Scanning the Horizon – Annual Meeting 2020 Part 1
18 – 20 May 2020, online

""Complex potential futures: Exploring the interconnectedness of global trends"

Outcome

28 May 2020

From 18-20 May June 2020, the International Civil Society Centre brought together a group of 60-70 ICSO global strategists and other futures thinkers in an expanded online forum. The key theme for our 2020 Annual Meetings is exploring how international civil society organisations (ICSOs) can strengthen their strategic capacity to analyse how the major global trends influencing their work – both the urgent and the important – might interact with each other to bring about different potential future states, which could drastically shift the relevance and impact of these organisations.

This first convening focused on enabling peer exchange between ICSO global strategists and foresighters and futures thinkers from private, public, academic and philanthropy backgrounds. It also planned new 'trend intersection' content collaborations for the second convening in autumn 2020, with a focus on emerging second-order effects and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Days 1 and 2, participants explored the 'necessary but messy' process of interconnected trends analysis, and challenges, assets and opportunities for increasing diversity and collaboration in this kind of integrated thinking, both within and beyond our sector. Insights were shared from foresight practitioners and scenario developers from different sectors: business/private (Arup), academia (Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research), multilateral/inter-governmental (OECD) and the international civil society sector (Plan International).

Day 3 included hearing signals of change from CIVICUS and MobLab for civic space and climate action respectively, and identified new collaborative signals scanning and analysis processes for June-September 2020.

Common discussion themes

A number of common themes emerged from the small group breakout sessions and the chat posted by and between participants during the plenaries.

Being more humble and inclusive

Scenarios are just one tool/foresight process to challenge assumptions and open out new conversations about what might be possible or plausible in future. Key elements of different ones are likely to exist in parallel at any one time, and we should not get too focused on individual scenarios. It is not about being 'future proof' for specific eventualities, but being 'future savvy' for what we may need to respond to. There are dangers in following a single story or set of stories. These processes are not about eliminating uncertainty, but exploring how to increase adaptability and resilience by showing up blind spots and having trusted functional

'early warning' receptors for responding to the unexpected, as the potential for that or similar events has already been considered. Reflecting on past false assumptions, errors of judgement or blind spots (e.g. where we thought we may be by 2020 – with populism, pandemics, etc.?) can help us get better at challenging the assumptions we have today, about tomorrow.

We also need to be humble about what we do not know and move beyond thinking that we have all the answers within the 'walls' of our organisation and even sector. There are big risks in seeking quick convenience or consensus, instead of engaging openly in understanding different views. We also need to be more self-critical about whose knowledge and vision we are privileging in equitable futures, questioning our own mental models and the basis on which we make decisions. Critically, this means:

- Including people who vulnerability is directly affected by these forces and events. Digital technology (e.g. for story harvesting) offers a huge opportunity to increase grassroots engagement and feedback in these discussions and we are not leveraging this well enough in doing this.
- Moving beyond over-reliance on analysis from the Global North, just because those sources are better resourced to produce these, we need to give additional effort to seek out other sources. For instance, emerging countries have some excellent assets to leverage in foresight, e.g. South Africa and Brazil, and experience in understanding what might happen in future with their economic and social wellbeing developing.
- Challenging power dynamics internally and valuing our own geographic diversity, doing more to get the 'edges' of our organisations involved, as people often have a very different perspective to those at the 'core'.

Building trust in the process and information, evidence and timeframe

Co-ordination needs to be centralised to some extent to keep the process manageable, although not as 'expert-led' or at the expense of diversity (see below). To avoid being overwhelmed by the 'interconnectedness' or 'scenarios of everything', you need to limit the number of trends or drivers you need to look at to test your relevance. Keeping the process simple but engaging is key to inclusion and 'demystifying' what is involved, but it requires deliberate design, investment of time, proper resourcing and good facilitation.

You are asking others to take a leap of faith and jump in to the process, but the process of exploring future as a space of unwritten possibilities can be highly motivational if people are allowed to follow their curiosity, creativity and intuition. The process needs to recognise there may be anxiety 'creating something new means losing something old', but it is about finding the potential to build on legacy without getting boxed in by it. What do we need to let go? What do we need to conserve? And what systemic interventions are necessary to get to where we need to be? People may also fear some of the risks identified through the process as beyond their capacity to plan responses.

The process is not about being right, making predictions or validating or confirming what is assumed organisational leadership might want to hear. There should not be pressure in terms of the results which come out of the process, but more value placed in the social process itself, through allowing divergent, fresh thinking and seeing different possible horizons, and actively inviting curious people who will ask the right questions.

Bringing others along on the journey involves constantly making the connection from where we are today to overall vision by short-/middle- and long-term planning/thinking. People can find it really challenging to disengage from the urgencies or predicted directions of today. For

instance, one ICSO divided its 10-year horizon into 3, 7 and 10 years slices to make the process more inclusive and manageable. Foresight processes themselves should be built more into day-to-day processes, and not just as 'point in time' inputs to a formal strategy planning process, so colleagues can 'flex these muscles' regularly.

Filtering appropriate information and evidence from trusted sources – and not too narrow a pool - may require significant additional effort, with the wider misinformation environment or increasing propensity of people to think sources used might skewed to support a particular desired agenda or outcome scenario planning processes.

Futures thinking is only worth doing if organisations are genuinely prepared to make the internal changes and adaptations needed to address those futures. We need to invest in the underlying knowledge, learning and adaptive management capacities to ensure that our strategies remain relevant and responsive to new developments and disruptions. This includes creating quicker feedback loops between global and in-country strategists and programme staff to identify real-time insights and opportunities.

Breaking out of our bubble: Getting comfortable with being challenged

There was consensus that we have 'taken on each other's narratives' about the future as a sector, with group thinking is converging around the preferable, rather than the plausible or the probable. We need to stop talking in our echo chamber, intentionally break out of our traditional communities, and include other sectors as a priority. For instance, the energy industry could add valuable perspectives on security, and one interesting 'strange bedfellow' example is Mercy Corps engaging NASA as an unusual suspect in strategic dialogue about the future.

We need to listen to others those that might challenge our world views with contrarian perspectives, to build more robust scenarios. For instance, scenarios developed by or for CSOs can be strikingly similar in assuming or predicting that CSOs will be a big part of solutions in future, but experience with scenarios from other sectors is that CSOs rarely feature as major actors. We might feel uncomfortable discussing our blind spots when attention is drawn to them by unusual suspects or critical friends, but should still seek out and value this challenge.

Engaging the opportunity of 'now'

COVID-19 can be a galvanising force to discuss where we have something concrete in common and create space for sharing futures analysis and finding sector peers. Mobilising resources together will ease financial pressure allow the inclusion of smaller organisations who cannot otherwise afford to run these kind of processes. Rather than all 'cramming the same space' we should build this analysis with different organisations coming in with their own unique perspective/added value to complement each other's efforts.

We have the methodologies and tools in our and across sectors to support these processes, although we may need to make the effort to tailor them/mix and match to the different audiences (e.g. age appropriate) we want to engage. However, such times of radical uncertainty as now creates room for experimentation and opportunities to try and test new things, e.g. through design thinking games, 'citizen science' experiments to develop new bodies of knowledge.

New emerging collaborations

From the final day, four potential multi-agency small working group collaborations emerged.
They work together to develop deeper analysis on the following trend intersections:
1. *COVID-19 and shifting vulnerability and inequality:*
   Leaders: Direct Impact Group, World Vision International.
   Readers: Alliance2015, CBM Global, Dorcas Aid International, Shodh Nepal, WaterAid
   Feeder(s): SOS Children's Villages
2. *COVID-19 and climate action/people power:*
   Readers (leaders TBC.): Alliance2015, Amnesty International, Fingo, Mercy Corps, MobLab, Oxfam, Plan International, Shodh Nepal, WaterAid, World Vision International
3. *COVID-19 and shifting civic space, freedom and rights:*
   Readers (leaders TBC.): Bond, CIVICUS, Fingo, Innovation for Change, InterAction, Mercy Corps, TechSoup, Transparency International
   Feeder(s): ICVA
4. *COVID-19 and shifting cooperation and multilateral commitment for global development:*
   Leader(s): WaterAid
   Readers: Averthur NGO Consulting, Direct Impact Group, Dorcas Aid International, Sandstone Consulting, Transparency International
   Feeder(s): SOS Children's Villages

Twin 'leader' organisations for each group will co-ordinate the content discussions, with meeting logistical support from the Centre. Other organisations can still join these groups either as an active 'reader' and meeting participant, or as an indirect 'feeder' identifying and recommending resources for each group to look at. We particularly need commitments for more 'feeders'.
If you are interested in joining one of these groups, please email vtongue@icscentre.org.

The aim is for the groups to meet remotely up to three times online before the end of September, to share resources and discuss insights from what they are reading/seeing in more depth around these areas. The outcomes of their discussions will be shared back to the wider community when we reconvene in the autumn.

Agreed follow-up actions/next steps

- **June-September 2020**: Joint working on the four group collaborative initiatives above, and collective 'signals for the sector' scanning exercise to track emerging signals of change relating to major uncertainties our sector faces as a result of state and societal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, under the nine areas below:
  1) COVID-19 and shifting **vulnerability, need and inequality**
  2) COVID-19 and combatting **climate change**
  3) COVID-19 and shifting **civic space**, freedom and rights (inc. digital)
  4) COVID-19 and shifting international **cooperation** and multilateral commitment for global development
  5) COVID-19 and shifting **public perceptions** of states, institutions and CSOs
  6) COVID-19 and shifting **conflict, fragility** and humanitarian action
  7) COVID-19 and shifting employment, income, **livelihoods** and labour (inc. automation)
  8) COVID-19 and shifting societal **values and behaviours**
  9) COVID-19 and shifting **food security and systems**

- **October 2020**: Presentation of outcomes from the collaborative initiatives, collective sense-making and analysis of potential implications for individual ICSOs and the wider sector. Dates TBC.