THE SECOND QUARTER
OF OUR CENTURY

THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETIES

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Foreword

In 2024, we celebrated the 20th year anniversary of the founding of the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL). Over that time, we have grown and matured to become a critical and nimble partner to civil society in Europe and globally. The anniversary coincided with the end of our most recent strategy and so the moment felt right to take stock of what has changed in the last two decades but also to explore what is happening in the world right now and to look ahead to the future. We sought to shape our new strategy and develop our organisation informed by an understanding of what the second quarter of this century may look like.

With support from James Logan, we therefore started a process of strategy development grounded in foresight and futures methodologies. The process comprised multiple elements including structured conversations with visionaries, activists and experts from different fields and parts of the world; a survey of our partners and collaborators; and, also, a set of convenings and workshops with our team[1].

Through these different elements, we sought to 'sense' what the world in 2035[2] might look like. Specifically, we posed the following questions:

- What are the 'building blocks' of our future – the trends and drivers that will shape our world and the signals that we see in the present that may hint at how it may change in the years ahead[3]?

- What kinds of issues will civil society groups need to be addressing in the future and what are the different ways they will be doing that?

- How might civil society groups have to change themselves internally to be ready - in other words, what will the 'organisation of the future' look like?

These questions generated a range of insights and ideas that we have now used to inform our new strategy and which, we believe, will give us the ability to better deliver our mission and work with our diverse partners in these changing and uncertain times.

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1   Inspired by the work of Krizna Gomez and also Klarise Cajucom.
2   Ten years in the future being identified by futures thinkers like Institute for the Future as a useful timescale to precipitate thinking given that it is far enough away that it is possible to imagine significant changes from the present but also not so distant that it becomes 'science fiction', unconnected from any sense of reality.
3   Krizna Gomez gives an example of the difference between drivers and trends here: "we can say that a deep driver of change that has produced the trend of the rise of authoritarian populist leaders is the "continuing decline of institutional trust by the public" in many places around the world. This decline in trust in institutions could be argued to have created a playground that is ripe for the rise of anti-establishment figures who eschew traditional political discourses and champion themselves as "anti-elite"".

That sense of change and uncertainty has rarely felt so acute as at the time of writing with the commencement of Donald Trump's second Presidency in the USA. He has introduced an array of disruptive and disorienting measures that are having global consequences and that are also affecting civil society around the world. The conversations and thinking that we have engaged in through developing our strategy have, however, meant that we feel prepared to meet these and other challenges.

We now share what we have discovered in the hope that it might also help others to find a way forward. In doing so, we express our profound gratitude to the participants in the process who were so generous with their insights[4].

Pia Tornikoski
ECNL Board Chairperson

Katerina Hadzi-Miceva Evans
ECNL Executive Director

What We Have Looked at – and Why

When we began the process of building our new strategy, we shared a common feeling of living in a time of multiple and interconnected crises which are profoundly affecting us as individuals but also at the level of our organisation, our partners, and our broader societies.

This feeling was driven by a dizzying array of events that were disrupting our lives. These included (but are no ways limited to) the Covid-19 pandemic, conflicts around the world, financial and cost-of-living crises, the rise of authoritarian and far-right populist parties, extreme weather events, and new and destructive uses of technology. Our present – and the future ahead of us – seemed to be well-described by the acronym 'VUCA': Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. This perception has only become more profound as we moved into 2025 as Donald Trump took power for a second time.

In these kinds of moments of change and disruption, it is hard to look beyond the immediate crises of the present to understand the deeper trends that these crises are a manifestation of. It is yet harder to look ahead and prepare for future challenges before they have eventuated. This is especially so for civil society given that we are often responsible for responding to the fall-out of these crises and to try to alleviate their impact.

ECNL sees its ability to look deeply and further ahead as crucial for it to be able to fulfil its mission to protect and expand civil society's 'space for action', even in such tumultuous times. This 'space for action' comprises the rights, legal frameworks, processes, circumstances and resources needed for people to come together, to organise, and take action to create change. In the last 15 years, this space has been severely challenged around the world with restrictions of diverse types proliferating that seek to silence or sideline activism.

This phenomenon – termed 'closing civic space' – has been especially difficult for civil society to respond to. Part of the reason for this is described well by an interviewee of the International Civil Society Centre:

[Closing civic space is a] …long-term change that doesn't present as a crisis with actual impact in the immediate future. The intersecting trends that are closing civic space… are complex and multifaceted. It is difficult to see the entry points and often impossible to have a confident theory of change in a massively entangled, interconnected system…These trends are not 'campaignable', and this makes it hard to articulate a clear and compelling case to mobilise people. Reactive responses to specific manifestations - a repressive law…- are more straight forward, feel more impactful, and are better supported by most donors and members than long-term attention to, and attempts to influence, underlying causes.[5]

5   https://icscentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Mapping-Anticipating-Futures-.pdf

A number of partners have pointed out how civil society can often struggle to anticipate and prepare for emerging challenges – they have a low level of 'adaptive capacity''[6]. The problems that this creates can be seen in the response to the trend of closing civic space.

To develop ECNL's strategy, we therefore set out to understand the kinds of interconnected trends that have shaped the state of civil society today and which are likely to do so into the future. We also sought to identify the 'deep drivers', the long-term, large, structural forces that underlie and manifest themselves in these different trends. These trends are, indeed, inter-connected and complex but it is possible to categorise them in different ways:

- Between those that are already shaping the present and those that will be new or become more significant in the years ahead[7];

- Across different domains – between those trends that are social, technological, environmental, economic, political, legal, ethical or cultural in nature.

- Between the levels at which these trends create impact – globally, societally, sectorally[8], organisationally and individually.

We also delved into the trends and drivers that can help us understand:

- The key issues that will shape civic space in the future that we should prioritise;

- Factors that will determine how and where we are able to effect change;[9]

- Changes that might impact the way that we need to operate as an organisation[10].

We discovered that many of the trends we observed have the potential to shape our future in both positive and negative ways. For example, the uncontrolled and unregulated development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is creating new and powerful ways for governments and non-state actors to monitor and attack civil society. At the same time, if developed appropriately, it could bring new capabilities for civil society such as the automation of different internal processes that may free up capacity or by facilitating new ways of creating change.

Given this complexity and the inter-connectedness of the trends we identified and the diversity of views, it is difficult to wrestle the thinking the process generated into a concise document. Accordingly, the report only captures a fraction of the nuance and insight provided by the participants. We nevertheless hope that we have managed to draw out the main ideas in a way that we hope will be of use as civil society, funders and other partners are working to address the challenges and opportunities ahead.

We have structured this paper by examining the 'building blocks' that exist within different domains – climate change and the environment, the economy, society, culture and mindsets, technology and politics. Within each of these domains, we have looked at the key implications for these on civil society's space for action, for the ecosystem of organisations and actors trying to protect and expand this space, as well as for organisations. We have gone deeper into some key areas – for example, at the resourcing of civil society. Finally, we conclude by sharing what we heard from partners and interviewees about what the 'organisations of the future' will be doing differently.

6   See, inter alia, the following:
https://solidarityaction.network/wp-content/uploads/Mapping-Anticipating-Futures.pdf
https://www.fundersinitiativeforcivilsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/FICS-Rethinking-Civic-Space-Report-FINAL1.pdf
https://civitates-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Civic-Space-report-2024-Final.pdf
7   Specifically in 2035, ten years in the future being identified by futures thinkers as a useful timescale to precipitate think-ing given that it is far enough away that it is possible to imagine significant changes from the present but also not so distant that it becomes 'science fiction', unconnected from any sense of what is actually possible.
8   i.e. having impacts on the wider ecosystem of actors and organisations that are working to support civil society and that we are part of.
9   For example, the way the different international and regional organisations are becoming more or less influential in, or committed to, advancing human rights.
10   For example, new organisational models, new technological tools, changes to the way we generate resources or changing expectations from staff about how we organise and work together.

Building Blocks of the Future

I. Climate Change & The Environment

Overview

We lead with climate change as this emerged as the preeminent issue that will undoubtedly shape the future of our planet and of civil society. In the words of one participant in our process, "this changes everything."

The potential impacts of climate change on society are almost too long to enumerate but include increasing destruction caused by extreme weather events, displacement, and conflict, reducing resources and food insecurity, effects on health and the spread of vector-borne diseases[11] to new regions and new pandemics. It will also accelerate inequality with marginalised and low-income communities most affected by climate change and, at the same time, with the least resources to adapt.

Climate change will strengthen emotions of fear, scarcity and competition in society that can be capitalised on by authoritarian and far right politicians and will generate fertile ground for further polarization and the 'securitisation' of different issues.[12] The failure to tackle climate change is exposing the limitations of institutions – whether governments or the United Nations – and is contributing to anger among younger generations and resulting in an apparent reduction of support for democracy on their part.

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11   Like malaria or dengue fever.
12   'Securitisation' is the representation of certain issues as a security threat to justify policy approaches towards them that undermine human rights and/or violate legal principles.

Impacts on civil society's space for action

There is an urgent need for coordinated global action to limit climate change, to mitigate its effects and to adapt to already irreversible changes. Civil society - including environmental defenders, Indigenous groups and affected communities – are critical for the meaningful and immediate action that is needed, and particularly so that the needs of the communities most affected by climate change are prioritised. Despite this, they are often excluded from processes designed to tackle climate change or involved in ways that are superficial.

The failure to tackle climate change is leading to greater citizen action and new forms of organising and action. In response, however, governments and corporations are seeking to stifle their freedom and space for action. In many parts of the world, environmental defenders are threatened with violence and death while, in Western Europe, there is a trend of restricting civil society space with illegitimate constraints on the right to assemble and protest being introduced and climate activists imprisoned for exercising their rights to take action.

Moreover, there are already signs of that the issue of climate change is being 'securitised' and framed as a security threat to nations in a way that will further reduce the role of civil society and lead to policies and emergency measures that flout human rights standards, including those that underpin civil society's space for action.

Impacts on the ecosystem for change

Our conversations revealed multiple ideas about how climate change may affect groups seeking to protect civil society's space for action.

Most notably, there was a fundamental critique about how civil society operates in siloes so that, for example, groups working on human rights and those focusing on climate change goals do not adequately elevate and deal with the interconnections between their work[13] . Partly exacerbated by the narrow thematic focus of funders and a lack of investment in interdisciplinary approaches and cross-sector collaborations, climate change had exposed the need for more resources, spaces and practices which can help break down these siloes and enable civil society to meet the multi-faceted challenge that it poses.

Similarly, climate change was also considered to have exposed the limitations of global governance as well as the failure of many governments to effect meaningful change. While many see action at the international and national level as 'blocked', they saw particular opportunities in two areas. The first was through multi-stakeholder initiatives that involve critical actors beyond government (for example, business). The second was through focussing on creating change at the sub-national and community level – particularly in cities – and so civil society's ability to engage there should be strengthened.

13   At the most basic level, we heard concern that funders and organisations working on climate change are not adequately centring the security of activists in their work.

Impacts at the organisational level

As well as centring climate change in their work – as we at ECNL are seeking to do in our new strategy – organisations will need to take action to reduce their climate footprint, including reducing travel by air and investing in new ways to collaborate and build connection that are not reliant on conferences in far flung places.

Participants in our process also drew attention to the effects of climate change on organisational resilience – for example, the effects of extreme weather events and flooding in the places where we live and work. Finally, concern was raised about donors failing to see the interconnections between human rights work and climate change and that they are reducing funding for the latter and focussing instead solely on climate change. Organisations will need to show – not tell – the interconnections between their work and climate change and diversify their funding sources in response.

II. Economic Sphere

1. Neoliberalism and its Discontents

Overview

There was a powerful consensus among participants in our process about the fundamental role that neoliberalism had played in shaping our world and influencing the space for civil society to organise and achieve change. They believe that this ideology will continue to shape our societies and culture into the future but, also, pointed to an emerging pushback against it and of campaigns for new economic models, especially at the community level, which are more supportive of civic space.

The influence of neo-liberalism on our world is multi-faceted but participants pointed towards:

- Accelerating economic inequality in society with wealth being horded by a tiny fragment of the population while the rest of society sees the value of their salaries reduce, experience economic precarity and social mobility reduces.
- Weakening public services and erosion of the welfare state as a result of privatisation and austerity measures – especially after the global financial meltdown of 2009.
- The privatization of public space in the physical realm so that the common places where people can gather are no longer public but are owned and overseen by private entities.
- An increase in corporate influence in the democratic process and the prioritisation of their agendas ahead of that of the public.
- Reliance on a model of growth that drives extractivism and results in the unsustainable depletion and exploitation of resources and drives climate change.
- The creation and dissemination of deep narratives, including through culture, that reify individualism, materialism, and 'hustle culture' in a way that portrays economic success and failure as a result of personal efforts and undermine community action. Techno-solutionism – explored below - is another example of this kinds of narrative.

As the negative effects of neoliberalism are becoming clearer, communities and individuals are pushing back with campaigns for tax justice, greater regulation and redistribution and alternative economic models.

Impacts on civil society's space for action

The present and future impacts of neo-liberalism on civil society's space for action are extraordinarily diverse. These include:

- Most obviously, huge social dissatisfaction with the 'system' and mistrust of governments and institutions seen to be part of the establishment.

This is then fertile ground for populist movements that offer stoke up hate and blame minorities, immigrants and 'outsiders' for the predicament the public face themselves in. In some countries, this discourse and movements are being supported by oligarchs who wish to

divert attention away from the economic model from which they benefit to target other groups and communities instead. There can be a proliferation of violent discourse and polarization that means that independent civil society working outside of, or critical of, these movements are smeared and attacked.

- Corporations and billionaires also weaken democratic and civic space by bringing powerful pressure to bear on politicians so that they implement policies that support their interests in ways that are both ostensibly legal (campaign donations and lobbying) or illegal (such as outright corruption). In many countries, they control much of the media and thus can shape narratives and arguments that support their interests and, again, deploy these against actors including independent civil society that may challenge their position. More subtly, the growth in private philanthropy from the mega-wealthy can privilege professionalised civil society organisations (CSOs) and be directed away from efforts that seek systemic change, including the economic models through which they accrue their wealth.

- Governments prioritise economic growth over other objectives and democratic norms and institutions, human rights frameworks and citizen engagement depicted as unnecessary barriers towards that goal. The result is processes that discourage or exclude participation of civil society, prevent citizen oversight as well as a reluctance on the part of politicians and policymakers to engage with civil society.

- Finally, the ability for members of the public to access the time and space to make sense, come together and take action is severely constrained where individuals are facing precarity and are forced to work long hours or provide caring duties without state support. Civic space is not just a legal and regulatory framework but also requires the resources and conditions for people to realise their human rights to associate, assemble, and participate. Another effect here is that of creating an imbalance in civil society where professionalised CSOs have the resources to do this but social movements and activists working without a salary struggle to access these essential conditions.

Impacts on the ecosystem for change

This area generated a number of critiques that the ecosystem for change will need to adapt to be ready for the future.

These include that there is a need to understand how economic models – and particularly that of neo-liberalism – are so central in shaping our world and of the space for civil society action. There was a demand for greater recognition as to how this particularly stymies the power of parts of civil society working to achieve systemic change. This particularly included social movements and participants described how the ecosystem of organisations working to protect and promote the space for civic action should look beyond formal CSOs and fund ways to better engage with, and

support, these social movements. They also identified a need to recognise the economic conditions that are an essential enabling factor for activism and to address those rather than to focus primarily on laws and policies that provide theoretical rights that cannot be realised in practice because of resource constraints.

Failure to do so exacerbates a perception that the work of CSOs is focussed on issues that are not a priority for the wider public and, indeed, are part of the 'establishment' against which publics are railing. For several participants there is truth in the critique that many CSOs are a liberal elite, focussed on arcane legal issues and on elite institutions and unconcerned with 'bread

and butter' issues. Indeed, as described above, private foundation funding tends to flow towards professionalised CSOs who come from the same milieu and speak the same technical language as foundation staff, at the expense of grassroots and community-level changemakers. To stay relevant, and for civic space to be seen as something of value, there is a need for CSOs to show how their work provides solutions to the issues that the public are struggling with and to become more representative of those they are working for.

Impacts at the organisational level

While they need to think about how activism outside of professional organisations can be sustained, they will also need to think about what impact rising costs and falling salaries will have on their staff and how this could lead to a challenge to recruit new staff, especially of those from backgrounds that are not economically privileged.

Equally, they will need to think about how they address the kinds of imbalances described above within their ecosystem and networks and what they need to share power and build relationships and support the agendas of groups with less socio-economic privilege. This especially includes developing their funding models and ensuring they can generate or access resources that can support transformative work and which some foundations are less interested in supporting.

2. Resourcing of Civil Society

Overview

A key area in the economic sphere - influenced by many of the trends and drivers described in this paper – is the way that civil society is being resourced. While the process of generating this research happened before the closure of USAID in early 2025 – something that has created major disruption for many civil society groups around the world – this was this was just the most recent example of what is observed to be a longer-term trend. For example:

- Bilateral funding from governments in the Global North supporting civil society – especially those parts of it working on human rights and equality – is reducing as a result of austerity measures. It is also changing in nature - in some cases, this is to do with the electoral success of far-right political groups in countries that were previously major donors to civil society working on human rights in the Global North (such as in The Netherlands) and who are hostile towards these issues.

- This is accelerating a pre-existing trend among governmental donors – of abandoning rights-based approaches to development in favour of frameworks for assessing impact that do not align with the work of groups working for systemic change. Alongside this, the private sector is increasingly being privileged as a partner in international development and significant portions of aid budgets are transferred to private sector organisations, sidelining efforts to challenge systemic and rights-related issues or excluding marginalised communities.

- The trend of disintermediation is clear in this area, with moves to 'cut out the middle' and enable donors to reach communities and activists in the Majority World and not through charities in their own countries that have previously played a role as an intermediary. An example of this is the decision of the Swedish government to discourage forwarding of aid funds and to deprivilege Swedish organisations in the delivery of development work. This trend may address the critiques made by the 'Shift the Power' agenda described below but it is also being done in the name of efficiency and reducing bureaucracy and may shift funding away from rights-based work and activism, especially in locations where the space for civil society is closing.[14]

- Another aspect of this disintermediation is the 'platformisation' of philanthropy – giving and organising via online platforms which enable donations to be made by members of the public directly to communities. This has the potential to enable civil society to access new forms of income directly, including through micro-donations. At the same time, this gives power to these private platforms – and their algorithms – to determine which causes should be privileged and the public may end up giving favour particular identities and types of work that, again, may exclude particular communities or approaches.

- Private philanthropy towards civil society reflects the kinds of dynamics described further on in this paper around the contestation of rights. On one hand, there is increasing and growing support for trust-based philanthropic models that provide unrestricted and long-term support to grantees with few strings attached. At the same time, a number of foundations are moving towards time-bound 'big bet' models of philanthropy; moreover, some major foundation funders of human rights work have announced that they are pivoting to other issues that are perceived as separate from human rights – such as the environment and climate change.

- Compounding this, in countries where the space for civil society is closing, some foundations are at risk of being attacked for engaging in social justice work and may be forced to fund different kinds of work to avoid being shut down or attacked. The trend of limiting cross-border philanthropy will continue in a way that prevents rights-based groups from being supported from abroad.

- At the same time, participants pointed to opportunities to reshape the resourcing of civil society in new ways that disrupt power imbalances. There is much work being done to support the development of new philanthropic models. Participants pointed to increasing examples of how transnational movements are supporting each other and moving resources to where they are needed. There are also new forms of giving that hold potential for civil society in the future – this included creating new financing models, opportunities from blockchain, as well as giving from businesses – like B Corps – that have committed to social and environmental impact and who are setting up giving programmes.

The above shifts are affecting civil society profoundly – and especially those that are engaging in activism or seeking to challenge systemic injustice. Already, civil society working on human rights in the Majority World are seeing a significant reduction in their funding while funding calls are expressed in a way that ties them into activities or practices that do not align with their theories of change. This has the potential to weaken groups at a critical time where action is needed more than ever. Organisations will need to find new forms of resourcing – including from within their movements - and to look ahead to anticipate these trends and develop new forms of funding.

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14   https://www.development-today.com/archive/2024/dt-4--2024/the-break-up-of-swedens-civil-society-funding-system-as-seen-from-abroad

# III. Society – Contesting Rights and Justice

Overview

Participants in the process drew attention to how people were increasingly mobilizing around the world to challenge systemic and structural injustices and seek justice and rights, particularly those that are experienced by racialised and minoritised groups. From the Movement for Black Lives, the #MeToo and #NiUnaMenos movements, youth-led movements in Senegal and Nigeria, and the movement against genocide in Palestine, these movements are contesting dogmas and shifting paradigms.

Supported by social media, characterised by creativity and direct action, they have brought new actors – especially younger generations – into campaigns for change and forced their issues onto the agendas of institutions, political parties and media. Their visions are radical and transformative and they have challenged the analysis and practices of organisations and individuals working on these issues. This includes critiques of the practices of funders and international CSOs – exemplified by number of initiatives like 'Decolonise Aid', 'Shift the Power', #CharitySoWhite, and the Re-Imagining the INGO (RINGO) Project and beyond.

At the same time, this has generated a powerful and sophisticated backlash against these movements and the causes they are advancing. The kinds of anti-gender and anti-rights actors leading this are working transnationally, organising in different spaces and domains (from the international to the local, from the on-line to the UN). They disseminate narratives that foment polarization and which represent human rights and social justice causes as 'woke', niche issues championed by perceived liberal elites that are in opposition to the interests of the broader public.

The far right is gaining electoral ground in Western Europe and beyond while authoritarian populists globally are achieving success through policies and language that attack these movements and fundamental rights. The power of this backlash is attested to by the reach of 'misogyny influencers' on social media which is reducing support among young men for feminism and being used to drive them to support far right and authoritarian agendas in a way that bucks the supposed tendency of younger generations towards more progressive views than their elders.
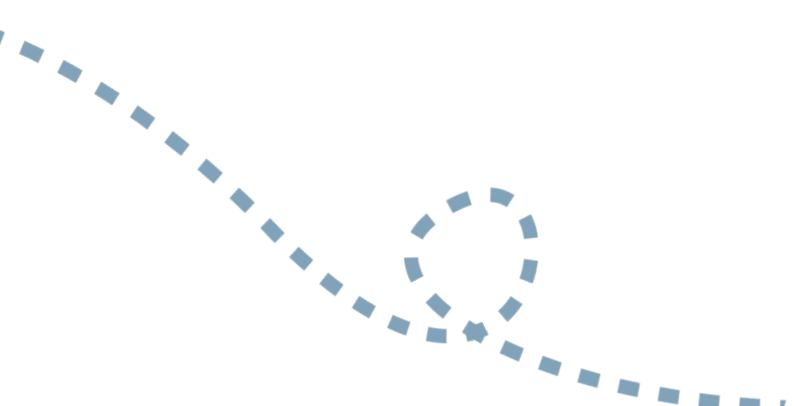
Impacts on civil society's space for action

The rights to protest of the members of these movements are being attacked and restricted while, in some situations, their involvement is punished in other ways, for example, through the expulsion from university of students involved in action on their campuses. As these movements' own tactics evolve, we expect to see a proliferation of new legal and non-legal measures developed in response to marginalise and weaken them. There are recent examples from the USA, for example, of company-led programmes to ensure greater diversity, equity and inclusion in their organisations are being litigated against and forced to be shut down.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the space of social media and, connectedly, the use of discourse and narratives to attack the agenda of these movements and to 'other' communities and to use their campaigns for rights and justice as 'wedge' issues that authoritarian and far right populists can weaponise. We see an asymmetry of resources and capability in the on-line space – initially in the use of bots to attack and crowd out the voices of these movements online by state and non-state actors. This has now expanded into adoption of AI as well as, in the case of Twitter, the acquisition and transformation of the social media platform for these purposes.

This increased contestation can increase polarization, a phenomenon that some interviewees pointed out that movements may themselves contribute to. There is evidence that the tactic of 'polarise to mobilise' by movements can actually foster greater societal conflict that activates authoritarian values among the public. Indeed, far-right actors intentionally stoke up this polarization for their own ends. This is happening at the societal level but also within progressive causes where issues are used to divide them and where there are often particular divides between those committed to radical visions and those that are reformist. The fragmentation and discord that often results is increasingly weakening these movements and civil society generally.

Impacts on the ecosystem for change

There are multiple effects on the ecosystem of organisations working to protect and advance the space for action. These include:

- A need to see the interconnections between the attacks on racialised and minoritised groups and on civic space generally. There is a call to show solidarity with affected groups across civil society in the face of weaponization of homophobia, racism and misogyny and to see the attacks, restrictions and smears against groups and communities working against them as a pretext to, or initial step towards, an effort to undermine independent civil society. It will be increasingly obvious that the health and robustness of civil society space can best be gauged by the experience of these groups. Infrastructure organisations will have to build out stronger connections to them and develop their agendas in partnership with them.
- As described below, a requirement to look beyond legal and regulatory frameworks that are key to the space for civil society action to the role of social media platforms and narratives in advancing this space. At the same time, organisations should avoid messaging and narratives that exacerbate polarization and inadvertently strengthen polarization.
- Beyond this, there will be a need to attend to fissures in civil society that

are coalescing between those with radical and those with reformist agendas, as well as those that are encouraged and instrumentalised by anti-rights actors to undermine and weaken civil society movements. While differences must not be glossed over, a divided civil society will struggle to stand up to authoritarian actors who are seeking to weaken them and their space to operate.

Impacts at the organisational level

Funders and international civil society will need to interrogate the ways that they work and how that may replicate and strengthen power imbalances and exclude and undermine civil society from the Majority World. Instead, they will need to move to practices and formations that are inclusive and empowering. Within their own organisations, there will be a greater expectation that staff, leadership and governance should have lived experience of the issues that they are working on.

Younger generations entering the workforce have stronger expectations that civil society groups should internally reflect the values that they seek to advance externally and this appears will only increase. Many of these concerns are also shared by funders and the wider public who are looking at the level of diversity within charitable organisations. Questions of inter-generational unfairness, and ableism will also become more and more important for organisations to answer. As described further on, the 'organisation of the future' will have different structures and working practices that encourage inclusivity and power-sharing.

IV. Culture, mindsets and narratives

Overview

Participants observed how the kinds of events and drivers described above are shifting the mindsets of the public in a way that fundamentally impact on the civil society and the space for activism.
These include:

- A loss of community and institutions and groups through which people interact and engage with each other. This contributes to an increasing epidemic of loneliness with deleterious effects on health (both physical and mental), undermines community cohesion and weakens civic action. Churches, community groups, trade unions, political parties are all witnessing falling membership as are NGOs - the latter, in the words of Anton Jäger[15], becoming "heads without bodies — finding it easier to attract donors than members."

- In place, people are finding connection through on-line interaction and participating in digital communities where they can form relationships with others based on interests and identity in a way that transcends location and boundaries. However, this is also contributing to further fragmentation, 'hyper-pluralism' and even polarization. As communities become narrower and less diverse in opinion, it is harder to generate solidarity and build the kinds of broad-based movements needed to achieve change.

- Participants pointed towards how a lot of the fear and insecurity in society derive from genuine concerns – whether conflict, lack of resources, climate change and the dizzying array of new crises described in the introduction. Faced with this, values that favour security and control will be strengthened among the public and make them supportive of political agendas that purport to provide that, at the expense of civic freedoms. This – together with the issues described elsewhere of loneliness, the way that technology privileges content that creates indignation and hostility, and the sense that the system is not working for public - is also generating rage and anger that contributes to polarization, a failure to find common ground, and lashing out at groups and identities that are different.

- Participants also drew attention to how the overload of information and intense pace of change and crisis was overwhelming the public's ability to look ahead and also contributing to a demand for quick fixes; it is also making individuals more susceptible to information sources that confirm and pander to their views.

- There is greater awareness of issues around mental health and of the way that societal factors can impact it – factors like financial precarity and conflict described above – and a need to for initiatives to promote well-being to look beyond the level of the individual to these kinds of factors.

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https://jacobin.com/2022/12/from-bowling-alone-to-posting-alone

Impacts on civil society's space for action

The effects of these mindsets are diverse but connected by how important they are for civic space. Most obviously, as George Orwell described, "the relative freedom which we enjoy depends of public opinion." If society is fragmented, angered, and fearful, what hope for civic freedoms?

These impacts include:

- The loss of associational life, the primary means through which people experience the value of civic space. The wave of organising within communities to provide mutual aid during the Covid-19 pandemic was a recent example where many people were able to access this; it is also is true that people are experiencing connection through digital communities. However, participants drew attention to how the trend was one of lesser interaction and that this weakened civil society – and that there was a concern that younger generations are not being able to experience this in their lives at all.
- As explored elsewhere, emotions of precarity and rage creates fertile ground for authoritarians and populists who seek to restrict rights, to polarise and 'other' particular communities. Independent civic society and especially those parts working for communities under attack are more readily delegitimised and attacked. This, and the search for quick solutions, undermine deliberative democracy and the involvement of independent civil society groups in the development of policy.
- It is increasingly clear that there are profound challenges around burnout within civil society and that the sense of threat, stress and overload is contributing to poor mental health among activists. A number of participants pointed out that the costs of activism in terms of mental health and commitment are so high that it was discouraging people from involvement. This overload also prevents people to look further ahead and to spend time on crucial but non-urgent activities like relationship-building with others in their ecosystem.

Impacts on the ecosystem for change

The implications of this for the sector of organisations working to protect and advance civic space include:

- Developing the ability to both deal with crises and react to attacks in the present as well as to look longer-term and to develop strategies based on a bigger vision of the future. Different sectors of civil society are talking about the need to work towards bigger and positive visions and to define their own agendas (rather than having to concentrate on responding to those put forward by their opponents). This will apply equally to groups and organisations working to protect and promote civil society's space for action.
- Thinking about how mindsets, narratives and culture relate to the achievement of their goals. How might they create narratives that address the challenges above but de-escalate emotions of fear, crisis and insecurity? Crisis-based messaging or campaigns that tap into outrage and anger can gain attention in the short-term but, in the longer-term, contribute to trends that will have negative consequences that outweigh their transient benefits. At the same time, how can these actors speak to the

real concerns that people have and show the value of civic space in addressing these?

- Addressing profound questions as to how this ecosystem can address the loss of associational life described above and, especially, provide younger generations tangible experience of what a healthy civic space looks like. This is especially important in countries where opportunities for this have been restricted. Echoed elsewhere in this paper, there is a sense that the organisations of the future will need to be focussed on building a sense of belonging and community both within their own institutions but within civil society as a whole.

- Connectedly, centring well-being and healing within their work and to collectively attempt to disrupt the sectoral effects of trauma, stress and burnout which can, for example, accelerate mistrust and conflict within movements or limit the adoption of new tactics. This has implications for the tempo and manner through which collective work is carried out and elevates the importance of building authentic and trusting relationships with others in the ecosystem that can form the basis for sustainable change.

Impacts at the organisational level

Many of the same questions for the ecosystem apply here such as:

- How do organisations create and disseminate deep narratives that shift the mindsets and activate the values of the public towards support of civil society instead of aggravating negative trends?

- What models and ways of working will emerge that address the endemic burnout within civil society?
- How can they find the space and mindset to move beyond firefighting and look further ahead?
- How can they build community through their work?
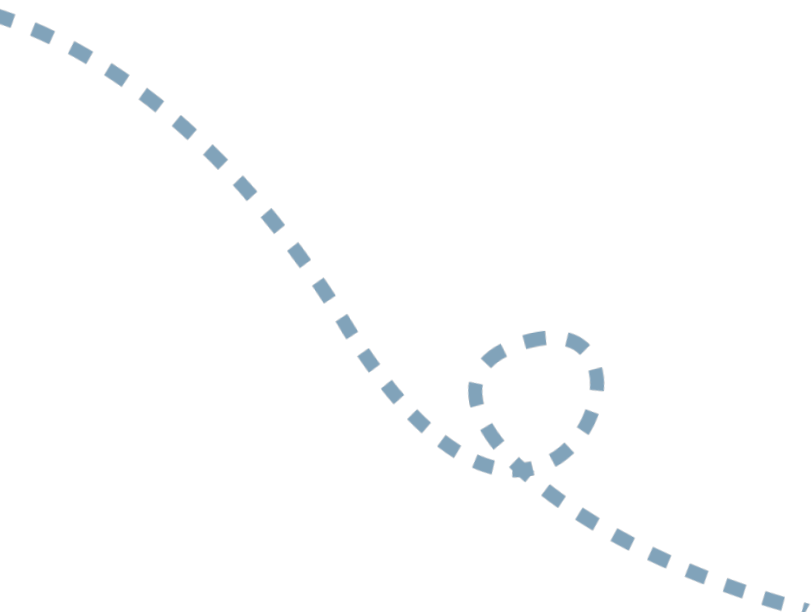
V. Society and Culture – Changing Information Ecosystem

Overview

Participants drew attention to how the ecosystem through which news and opinions are shared will continue to shift dramatically in a way that impacts on the space for action by civil society.

Some of these changes include:

- A reduction of influence of traditional sources of authority that curate and gatekeep information (like newspapers and television channels) towards social media platforms where content is created and shared by independent creators and influencers. Whereas audiences used to be passive recipients of news and ideas, these platforms and technologies are enabling them to become part of the story and to investigate and create content themselves and to share with peers. There is also greater two-way engagement with creators engaging with their audiences online through live streaming platforms.

- Alongside this, media is becoming more targeted – enabled by new technologies - with audiences forming into smaller groups formed around specific outlooks or views and mass media reducing in influence.

- Independent media is struggling to develop business models that are sustainable and prioritising content that will go viral on platforms (including that designed to generate engagement through creating outrage and anger – so called 'rage bait') at the expense over in-depth or nuanced reporting.

- There is increasing concentration of ownership of media in the hands of corporations who, as described in the economic sphere above, see this as a way to advance their interest. In countries where space is closing, these outlets are increasingly owned by actors close to government.

- Participants drew attention to the ways that artistic and creative media is being used to tell stories and shift culture and attitudes – music, plays, films – and the critical role that this is playing in advancing certain causes. In this new information ecosystem, some drew attention also to the value of work at the community level to build trust and disseminate narratives.

Impacts on civil society's space for action

This changing information ecosystem both reflects and accelerates many of the deeper trends described elsewhere like fragmentation, disintermediation, growing corporate influence and mistrust of authority. The way that this is shaping civil society's space for action – and will continue to do so in the future – include:

- Increased fragmentation of society into smaller interest-based groups in a way that undermines the possibility for collective action while in-group dynamics can mean that members of these groups become more extreme in their views.
- While disintermediation has positive aspects, it also means that there are few safeguards around accuracy or even hate speech. Misinformation is able to spread rapidly and unchecked and powerful actors are using social media to smear, delegitimise and attack parts of civil society, especially minoritised and racialised communities.
- The effects that this is having on people's mindsets so that, as described above, they are becoming more angered, more mistrustful of each other, or overwhelmed by a sense of crisis. Participants pointed to an overload of information that meant that it was difficult to get people's attention and to keep them engaged in campaigns into the longer-term. These all undermine the space for civil society in diverse ways described below.
- Against this, these platforms also offer opportunities to reach new audiences and, especially in countries where mass media is restricted or controlled by actors whose interests are in opposition to civil society, get their stories out to a wider audience. Especially among youth-based movements, participants pointed to the creative use of social media to reach and mobilise a mass of people at particular moments.

Impacts on the ecosystem for change and for organisations

Groups working to protect and expand the space for civil society action are faced with a number of key questions given the changes that are underway, the largest of which is how do they operate in this new system without endorsing platforms that are problematic or inadvertently strengthening and mindsets that are, in the longer-term, potentially hostile to their agendas?

Some of this has been seen in the fall-out from the takeover of Twitter and the proliferation of hate speech there as a result of which campaigners debated a choice of staying on that platform with its potential to reach a wider audience or of moving onto platforms with a much smaller reach and where they end up speaking to the like-minded.

The sector, and especially democracy and civic space groups, will therefore need to look more broadly at the business models, policies and regulation that limit the misuse of these platforms to attack and smear them and enable them to have voice. As described in the section below on technology, they will need to engage more in the aspects of how digital platforms work and the nature of the algorithms that underpin them. This requires news sets of skills and for engagement in new fora different from those they have traditionally focussed on.

They will also need to move beyond a form of communication that is based on an approach of transmitting facts and expertise and reflects the way that information now travels – a mode that is more conversational

and builds trust and belonging among the intended audience. Participants pointed to the power that individual influencers are having to generate attention and action on issues and the connections and approaches that were needed to enable for civil society groups to work with them.

VI. Technology

Overview

Participants' attentions were inevitably drawn to the role of technology in the future – how it will affect society and the space for civil society action in new and powerful ways. It was seen as a distinct driver of change but also one that will accelerate existing trends: for example, the way that it may strengthen corporate influence and control over what voices get heard, or exacerbate power imbalances and contribute to the further concentration of wealth, or strengthen social fragmentation and disintermediation.

In this area, in particular, participants could see how technology could have positive impacts as well as negative and saw that it was therefore critical to challenge the trends that might have deleterious effects on civil society as it was developed and used. There was a concern that the rush to develop and embrace technologies without exploring or managing the risks around them would mean that the negative impacts could continue to proliferate – techno-solutionist approaches that valorise disruption and of 'moving fast and breaking things' have the potential for grave social consequences. The public was being offered a stark choice – to partake of the benefits that technology offers (whatever the consequences) or reject it outright.

In the face of this, participants pointed to examples where society is challenging this unlovely deal – for example, parents organising in their communities to create agreements among themselves to not give their children smartphones from an early age. Similarly, concerns about the potential dangers of AI have created important responses and proposals to how it can be developed responsibly. However, all too often, key processes and forums in which regulation and controls are being developed do not include civil society – and especially those parts of it from minoritised and marginalised groups who are exposed to the greatest risks.

A full overview of these technologies and their impacts is not possible here but include;

- Inevitably, the recent introduction of generative AI meant that this area of technology was in many people's minds when thinking about the future. They see how it can shape the future of our societies – around work, the economy, of government, of culture, and of civil society action.
- The impacts of social media and tools to create content that are explored in the section on the information ecosystem.
- The way that blockchain could facilitate new ways of people organising and sharing resources and facilitate horizontal working - for example, through Distributed Autonomous Organisations.
- The potential for quantum computing to push forward the limits of computational capability and to deal with certain tasks that digital computers are unable to. While this is an emergent technology and the uses are not clear, it has the possibility to create new capabilities and drive exponential change globally.

Impacts on civil society's space for action

The potential impacts of technology on the way that civil society can operate in the future were based on the way that it complemented and exacerbated existing trends described elsewhere – polarization, unaccountable corporate power, fragmentation.

Some distinct ideas included that AI could enable people to give up more time to volunteering and other forms of associational life that they previously cannot. Similarly, civil society organisations could free up staff time from administrative tasks to engage in the key activities that have the potential to strengthen their movements, including convening, relationship-building and thought-leadership. Translation and interpretation could be facilitated and enable deeper conversations within international civil society forums in a way that remedies the traditional exclusion of communities and participants that do not speak colonial languages.

Conversely, these technologies and AI especially could intensify existing inequalities – the way that AI algorithms reflect and deepen discrimination is increasingly recognised but there is also the potential that such tools will not be accessible to marginalised communities. Civil society may struggle to match the resources that states and business have to adopt and use AI, particularly in generating content and disseminating and shape narratives. The use of deep fakes will also be deployed to undermine civil society and contribute to increasing mistrust in society and proliferation of disinformation.

Multiple participants pointed to the way that AI was being used to surveil and target activists in closing regimes and, moreover, that quantum computing would be able to crack cryptography methods and weaken the digital security of civil society groups with great ease.

There is also concern that authorities may rely on AI to make decisions and determine policies and regulation in a way that undermines deliberative democracy and the necessary participation of civil society organisations in this. Compounding this concern was the fact that the development of technology was as critical to people's lives as the development of laws and policy, but that civil society and affected communities were effectively excluded from processes and conversations around this.

Participants saw that different technologies will enable new ways of working and organising across civil society – for example, the use of Decentralised Autonomous Organisations (DAOs) could facilitate the sharing of resources and governance across a diverse group of people. There had been ample examples of how technology had enabled civil society to organise and reach scale easily but, at the same time, that it was hard to sustain momentum and keep attention of the public. On-line campaigns could gain visibility by tapping into outrage, but this contributed towards polarization and inadvertently strengthened authoritarian values among the public while there was concern about that many campaigns were superficial and performative and lacked depth.

While it is clear that the on-line and physical space for action by civil society are deeply connected, they would become increasingly meshed. Participants pointed to examples of where people had engaged in protest in on-line games or in the metaverse; and, inevitably, to examples of where authorities had taken measures against these activists for this.

Impacts on the ecosystem for change

The implications for civil society in the future are numerous. Given how quickly new technologies are created and proliferate, this will require an ability to keep track of them and to focus on shaping and influencing the way that technology is developed and regulated so that it aligns with human rights standards and does not undermine the space for civic action. This will necessitate the development of new skills and relationships and engagement in spaces that are new to most of civil society. Ensuring that civil society voices – especially those from communities that are most vulnerable and affected – are included in such spaces will be critical.

Impacts at the organisational level

In the face of this, civil society groups, especially those focusing on democracy and civic space will need to develop the collective competency to engage with the development, regulation, platforms and implications of new technologies for civic space. They will need to do the same internally to be able to take advantage of new tools that can empower them in their work – for example, in facilitating the generation of funds or building and implementing collaborative ventures.

VII. Political – Democracy Threatened & Reimagined

Overview

As participants looked ahead, they anticipated that the falling respect for democracy evidenced in various global surveys would continue, including in established democracies.

Authoritarian populist parties and leaders seemed to be on the rise with democratic processes and norms represented as ineffective or incapable of offering the security and economic growth that these actors purport to offer. This was not confined to far right and populist actors – there had been efforts to centralise authority, prevent independent oversight of government, and reluctance to engage with wider civil society in the making of policy across many parts of the political spectrum. In looking to the future, some participants pointed to the trajectory of what had happened in countries like Hungary and Turkey.

The weakening support for, or undermining of, democracy is driven by a number of distinct factors covered elsewhere – economic inequality that drives resentment of parties and institutions associated with the status quo, conflict and polarization. However, the falling reduction of support for democracy in many parts of the world – including among younger people – also derives from the fact that people feel disengaged and that democratic processes and institutions do not seem to be able to provide solutions to the issues that they are struggling with nor global challenges like climate change.

In response, we are seeing actors trying to refresh and develop new forms of democracy which seek to increase people's sense of agency and give them opportunity to use the system to effect change – this includes bodies like citizen's assemblies as well as initiatives to devolve greater power to communities as well as those that use technology to facilitate engagement and participation. Tackling the challenge to democracy will require not only efforts to protect it but also steps to reinvigorate it so that its promise and value can be realised.

Impacts on civil society's space for action

Civil society is essential to democracy; democracy is essential for the space for civil society to operate. Efforts to undermine that space are part of a broader agenda that seeks to undermine democratic norms and framework.

The impacts of this process of autocratisation on civil society are all too clear and, if the trends are not met and addressed, include:

- Restrictions on essential rights for civil society to take action – to freedom of association, assembly, expression and participation.
- Exclusion of civil society organisations from involvement in developing policy.
- Securitization of areas of policy taking them out of the scope of regular democratic processes and principles.
- Undermining of independent media and acquisition or co-option of media outlets

to prevent oversight and scrutiny by civil society.

- Politicisation and attacks on the judiciary and the courts, key mechanisms through which civil society is able to assert its rights.

Meanwhile, efforts to reinvigorate democracy and bridge the gap in participation offer new potential for civil society engagement and for people to manifest their power to effect change.

Impacts on the ecosystem for change and for organisations:

The impacts on the wider ecosystem and on individual organisations were similar. Participants in the process called on the groups working to protect and advance civic space to work more closely with others seeking to protect democracy from assault as well as in helping to develop new democratic practices of the kind described above, particularly at the sub-national and community level. Some also argued that these groups would also need to recognise the issues that are generating insecurity, precarity and fear that anti-democratic actors are capitalizing on and to show how they were providing solutions to them.

VIII. Political Focus – Changing Context for Influence

Overview

A theme cutting across these different domains is that the tactics that civil society have relied on to effect change need to adapt to the new context. For the organisations that are part of the ecosystem of actors that are seeking to protect and advance the space for civil society action, they will need to change their strategies to reflect the following:

- Geo-political shifts have meant that many of the governments that they have previously relied on to support their causes at the international level are less influential; moreover, many of these have cooled in their support for human rights abroad and at home and may have even become overtly hostile.

- There is a keen sense that there is reducing support for a rules-based international order and that human rights framework is less effective in constraining governments. Compounding this, participants observed that the UN is failing to generate progress on critical issues and that it is less important as a place to achieve change.

- Participants therefore highlighted how organisations would need to adapt and explore different advocacy settings and, also, engage different governments and blocs of states than those they had relied on previously, including small states.

- Similarly, polarization and closing space had meant that there was less opportunity to generate change at the national level but that there were more opportunities to create positive change connected to space for action at the sub-national and municipal levels with cities being highlighted in particular.

- Openness to these issues by governments could not be taken for granted but would rather be driven by the perceived extent of popular support for these. Whereas some NGOs might previously find the door open to their advocacy, this was now closed and so public support would be needed to reverse this. Accordingly, elite-level advocacy would need to be enabled through campaigns and mobilization and the actors in this ecosystem would need to find the tactics and narratives to do this.

- Finally, as described above, critical aspects of civic space were being shaped by processes and frameworks outside of national and international law – such as those related to technology. Organisations would need to find ways to engage in new processes.

The Organisations of the Future

During our conversations, we asked participants about what the civil society organisations of the future will look like – specifically:

What will the groups who are going to be successful in 2035 be doing?

What will groups which are not being successful in 2035 be doing (or not)?

In other words, what will organisations need to become – and to do - to navigate and create change in the face of the kinds shifts and trends described?

We heard the following key themes:

- Organisations would need to be able to look ahead to emerging trends and, moreover, be able to develop new approaches in response to this. This required space and time to engage in reflection and to think long-term, rather than focussing exclusively on the current crisis. This also needs a culture and leadership that supports this and a commitment to constant and ongoing experimentation.

- Participants also talked about how change is more likely to happen through networks of groups. Given the complexity that they see externally and the way that a diversity of tactics and approaches will be necessary to create change, no one group will have all the answers but should see itself as part of a wider ecosystem. Moreover, they should be clear on their value to this ecosystem and their role within it and have the relationships with parts of it so that they can develop collaboration and draw on each other's specialisms.

- Successful groups will have transcended the tendency to form siloes but would be working with civil society in other sectors on shared goals and would also be able to tap into different technical fields. The ability to act as a bridge and an interpreter between these different sectors and fields was considered a critical role.

- In particular, successful groups would either be part of social movements or act as a bridge between these movements and formal civil society. Participants talked about the critical role that student leaders, community activists, members of cooperatives and collectives as well as other unregistered actors would play in shaping the future and that successful groups would actively support, include and link to them.

- Connectedly, there was a widely held view that groups would need to be clearer in their values and outright in their commitment to justice and human rights. Given the nature of the threats to democracy and justice, they need to be very direct about the larger change that they are seeking to create. Rather than approaching civic space as a playing field for all to play on, the threats to and inequality of conditions for groups working on social justice and human rights meant that their needs should be prioritised. Groups would also be focussed on, and connected to, minoritised and marginalised communities.

- Given the key role that technology will play, they will have the

connections and capability to ensure that this is being developed responsibly but also to deploy it to achieve their mission, particularly around AI.

- Groups would need to be focussed on the key area of narratives, discourse and the role of social media. As described above, the way that they communicate would have shifted to reflect the changing ecosystem for information towards a mode that is more invitational and builds community. They would find a way to challenge systemic injustice but in a way that does not exacerbate polarization but rather builds social cohesion.

- More generally, and reflecting the point made above, they would build a community around them from which they derive their mandate and even resources. Participants played to the key role of membership-based entities that pool and share resources. More generally, successful entities would have found a way to sustain themselves and develop new forms of funding and business models to navigate the ongoing shifts in philanthropy and to support work that is truly transformative in nature.

- They would also have found a way to 'lower the costs of activism' – to make participation in civil society and in their organisations something that is sustainable and does not take its toll on well-being and security.

Much of the answer to the second question – of **what groups that are unsuccessful in 2035 will be doing (or not doing)** – are the inverse of what those that will be successful will be doing. Key themes were:

We heard the following key themes:

- One characteristic of unsuccessful groups would be that they 'rest on their laurels' or continue to focus on the same tactics despite the changing external context. One participant described them as those that 'sit on a pedestal, set in their ways'. In particular, participants drew attention to the kinds of groups that were working on human rights using tactics based that may have worked in the 1990s but are no longer effective. Groups would need to adapt and evolve their theories of change constantly.

- Groups that are stuck in siloes or do not see themselves as part of a wider ecosystem of change – those who are "not a team player" – will also struggle. Attention was also drawn to those that engage in binary thinking about how change happens instead of seeing how different tactics and action in different spaces are needed and complement each other.

- International and regional CSOs that fail to embrace disintermediation and continue to try to 'gate keep' resources or profile from local civil society groups were also highlighted. They would need to develop their agendas with local partners and seek to disrupt power imbalances and hierarchy in their relationships with them,

- Groups that are failing to address deeper trends nor taking a systemic approach but who remained focussed on their 'pet issue'. Given the full-on attack on civic space and on particular actors, groups would fail that were 'centrist' in their approach, shied away from controversy, and did not take a stand in relations to issues of justice and rights.

- Connectedly, groups that failed to address their practices and models in the light of concerns about justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Moreover, groups that are remaining distant from society and who were not engaging with the economic and social concerns of the public – especially around the impacts of neo-liberalism described elsewhere in the document.