focal points within initiatives to coordinate efforts and disseminate information, including updates on immigration policies.

Recommendations

The thematic sections of the above findings inform three broad categories of recommendations. Each of these categories respond to the expressed needs and experience of exiled activists and Human rights defenders who participated in this project. These recommendations are made towards a wide range of stakeholders, from civil society organizations and private sector actors to public safety institutions and the Government of Canada.

Create an Enabling, Supportive Environment for Effective Adaptation and Re-organizing of Exiled Activists and Human Rights Defenders in Canada

1. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, and civil society organizations should collaborate on creating an enabling legal and policy environment that allows for the safe and timely relocation of exiled activists and human rights defenders to Canada. Assistance programs specifically tailored to the needs of exiled activists and human rights defenders should focus on legal advice on asylum applications, residency permits, work permits, and navigating the Canadian legal system. They should also provide assistance in obtaining and renewing legal documents such as visas and travel documents, enabling activists and HRD to travel internationally for advocacy and outreach engagements. This recommendation could be directed towards improving Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's global human rights defenders stream.
2. The Canadian government, civil society and private sector agencies should collaborate on developing mental health support programs designed explicitly for exiled activists and human rights defenders, recognizing the unique challenges they face due to their experiences of persecution and forced displacement. These include facilitating access to counselling, therapy, support groups, and trauma-informed care to address the psychological impact of their past experiences and help them build resilience.
3. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, in consultation with civil society and local integration organizations, should develop and implement public awareness and solidarity campaigns to educate Canadians about the experiences and contributions of exiled activists and human rights defenders, fostering empathy and solidarity within Canadian society. These can include:
 - A series of storytelling campaigns that highlight the experiences and contributions of exiled activists and human rights defenders.
 - Featured interviews, testimonials, and multimedia content that showcase the journey of exiled activists, including the challenges they have faced, the reasons for their exile, and their ongoing advocacy work.
 - Community engagement events that provide opportunities for Canadians to interact with exiled activists and human rights defenders in person.
 - Panel discussions, workshops, film screenings, and cultural events that explore the unique realities of exiled activists, human rights defenders, and refugees.
 - Dialogue and exchange opportunities between exiled activists and local communities, creating spaces for mutual learning, solidarity, and collaboration.
 - Creating public forums that encourage Canadians to become allies and advocates for exiled activists, raising awareness of the challenges they face and mobilizing support for their rights and well-being.
 - Developing educational resources and advocacy campaigns focused on the rights and protections of exiled activists and human rights defenders under international law.

Ensure Safety, Mitigate Risks and Counter Transnational Repression

1. Establish a multi-stakeholder task force to develop strategies and tools to limit exposure to transnational repression and its adverse effects on activists in exile in Canada. This task force should be comprised of activists and human rights defenders, public safety institutions, relevant Government of Canada departments, civil society and human rights organizations, legal experts, cybersecurity specialists and the private sector. This task force should develop comprehensive strategies and tools to identify, prevent, and respond to transnational repression targeting activists in exile. The task force should foster collaboration and information sharing among stakeholders to enhance coordination and effectiveness in addressing threats to the safety and security of exiled activists residing in Canada. It is critical that the voices and experiences of exiled activists and human rights defenders inform the development of policies and recommendations.
2. Public Safety Canada, Canadian Security Intelligence Service, and Royal Canadian Mounted Police should actively collaborate to enhance digital security and privacy measures, providing training and resources to exiled activists and human rights defenders on digital security best practices, encryption tools, secure communication channels, and threat detection techniques. Relatedly, civil society and human rights organizations should collaborate with tech companies and cybersecurity experts to develop and implement tailored solutions that enhance the digital security and privacy of exiled activists, such as secure messaging apps, VPNs, and anti-surveillance software. They should also collaborate to conduct regular risk assessments and security audits to identify vulnerabilities in activists' digital infrastructure and develop mitigation strategies to address them.
3. Civil society should actively seek allyship with Public Safety, Democratic Institutions, and Intergovernmental Affairs to advocate for stronger legal protections for digital privacy and freedom of expression, both domestically and internationally, to safeguard activists from online harassment, surveillance, and censorship.
4. Efforts should be made to strengthen legal protections and advocacy efforts by collaborating on legal reforms and policy changes that strengthen protections for exiled activists and human rights defenders in Canada. This should include collaboration with legal experts, human rights organizations, and civil society groups to provide pro bono legal assistance and representation to exiled activists facing legal challenges or threats of transnational repression. There should also be awareness raising among Canadian policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and the public about the risks of transnational repression and the importance of upholding the rights of activists in exile. Diplomatic efforts should be made in pressuring foreign governments to respect the rights of exiled activists and refrain from targeting them for reprisals or retaliation.

Develop and Implement Inclusive, Equitable, Tailored Capacity-Building Interventions

1. Support the upward social mobility of exiled activists and human rights defenders through gainful employment and by creating fellowships/placement initiatives tailored explicitly to exiled activists and human rights defenders, providing opportunities for them to gain hands-on experience and contribute their expertise to Canadian organizations. Placements in relevant organizations within government agencies, NGOs, think tanks, or academic institutions where participants can work on human rights issues, policy analysis, advocacy campaigns, or research projects can benefit the host institutions and present critical opportunities for activists and human rights defenders to navigate the Canadian human rights, democracy and civil society space more effectively.
2. To this end, the Government of Canada should establish funding opportunities centered on facilitating mentorship and networking opportunities, facilitating the organizing of events, peer support groups, and mentorship programs to encourage connections between exiled activists, human rights defenders, and professionals within government agencies, NGOs, academia, and the private sector. As part of such arrangements, exiled activists and human rights defenders should be encouraged to participate in professional associations, conferences, and other networking forums where they can expand their networks, share expertise, and build relationships with peers and potential collaborators.
3. Civil society organizations with expertise in human rights should develop a safe, comprehensive platform that maps activists and human rights defenders in exile, including listing their thematic and geographic expertise. The platform should categorize activists and human rights defenders based on their areas of expertise, such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, freedom of expression, environmental justice, indigenous rights, or refugee advocacy, and provide detailed profiles for each individual or organization, outlining their background, skills, experience, and key achievements in their respective fields. This platform could map the geographic locations where exiled activists and human rights defenders are based in Canada, highlighting regional concentrations and community hubs where they are most active. When safe, this platform should enable users to search for activists and human rights defenders by location, allowing them to identify local partners, allies, and resources for collaboration and support. The platform should include features that facilitate networking and collaboration among activists and human rights defenders, such as messaging capabilities, discussion forums, event listings, and collaboration spaces for joint projects or initiatives, enabling users to connect with individuals or organizations working on similar issues or in related geographic areas, fostering opportunities for knowledge sharing, peer support, and solidarity.

The platform should curate a directory of resources, including funding opportunities, training programs, legal assistance services, mental health support, and advocacy tools, to empower activists and human rights defenders with the resources they need to advance their work. It should also provide links to relevant publications, reports, toolkits, and research materials to support capacity building and information sharing within the community. The platform must implement robust security measures to protect the privacy and safety of activists and human rights defenders using the platform, including encryption, data anonymization, and secure authentication protocols. The platform should also provide guidance on digital security best practices and risk mitigation strategies to help users protect their personal information and mitigate the risk of surveillance or harassment.

4. Civil society organizations and think tanks with an active advocacy portfolio should develop comprehensive training programs focused on political engagement tailored to the needs of activists and human rights defenders in exile. The program should cover topics such as Canadian political systems and processes, understanding policymaking, effective advocacy strategies, coalition building, and engaging with elected officials and decision-makers. Practical skills training should be provided in public speaking, media engagement, strategic messaging, campaign planning, and grassroots mobilization to empower activists and human rights defenders to effectively advocate for human rights within the Canadian context. Mentorship and coaching opportunities should be made available to support participants in applying their newfound knowledge and skills to their advocacy efforts, including opportunities for hands-on experience in advocacy campaigns or community organizing initiatives.
5. Organizational resilience is another critical area of capacity-building, focused on strengthening the organizational resilience of human rights organizations and advocacy groups led by exiled activists and human rights defenders. Provided by organizations with educational and capacity-building programming, these trainings should include guidance on organizational development, strategic planning, governance structures, financial management, fundraising strategies, and volunteer recruitment and retention. These programs should address specific challenges faced by exiled activists and human rights defenders in managing organizations in exile, such as navigating legal and regulatory requirements, building partnerships with Canadian institutions, and maintaining connections with diaspora communities and international networks.
6. Local integration organizations should build onto their current efforts to establish peer support groups and mentorship programs that are specifically tailored to activists and human rights defenders in exile. These programs would provide emotional support, guidance, and advice to exiled activists and human rights defenders facing common challenges and obstacles, matching participants with experienced mentors who can offer personalized guidance, share insights from their own experiences, and provide practical advice on navigating the complexities of activism, advocacy, and exile. This would lead to the fostering of a culture of mutual support and solidarity within the community, where members feel empowered to seek help when needed and offer support to others, in turn building a strong network of solidarity and resilience.
7. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada should develop tailored training programs by collaborating with human rights organizations, legal experts, and exiled activists themselves to address the risks and challenges faced by individuals who have been forced to flee their home countries due to their activism. This includes the designing of training modules that provide public safety officials with a nuanced understanding of the political, social, and legal contexts in which exiled activists operate, including the tactics used by authoritarian regimes to suppress dissent and target activists abroad. There should be inclusion of case studies, real-life scenarios, and testimonies from exiled activists to illustrate the types of threats they may face, such as surveillance, harassment, intimidation, and physical violence, as well as the potential impact on their mental health and well-being.

Next Steps

Our research findings and recommendations provide critical insights into the challenges and opportunities facing exiled activists and human rights defenders in Canada. They enable the Canadian government, civil society, and academic institutions to develop targeted, responsive interventions to create a safe and enabling environment for exiled activists and human rights defenders reorganizing and advocacy efforts.

Resilient Societies will utilize research findings and recommendations to engage stakeholders in driving policy changes, improving support services, and fostering a safe environment for exiled activists and human rights defenders in Canada. Policymakers can use the insights to develop and enhance legal frameworks that better accommodate the unique needs of exiled human rights defenders. Civil society organizations can leverage the recommendations to design and implement targeted interventions addressing both immediate and long-term challenges faced by this population. Additionally, Resilient Societies will launch public awareness campaigns and stakeholder engagement initiatives to educate the broader Canadian society about the varied contributions activists and human rights defenders in exile make on issues of human rights, democracy and civic space.

Resilient Societies will further leverage these research findings and recommendations to advocate for evidence-based policies and programs that strengthen the resilience of exiled activists and human rights defenders, enhance their capacity to defend human rights and create more inclusive and supportive environments where they can thrive and continue their vital work.

In addition to its broader dissemination and advocacy efforts, Resilient Societies will incorporate the research findings and recommendations in its organizational strategic planning processes, resulting in needs-based, responsive, tailored program development and implementation. More specifically, Resilient Societies will incorporate the research recommendations in the design and implementation of its flagship initiatives, namely: (a) the Global Civic Space Summit, a multi-stakeholder event geared toward building global momentum around the importance of investing in civic space to uphold democracy, human rights, and social justice, (b) The Resilience Hub, a platform for innovation and co-creation against the digital repression of civic space, and (c) Activists and HRDs At-Risk Initiative, providing placement and reorganizing opportunities for exiled activists and human rights defenders.

About Cooperation Canada

Cooperation Canada brings together Canada's international development and humanitarian organizations and advocates for them by convening sector leaders, influencing policy and building capacity. Together, we work with partners both inside and outside Canada to build a world that's fair, safe and sustainable for all.

About Resilient Societies

Resilient Societies is an emerging Canadian global hub that provides support and creates safe spaces for grassroots networks of human rights defenders, democracy practitioners, and civil society activists from closed and closing spaces to collaborate, innovate, and advocate.

Resilient Societies' work builds on Canada's rich culture of embracing diversity and pluralism, and its generosity in supporting and welcoming at-risk activists, to design organic and innovative program with impacts in the diaspora and activists' native countries. In so doing, it provides a global platform for solidarity, innovation, and advocacy among human rights defenders and democracy activists from countries where the democratic space is under threat. By building resilience, enhancing voice and agency, and raising the credibility and relevance of civil society activists and human rights defenders from such environments, RS contributes to reversing democratic backsliding and shrinking civic spaces.

Resilient Societies (RS) is hosted by Cooperation Canada.

Land Acknowledgement

Cooperation Canada acknowledges the historical and ongoing oppression and colonization of all Indigenous Peoples, cultures, and lands in what we now know as Canada. The land on which Cooperation Canada's office is located is the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabe People. We believe that social justice in Canada and globally depends on reconciliation with all Indigenous peoples, including the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, who are the original guardians of the land we are grateful to be sharing.

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