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TRANSCRIPT

Event

**“Civil Society and Environmental Politics in the Middle East and North Africa”**

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FEATURING

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Will Todman      Good morning, good afternoon, and welcome to CSIS. I'm Will Todman, the deputy director and a senior fellow in the Middle East Program here. I am really delighted to welcome you to a discussion about environmental politics and civil society in the Middle East and North Africa.

I am joined by three wonderful colleagues with a real wealth of expertise on this topic. Firstly, joining me is Amy Hawthorne. She is an independent consultant on the Middle East with expertise on democracy and reform in the region. She was previously the deputy director of the Project on Middle East Democracy, has held positions within several think tanks, and served in the U.S. State Department during and in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Next, we have Hajar Khamlichi, who is a sustainability expert and a climate activist from Morocco. She is joining us from Baku, Azerbaijan, where she is attending the COP conference. She has been involved in and founded a number of environmental initiatives in the region. She has served as the co-founder of the Mediterranean Youth Climate Network, the Imal Initiative of Climate and Development, and she's also the co-founder of the Tangier Observatory for the Protection of the Environment. Joining me here in the studio is Aly Rahim, who is the program manager of the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) and also the Global Lead for Citizen Engagement at the World Bank. He was previously an assistant to the president of the World Bank, where his portfolio included civil society and stakeholder engagement.

The discussion today marks the release of my new report, "Mobilizing for Sustainability: Environmental Civil Society in the Middle East and North Africa." In this report, I sought to understand the degree to which civil society can drive environmental action in different parts of the Middle East and North Africa. I chose a range of case studies. I studied the cases of Iraq, Oman and Tunisia. My colleague and co-author, Martin Pimentel studied Morocco. We wanted to understand how and in what ways civil society can contribute to efforts to tackle environmental and climate crises that are facing the region today. To those of you watching online, you can submit questions using either the button on our website or on YouTube. So please do that, and I will raise them for the panelists.

Firstly, Hajar, I'd love it if you could help us set the scene. What are the greatest environmental challenges that civil society actors in the region are trying to tackle today. Why is this topic important?

Hajar  
Khamlichi:

The region is facing a wide array of environmental challenges, which are further intensified by climate change. One major issue is water scarcity, as the region is among the most water-stressed areas globally. Factors like rapid population growth, inefficient agricultural practices, and worsening climate change exacerbate these shortages, affecting health, human security, and the economy. Countries like Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, and Yemen are particularly vulnerable, as the strain on water resources has far-reaching implications for regional stability.

Another relevant topic for the region is desertification and land degradation, caused by expanding desert lands, overgrazing, and unsustainable farming practices. This impacts food security, livelihoods, and economic resilience, as nations rely on agricultural productivity to sustain both the local region and the broader economy.

Air pollution is also a serious issue, particularly in rapidly urbanizing areas with growing fossil fuel dependency. Major cities like Cairo, Tehran, and Riyadh face significant public health risks due to pollution. Marine and coastal degradation, especially in countries like Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia, poses another challenge, with overfishing and biodiversity loss impacting local economies and natural resources.

Waste management is a priority for civil society, as poor practices are visibly affecting both rural and urban areas. Inadequate disposal and recycling contribute to soil and water contamination, endangering public health. Deforestation, though less prominent, is a significant issue, especially in Morocco, Lebanon, and Algeria, where urban development leads to erosion, biodiversity loss, and reduced carbon sequestration capacity.

Finally, the transition to clean energy and emissions reduction is a considerable challenge. While civil societies are eager to address this, they often lack the necessary resources. These challenges underscore the urgent need for sustainable policies and comprehensive strategies that integrate environmental, economic, and social dimensions to build resilience for the long term.

Mr. Todman:

That's a daunting list of challenges that you laid out for us. You mentioned a couple of areas that civil society actors are more involved in, waste management in particular. Can you give us a bit of optimism? What are some of the most promising initiatives that you've seen different civil society actors working on in the region?

Ms. Khamlichi: Civil society in the region is actively focused on water resource management. Initially, their efforts centered on raising awareness, which is often the starting point for civil society actors in the region. They then moved toward advocacy, and today, they're implementing innovative projects for water conservation. For example, in Morocco, the Observatory for the Protection of the Environment and Historical Monuments leads community-driven initiatives in rainwater harvesting and water-saving practices. In Jordan and Palestine, local policy advocacy and gray water recycling projects demonstrate civil society's essential role in resource management.

Waste management has also been a significant theme in Morocco and Tunisia, where grassroots organizations raise awareness and organize waste collection campaigns. However, policy has often lagged behind the advocacy efforts, creating an imbalance. Progress in this area is more advanced in Morocco and Jordan than in other countries.

Renewable energy advocacy is another major issue. Tunisian grassroots groups, especially in the south where fossil fuel reserves are concentrated, have been particularly effective, moving from local action to national policy influence. In Jordan, photovoltaic (PV) solar rooftops are already part of national policy, with civil society focusing on the water-energy nexus. Morocco has recently introduced policies with more specific regulations, promoting a multi-level approach where groups work locally, sub nationally, and nationally, complementing the efforts of companies and advocacy groups. This shift represents a significant step forward in organizing long-standing efforts into effective networks.

Mr. Todman: Thank you. I do want to come back to that point later, about the level at which we can hope that civil society groups have the most impact. It's perhaps helpful to clarify who we're talking about as well. At this stage, when we talk about civil society, it's a really diverse community, including formal NGOs, informal activists, and volunteers. There are also journalists who are working to raise environmental awareness, entrepreneurs who are trying to come up with new green solutions, and even artists who are trying to get involved in efforts to spread environmental awareness. Aly, if I can come to you next, Hajar has mentioned how competitive civil society is in a variety of areas. She talked about project management as being one of the most successful ways in which civil society is focusing their efforts today. How can international actors best amplify some of these local initiatives? This

includes your perspective from working in the World Bank. How do you think about getting involved in supporting this kind of work?

Aly Rahim:

Thanks for having me here. Your report is quite timely with the eve of COP in Baku, and there are serious discussions that have been happening over the last year about the renewal of the international financial architecture and reaching our goals for climate finance in the developing world. There is the 100-billion-dollar pledge from Paris, which we were involved in when that number was being developed. It is important to question what that promise means and who we are delivering it through.

A lot of the thinking about the renewal of the international public financial architecture has been about how we 1) catalyze larger flows of public dollars, and 2) governments. Particularly, how we leverage those scarce funds, whether they're concessional funds, grant money, or other kinds of financing instruments, to catalyze larger amounts of capital flow. Bilateral donors, philanthropies, and others who support the civil society ecosystems are thinking about this, but we're not yet strategically leveraging the idea of what civil society brings to these large global challenges.

There's a rethinking underway. Your report is another salvo for that. We've been thinking seriously about this over the last two years. The Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA), which I led, quite appropriately emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring. The president of the World Bank at the time, Bob Selig, saw what was happening in the Middle East, said that we can't just work through governments and the private sector alone to reach our development goals. We need to build architecture to engage civil society.

We've done good things on this platform, but it did not scale, and often it doesn't scale. The challenge as we look forward to the future is, how do we take this bridge ecosystem of work—which you described in your report, and which Hajar is getting to in her comments—and link it to large-scale finance? This is where we fail to integrate, and we have this fragmented development ecosystem. How we think of development in the multilateral space is very different from how philanthropies are being developed, underscoring the need to thread together this architecture.

Climate and environment are a crucible that might finally force us together—not because it's strategically beneficial to engage civil society, but because it's strategically necessary to engage civil society. That's the pivot we need to make. I'll get into some of the architecture and what we're thinking about later in my comments.

I also like how you talk about the spectrum of civil society—I like to use the term social economy or social sector actors. We're calling the new facility we're launching today the Civil Society and Social Innovation Alliance because we think of a spectrum of actors, from traditional CDOs, CSOs, NGOs, service delivery, advocacy organizations, through to what might be B Corp, social enterprises, and impact-based businesses. There's a huge spectrum of actors that exist between public and private space that we need to bring in, and there are scalable solutions. The number one thing I often hear is, "This is cute, this is nice, but it isn't scalable." That's a false narrative. We have a lot of scalable solutions, especially when we start working through coalitions, networks, and building a global civic architecture.

This is something that a friend and colleague, the CEO of Counterpart International, recently called the need to build a global civil architecture. How are we linking the local to the global, the localization agenda to the decolonization of aid? We can see all these things out there, but what does it really mean in the context of this big international financial architecture reform? What's the role of civil society in the big picture?

These are the big questions we really need to start answering today. The Middle East is a great case, but there are many others, whether in Latin America, Africa, or elsewhere. In these places there are similar patterns emerging globally right now. It is a moment to really think about how we build this new architecture.

Mr. Todman: Amy, a lot of the support for civil society comes from donor governments in the region, and many of the initiatives that I found rely on government or international government support. How do you think donor governments should consider the potential of civil society, both in the environmental sphere and globally, and what they are getting right and wrong in terms of their support?

Amy Hawthorne: Thank you Will, and thank you so much to CSIS for inviting us here today. I want to congratulate you and your co-author on this incredible

report, which is really path-breaking. There are a couple of big things in my view, that donors today are getting right about support for civil society. The first is just a recognition that civil society is a legitimate and a necessary actor and partner for donors. This might sound like an obvious point, but as recently as 15 years ago, 10 years ago, this wasn't necessarily the case.

So I think it really does represent progress—significant progress—in terms of what I've seen over the course of my career tracking this issue closely in the MENA region: the sort of mainstreaming and legitimation of the concept of civil society as a really crucial development partner—the idea that supporting government, supporting states, supporting national institutions, is simply not enough, and that there's this whole other space out there that both Hajar and Aly talked about that is so rich and diverse and crucial. That's a really big thing that donors are getting right, and we shouldn't take that for granted. It's taken many years to get us to that point.

The second thing that I believe donors are getting right in the main is that there are aspects of the localization agenda that really benefit civil society in the region, or have the potential to really benefit and strengthen civil society in the region. The whole concept of localization is something very, very important, if we're talking about strengthening civil society and creating a sustainable civil society sphere in all of these countries.

There are, however, some very big things that I think donors have really gotten wrong in the main when it comes to civil society support. The first one is, to be a bit blunt about it, just an utter failure on the part of donors to really play any significant productive role in countering and pushing back against the closing civic space that this region has been experiencing, particularly over the past 10 or 15 years.

For those of our viewers and our audience today who are younger, it may seem hard to believe that 10 to 15 years ago, there was actually more space for civil society in most countries in this region. The space is so limited today. But, in fact, there was a little bit more room in some countries for civil society, activism, advocacy, engagement, etc. One of the major trends that has happened in this region since the 2011 Arab uprisings is a concerted effort by regional governments to close space for civic actors and to increase the penalties and punishments for activism and for receiving unauthorized donor funds and for countering

the regime's narratives, etc. This has been an overarching trend. And all donors, in my view—whether it is the multilateral institutions, whether it is the EU, whether it is the United States, whether it is the Japanese government, etc.—have all in their way, really failed to use their leverage and influence to push back against governments in the region who are trying to suppress and control and weaken civil society.

What we see is two conflicting big trends. The first one, as I mentioned, is a deeper acceptance and legitimation on the part of donors of the role of civil society. But, that is happening in a context in which the space for civil society across the board in this region has become more and more constrained and controlled. That is my overarching assessment of what donors are getting right and wrong when it comes to civil society support—across all sectors of activity, not simply environmental activism.

Mr. Todman: Absolutely. Part of the reason that I chose the countries I did, was to try to get a range of some of these different political environments, and some of them—Tunisia, unfortunately, is probably the main case of this—are experiencing a narrowing of that space in which civil society actors can have impact. And, if we go back, it was Tunisian civil society actors that won the Nobel Peace Prize for their work on the Quartet, on the transition to democracy. Part of that chapter of the report looks at how to navigate this new space.

Aly, if I can come back to you, bearing in mind all the challenges that we've been talking about, what does success look like for civil society in terms of engaging in international development projects or trying to drive environmental action? What sort of metrics should we be looking at to know if they are really having a positive impact or not?

Mr. Rahim: One of the challenges is the “projectization” of space and its fragmentation. Hajar was getting to this a little bit. I think that's very good. With civil society organizations, there's also a trend that is linked to closing civic space, and that's a diminishment and fragmentation of funding. It's very hard for a lot of CSOs to access funding, and who they access funding from actually plays to the civic space issue.

When funding is nested, let's say in the World Bank, it's very different for government to say, “we're going to shut that cap off.” That's part and parcel; it's linked to a World Bank project; has a status of international treaty. There's very different parameters of clawing back funding.

Whereas, if you're getting a grant from the Open Society Foundation, or one of their networks, there's different perception. All of these actors are important. But what we've lacked, is a systematic funding source. That's also why we, at times, lack systematic metrics. The metrics are often very project-bound. They're very time-bound.

And what you talk about here—I think the metrics go to your sustainability principles: What is making this politically sustainable, socially sustainable? How are we building new systems? How are we building new capacities within government to engage with civil society? The supply side matters and the demand side. How are we realizing network effects? This also goes to civil society's side. You see increasing coalitions. You see increasing networks. You see southern-based intermediary organizations that can support smaller organizations—because not every small CSO should develop capacity to access USAID funding. The transaction costs of that aren't good, but that's almost what our current system requires: maintain an M&E framework that aligns with what a bilateral donor or major international philanthropy monitors. You're wasting that CSO's capacity and energy, which should be directed to its strengths. That doesn't mean that they soon received those monies.

That's why the civic architecture piece matters so much. Projectization is a problem in development writ large, but it's especially a problem in scaling the strategic role of civil society. While we see great work from civil society around the world, including in the Middle East, we're seeing a failure to scale a lot of these initiatives, because, we lack that link to government, and a lot of the entities—the international actors' role, which you said—can help via brokerage, and that's what we want to do more of at the World Bank. The IFIs and multilaterals are actually hugely under-leveraged tools. At times in our history, we had used more leveraged with this, and when we do, it makes a big difference.

The biggest time this probably happened was when I first joined the Bank 20 years ago, when Jim Wolfensohn became president. This was part and parcel, a core part of his Bank's reforms were about how to bring participation—civil society actors and NGOs into development. It was revolutionary at the time, and while we progress and internalize that considerably in our DNA, it's not the same as it was then. It was real vision and thinking about how we do this. That's why I keep going back to the renewal of the international financial architecture. This is the big discussion about how we make development dollars more effective,

how we connect the Sustainable Development Goals to climate and environment.

The civil society narrative is not well-articulated enough. We need a local-to-global discussion about what this piece means. We need to connect the philanthropic environment, the multilateral environment, the bilateral environment. The place where most of these monies will come from—and increasingly, in different countries, you see this in the Gulf states, for example—there is also a burgeoning domestic resource base for a lot of these initiatives. However, it's certain countries where those are housed, and there's different dynamics.

How do we connect the funding ecosystem so that we can have more systemic metrics? I think that matters region by region, country by country, but also globally. And there needs to be a concerted effort around this.

Mr. Todman: The questions are coming in from the audience already. One of them is actually from my colleague, Marty Pimentel, exactly on this point. His question is: could you expand on the differences between the ways that philanthropies and multilateral organizations support environmental action? And you said that we need this more synchronized approach, what are the barriers to that at the moment?

Mr. Rahim: If I take the World Bank as a specific example, we are an institution designed for sovereign lending to governments. Our clients are described as governments. We have commitments to citizen engagement, participation, impact on beneficiaries, but we do see our clients as government. We lend our money to governments, and to the private sector through our private sector arm. We do recognize the role civil society plays, but our primary funding engineering is to channel money through governments. Philanthropies offer some support to government but are generally supporting NGOs and nonprofits. Bilaterals have a mix of support, so they're a very different funding ecosystem.

But let's say, I heard the case of water, I heard the case of a solid waste management project. I heard all these things. The largest public financing for those comes from the multilateral development institutions, and most of those projects won't have an explicit funding piece linked to civil society actors. Some of them will, and there are great examples around the world, from us, from the Asia Development

Bank, and others. But if we want these things to scale, if we want them to genuinely influence—and this is at the core of your report, which struck me so much when you reached out to me—we need to connect the nodes. International actors together need to thread that connection with governments.

When we do that, when bilateral actors are doing that, when multilateral actors are doing that, you help create a space for this work to flourish. You create a safe umbrella. Let's say you're doing a large-scale energy transition project. How are you going to think about benefit sharing? How are you going to think about stakeholder consultations in a systematic way? How are you going to think about beneficiary feedback into project design?

We have these elements built into our design principles, even in the multilaterals, but we don't have effective vehicles to bridge in those partnerships. We're trying to build that more. This is the idea behind CIVIC, our new successor. It's reflected in the IDA Replenishment paper. It's been committed to by our bank leadership. Ajay Banga announced this at our annual meetings last week. So, our leadership is seeing the importance of this. We're going to have a new indicator in the bank's corporate scorecard, which has two parts. We want to show a more concerted effort around development results. There's 20 outcomes of development we're going to drive. And there's 20 or so indicators in an organizational effectiveness dashboard, which is going to be public to the world, on how we're effective in doing this.

One of those indicators is going to be on civic and citizen engagement. This will also hold us to account on how we do better. But I think at the end of the day, more money has to also be nested in the multilateral system to support civil society. Many people have been pressing for that, and we need to see how these different actors come together. Within the context of these projects, it should just be taken for granted that there is a piece that involves financing, partnership, delivery, and oversight that comes from civil society's key actors, in delivery of large-scale financing.

Mr. Todman: Hajar, earlier on, you started to talk about the different levels at which civil society actors are working, some at the really local level, some at the provincial or regional level, some at the national level, even some at the international level. Could you talk to us about what level you think civil society, at this stage, is the best place to have an impact at? Should

we be focusing on one of those levels over another, or do we need people to be working at all of those levels?

Ms. Khamlichi: Before answering, I would like to thank Amy and Aly for bringing all of their interesting comments, because it triggers a lot of other thinking in me. I really agree with all of what has been said. I just want to flag that 83% of civil society engagement is voluntary based in the MENA region. We just have 17%, and this 17% covers big foundations related to governments. It's a very tiny portion of civil society that gets funded and gets to the stage of "professionalization" of their work. That's really through sustainability and retaining capabilities. With good capabilities, they can deliver the right work and the right progress for communities.

This is very important—and the multiyear funding is detrimental in this sense: that neither international cooperation nor philanthropies are there yet. This is what makes the difference between the civil society of the Global North and the Global South. In the North, they get to be professional and have their civil society work be their main role in their daily lives. In the South, we can't seize the passion. We can't expand engagement; it doesn't currently harness all the experience among the people in an effective way.

Coming back to your question, all three levels are important. Civil society has strong short-term impacts, especially at the local level, where they build ties with municipalities, local authorities, private sectors, and urban or rural communities. This proximity enables them to address specific environmental issues and drive behavioral change within these communities. Local policy changes are generally easier to achieve compared to sub-national, national, or international levels. However, the sub-national level is important for addressing more complex issues, depending on governance structures. For instance, in some countries, water management is a sub-national responsibility, while waste is local, and energy is national. Civil society must adapt to these different governance levels, engaging the appropriate stakeholders for each topic.

At the national level, civil society advocates for policy, regulation, monitoring, and progress—although limited civil society space makes this challenging, as Amy mentioned. Nevertheless, organizations adapt creatively to pursue their goals. Bringing civil society representatives into international networks is crucial, amplifying their local and national perspectives globally. Currently, there are limited MENA

representatives in these spaces, which are often dominated by Western or Global North perspectives. Increasing this representation can help address local needs and cultural contexts effectively.

Supporting civil society requires building structural, organizational, and other capacities, enabling local communities to confidently shape their own futures. The path from local to global is achievable, as evidenced by impacts and challenges in this transition. It's promising to see a MENA grassroots organization actively participating in World Bank meetings, thanks to philanthropic support that has bolstered professional capacity.

Mr. Todman: This is a perfect segway because we had a question come in from Shivan Anand at the Center for New American Security who asks: How important is representation for smaller Middle Eastern states that have fewer resources on a global stage? For example, representation at the COP conference. Can it actually yield scenario specific solutions? Hajar, speaking to us as someone from Morocco currently at COP, what are the solutions you're hoping to uncover by being there?

Ms. Khamlichi: The first thing that comes to my mind is bringing the voice of these communities to the international scene. It seems very basic, but it's not basic. It's very crowded in terms of ideas, positions, and the way we see the world. Bringing those voices together is imperative. We notice some voices already here trying to do this work.

Secondly, defending the right to development for the developing countries in the region that need to progress in a sustainable, green world. The other thing is the loss and damage which is a very hot topic. Even in developing countries, there is not a correct understanding of who is deserving of compensation. There is a wide range of subjects, not solutions, but they are political subjects that need to be tackled. We are on our way to solutions if the international and multilateral spheres allow it. The main challenge with solutions so far is finance. There is a feeling that the money is there, but how do we pin it down? That is the big question at COP and abroad. Where are we going to get that money to implement renewable energy projects in the MENA region and Africa? Where will money come from to enable new economies that are based on clean pathways? Where will money come from to allow more access to education, knowledge, and development? These are very complex topics individually and finding the funding for adaptation and

for solutions is crucial. I'm not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel yet.

Mr. Todman: Amy, I wonder if you could help us think through some of the politics of this. Part of what I tried to explore in the report is the fact that, as you said, we're seeing a closing space for civic activity in many countries across the region. You've spent a lot of time working in some very challenging political contexts. Can we realistically expect civil society to have an impact in these places? And what kinds of groups have you seen that are best able to navigate the political constraints on civic association and advocacy?

Ms. Hawthorne: Thanks. We can expect civil society to have an impact in closed political spaces. I am constantly impressed, amazed, and humbled by what colleagues manage to achieve in countries in the Middle East and North Africa under daunting circumstances and with numerous challenges and pressures. Overall, we must keep our expectations modest, as achieving lasting, major change is extremely difficult in any society, especially those lacking basic rights and freedoms. Closed political environments make everything harder, from governance to activism to local development.

Looking at the last 10 to 15 years, civil society is making an impact, especially at the local level. As Hajar mentioned, citizen-led organizations work in their communities to make positive changes. On a broader national level, however, social movements—not necessarily civil society organizations or NGOs—seem to have the most impact. Social movements are much broader, encompassing various associations, groups, and leaders. These broad coalitions often take a conflictual approach, challenging governments and regimes through mobilization, a tactic that can make some donors uncomfortable. Donors don't always support social movements, and social movements may not seek or welcome donor support.

While there are examples of bottom-up, citizen-led change, I'm sober in my expectations. Many citizen-led social movements in the region, pushing for positive change on issues citizens care about, face two significant challenges. First, regimes often take bold steps to crush or weaken these movements, blunting their impact. Second, within the

movements themselves, fragmentation and conflict can emerge, weakening these coalitions. This issue isn't unique to the MENA region; it's difficult to keep broad coalitions with diverse interests together over the long term.

Therefore, I have modest expectations about civil society's potential achievements. In the environmental arena specifically, as Hajar mentioned, there are promising examples of local issues where civil society can engage with local stakeholders and decision-makers. However, regarding the broader environmental and climate crisis in this region, it's my view that national governments and international actors hold the most power and responsibility to implement policy changes essential for potential solutions. It has been incredibly challenging for civil society to influence national policies in this area.

Mr. Todman: You touched on so many points that I've wrestled with over the last year or so. How do civil society actors go from mobilizing in opposition to something to mobilizing thought toward solutions? It's so difficult because it requires bringing in technical aspects while continuing to mobilize through advocacy.

One initiative that stuck with me is a group in Tunisia called, "Manish Msab" which means, "I Am Not a Garbage Dump." They mobilized against a landfill that the government kept renewing beyond its intended lifespan. They used art, organized street protests, and mobilized their community against this issue. Ultimately, about a year after the landfill closed, they wanted to keep building on this movement but weren't sure how. I think there's room for international actors to step in, connecting them with environmental experts who can help with solutions.

Aly, since your work focuses on accountability in climate and the environment, what role do you see for civil society in bolstering accountability, especially in more challenging environments where the political context isn't open?

Mr. Rahim: Great question. I'm really enjoying this discussion because an interesting aspect of these discussions, as reflected in your report and by my colleagues, is that the problem diagnosis is widely known, and

solutions are also fairly understood. For anyone working in this area meaningfully, while there are points of difference, the theory of change here is clear. The challenge is how we build out this architecture.

You've raised an essential point about this critical intersection. Oppositional social change is crucial to the evolution of science and climate action, yet we often overlook the "convergence space." For example, the GPSA and Open Government Partnership emerged from this space, which has always been vital, though sometimes our focus on large-scale development and finance shifts attention away from it. Climate change is the crucible that will hopefully prompt political leaders to recognize the need to expand this shared space.

I remember when Obama launched the Open Government Partnership, he emphasized that trust, integrity, and participation are the only viable pathways to achieving these goals. When I took on this portfolio two years ago, we knew we needed to integrate accountability into climate finance. There were discussions on whether this work should continue at the World Bank. We had to think about how we use our funds to model where we go. We launched the Global Green Accountability Initiative with a focus on working at scale, emphasizing the importance of connecting local to national to regional to global levels. We used Jonathan Fox's concept of "vertical integration," linking voices from local actors up to global climate negotiations at COP. But let's be frank—this isn't happening at scale. When it does, it's often through isolated actors or regions.

To address this, we've developed the green accountability platform through a North-South consortium of civil society partners, creating a network that pilots in Bangladesh, Mexico, Senegal, Brazil, and Cameroon. These countries face significant climate challenges from different angles and civil society contexts. In each, we work to promote participatory decision-making and support local organizations while connecting them across various institutions. For example, in Senegal, we're funding a network of 50 organizations focused on mangrove preservation, an essential ecosystem for climate resilience. This work requires local-level collaboration rather than top-down funding approaches, which are often insufficient. This requires close activity at the local level surrounding what is being done, who is doing it, and its

oversight. The organizations that can do this exist, but they're not funded or capacitated and lack digital solutions.

We need more connectivity between these ecosystems, as well as evidence to show policymakers that this participatory approach tangibly impacts outcomes. Last year, we commissioned a report titled "Better Accountability, Better Finance," with Systemic which explores the effects of transparency, participation, and accountability in climate finance. These efforts aim to demonstrate that there's no net-zero pathway without this approach.

The scale required is massive, and we're just starting, but major institutions like the World Bank are beginning to recognize this need. If we don't adequately fund and systematize civil society efforts, we risk superficial support, which won't drive the change needed.

Mr. Todman: I could discuss this for hours, but I want to extend a huge thank you to all three of you for sharing such valuable insights. The main takeaways I've noted are connecting, scaling, and systematizing—how do we make civil society a truly strategic partner in this? As I mentioned at the start, I published a report that explores some of these themes, available on the CSIS website. For a quicker overview, we also have an executive summary, audio brief, one-page country fact sheets, and an Arabic translation coming soon.

Thank you to my CSIS colleagues, especially my co-author, Martin Pimentel, Ali Dabaje, and my colleagues in the AV team, Dhanesh and Dwayne. A special thank you as well to Bahaa Hariri, whose financial support has made this project possible. There's so much more to discuss, but I hope this is just the beginning of leveraging civil society's potential to drive environmental action and resilience in the Middle East and North Africa. Thank you.

(END.)