

CREATIVE RESPONSES TO GROWING DIVIDES

The 2019 Innovators Forum

07 March 2019

Outcome

Building on the successful 2017 and 2018 Innovators Forums, the International Civil Society Centre, in partnership with [JustLabs](#), facilitated its third Forum on 25 – 26 February 2019 in Berlin. A diverse group of 25 innovators, communicators, campaigners, researchers and strategists from international civil society organisations (ICSOs), national CSO platforms, social change networks/movements, donors, media and human rights organisations attended the meeting.

Challenges and Opportunities for New Narratives and Creative Collaborative Responses

The participants shared experiences on current projects and experimental initiatives to test new, positive, [hope-based](#), and more accessible language and vocabulary for human rights to engage 'ordinary' members of the public in different countries and contexts of civic space. Challenging self-reflection was also discussed about the fundamental organisational change needed, particularly in terms of diversity, culture and representation, which is critical to reinforce that [everything we do as civil society organisations is the narrative](#), not just the things we say.

Emerging external trends, such as [synthetic media](#), [autonomous computational propaganda](#), and the [splinternet](#), were surfaced among new challenges and opportunities with which ICSOs and others increasingly need to engage. Innovative projects showed how to [create safe digital spaces where young people can share their own narratives](#) on their desires and priorities, access trusted information and diverse dialogues in restrictive settings. Finally, we learned about the [lessons for solidarity and the power of collective CSO action](#), particularly in contexts of [disinformation](#).

Specific Opportunities for Creative Collaboration

During the second day, participants split into three groups to develop concrete ideas to collaborate on advancing communications, narrative and solidarity capacities between CSOs:

- **Strengthening communications capacities:** Improving the knowledge management and intelligence sharing between a community of communications leads/departments in the ICSOs and partners. This would include both best practice and honest lessons on what has been less successful (case studies, campaigns, projects), pooling insights from audience research on brand and messaging, and potentially developing a synthesis report. The International Civil Society Centre could play a useful independent intermediary role here, as it could include harmonising market insights commissioned on brand competitor ICSOs.
Next steps: A sub-group from the participants will hold a follow-up call in April to further discuss these ideas, which could generate recommendations linked to the ICS Centre's convening later this year, including potentially [Global Heads of Divisions](#).
Contact point: Thomas Howie, Communications Manager, thowie@icscentre.org.
- **Building new narrative capacities:** Developing a plan for experimental labs with ICSOs based on the successful model which [JustLabs has used to bring its national human rights partners together with fresh approaches \(e.g. design thinking\) from beyond the sector](#). One



recurring narrative which participants kept revisiting throughout the two days was the metaphor of the sector working together as an orchestra, albeit one without a conductor, playing the same overall harmonic tune around core metanarratives or values (such as equality or social justice), whilst continuing to make their own kind of music (issue-specific work). Another idea to explore is the potential for a future joint '[social listening](#)' initiative.

Next steps: A sub-group from the participants will hold a follow-up call in March to further discuss these ideas, focusing around some core metanarratives or values. This should lead to concrete suggestions for further narrative labs with ICSOs linked to both JustLabs' and the ICS Centre's convening later this year, including potentially [Global Heads of Divisions](#) and [Global Perspectives 2019](#).

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- **Building new solidarity capacities:** Developing a 'Solidarity Hub' for international CSOs, to enable proactive preparation and rapid reaction for solidarity actions, in the event of disinformation or other politically-motivated attacks. This recognises that any attack on one ICSO is an attack on all ICSOs, targeting both ability to operate and partner efficiently and our collective legitimacy. With the increasingly unpredictable agenda, speed, and sources of attacks, individual ICSOs may also be more vulnerable than they are able to perceive, and not well equipped to respond to them alone. There are significant learnings and models to build from through the experiences of [InterAction's Together Project](#) and other co-ordination efforts e.g. in the Netherlands. The main tasks of the 'Solidarity Hub' will be to:
 1. Pool knowledge and experience from organisations that have been attacked and share this with the larger civil society community for others to draw on these learnings and be able to prepare accordingly;
 2. Serve as a mechanism for collective action (signs of solidarity, external communication, etc.) as well as individual organisational support (financial, legal, etc.) in the case of attacks on one or several organisations.

Next steps: The Centre will develop the ideas into a concept note and share with the organisations involved in the discussion before it goes to a larger group. Further research and a scoping of the ambition will then take place. The next [International Civic Forum](#) in October 2019 will then be dedicated to the further development of this idea.

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Summary of Next Steps

The three project groups will proceed with the next steps above. The outcomes from the Innovators Forum will contribute to the Centre and JustLabs' new Innovation Report on Responses to Populism in a Digitally-Enabled Era which will be launched at [Global Perspectives](#) in October 2019, focusing on the legitimacy of civil society. They will also inform longer-term strategic initiatives which the Centre will also be working on in this area.

