

Scanning the Horizon: Annual Meetings 2020, Part II

13 - 15 October 2020 online (3 x 2-hour sessions)

“Exploring Complex Potential Futures – Part II: Strategic Decision-making in a Whirly World”



Meeting Outcome

25 November 2020

In 2020, the Annual Meeting of the civil society futures platform [Scanning the Horizon](#) took place in two online meeting formats in May and October. Our [first May meeting](#) explored the ‘necessary but messy’ process of interconnected trends analysis, and challenges and opportunities for increasing diversity and collaboration with this kind of integrated thinking. ICSSOs and other sectors shared insights on strengthening intersectional analysis for better organisational strategic decision-making. This second event from October 13-15 picked up from these conversations, included reflections on recent developments over the past few months, resulting in ‘compound complexity’ for and also driving change within and beyond our sector - especially the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-racism conversations. Many organisations are now actively working on the implications of these factors, and their intersections, for their future strategic thinking.

Next steps for the Scanning the Horizon community in 2021 out of this meeting

The Centre will further develop these 2020 meeting outcomes into a [‘sector guide’](#) in early 2021, to support ‘strategic decision-making in times of compound complexity and uncertainty’, with further research inputs from members of this community.

The successful whole and sub-community convening model experiments from 2020 will be mainstreamed as our way of working from 2021. This will involve moving to regular sub-community exchange under two main themes:

1. *Complex and uncertain futures* – this sub-community will meet bimonthly to hear from each other and external speakers on relevant topics such as: interconnectedness of trends and COVID-19 complexity (continuation of 2020 work), building long-term and intergenerational thinking in organisations, etc.
2. *Equitable and inclusive futures* – this sub-community will meet bimonthly to hear from each other and external speakers on topics such as: decolonised and racially just futures, feminist futures, gender dimensions of global trends, etc.

As in 2020, there will be two opportunities for the whole Scanning community to come together and share and synthesise the best emerging outcomes from both thematic exchanges – once online in June 2021 (15th-17th) and potentially in-person in the first week of November 2021.

New community membership rates for 2021 have been lowered to increase the diversity of our membership. There are also new rates for individual consultants, academia and Southern CSOs, and online and in-person meeting rates. More details [here](#).



Day 1 (13 October): New perspectives on compound complexity from the past six months

The main content inputs for this session are available [here](#).

How should we engage in complexity and systems thinking in our organisations/sector?

[Tanja Hichert](#), Lecturer at Stellenbosch University's Centre for Complex Systems in Transition, advised that complexity thinking should bring in a 'radical pluralism perspective' with completely different and diverse viewpoints to inform organisational decision-making. This diversity is not just in age, ethnicity, culture, gender and language, but also in worldviews – hierarchical, egalitarian, meritocratic. This process takes time, money and effort, but is important to resource. Tanja also explained why we need to expand our decision-making toolbox, and 'stretch the edge' of traditional strategy-making techniques, exploring experiential and speculative futures. She also emphasised the need to search for and work with 'seeds', small pockets of the future in the present, signs or projects or ways of thinking or new business models which are fit for a different future system but already exist now – to imagine futures in which these are normal. Tanja also cautioned that it is critical to understand context – weak signals and what's important is likely to be very different in different parts of the world at the same time.

How should we engage in change towards a racially just civil society sector?

[Degan Ali](#), Executive Director of Adeso, made a compelling case as to why we need to capture the moment to finally undertake long overdue and radical re-examination of the humanitarian and development architecture and system. Degan shared her thoughts on why professionalised and corporatised INGOs need the courage to make hard decisions to go back to their civil society roots, show genuine solidarity and become real allies in recognising, questioning and changing the political nature of the system. We need to collectively imagine what a future decolonised sector looks like and what transformed INGOs remaining relevant within this look like - organisations which Southern civil society will feel are aligned in values, want to support and seek out as partners. Universities and higher education may be one of the other sectors to look at to identify models for how to go about transformative change. Smaller starting points include: changing board membership, stop using language like 'beneficiaries' and 'capacity building', pass on rather than retain overhead costs in funding proposals to partners and introduce them to your donors, hire local photographers, use positive imagery of the collective and communities rather than the individual, and work with partners to build their HR, procurement and finance systems (rather than technical training).

The short breakout discussions raised questions around reframing fundraising discussions to be more aligned with our ambitions for more principled partnership, such as moving support from tangible service delivery outputs to advocacy asks. There may be new opportunities with direct digital fundraising e.g. ActionAid is experimenting with supporters directly funding women-led partner organisation's campaigning work. And also if we can use the Grand Bargain to pressure donor governments for greater Southern funding, moving them away from their risk-averse tendencies which result in their preference to fund and manage larger organisations.

Day 2 (14 October): COVID-19 complexity strategic insights from our sector

The main content inputs for this session are available [here](#).

The summary presentation from the 'Scanning Squirrels' groups is available [here](#).

What signals are stronger in your strategic thinking over the past six months?

Overall, our joint discussions since May on COVID-19 related complexity has led us to generally conclude that not much is necessarily new – the COVID-19 effect has been a harsh illumination/X-



ray and renewed awareness of the systemic and interconnected nature of inequalities, but otherwise also a sense of further acceleration of many trends in their existing direction of travel. However, specific new areas for collaboration related to COVID-19 are: pre-positioning joint advocacy on equitable/universal vaccine access, better equipping ourselves and partners for mis/disinformation (about COVID-19, the vaccine and CSOs), and joint benchmarking and monitoring of restrictions on civic space and freedoms beyond lockdown measures.

Common theme emerging included trust in and the changing dynamics between different actors in the triangular relationship citizens and civil society, the state, and the private sector, and the different implications for international CSOs. Trust exists with local, front-line organisations and direct service providers, our role as ICSOs should be in ensuring that these organisations have access to the best information that we have at the moment (rather than 'the truth' which can be contested). There is a new space for real conversations around the contract between citizens and their states and constructively questioning the role of multilateral organisations. ICSOs also need to think pragmatically about how we engage more, and more deeply, with the private sector. In some areas like climate action we just need to urgently get on and do this, as we've already known for a long time. But private sector engagement will need better segmentation and strategising, as in certain areas such as data/information, the private sector almost has the same rights as government but not granted by the citizenry. Regulation is lagging behind, and we need to do more to change this. An interesting dynamic to navigate will be some of the questions from Day 1 about how ICSOs will need to reconcile becoming less corporate as a sector, whilst also engaging better with the private sector.

What are important internal dimensions and experiences of engaging your senior leadership teams on strategy during/since COVID-19?

It is important to ask ourselves questions these tough questions around organisational and sector transformations, but not be too self-critical or pessimistic about them. We can both change ourselves internally and continue to respond to big external drivers at the same time, and should not risk being overly distracted by the former in a way which might delegitimise our role in the latter.

There is a real challenge for senior leadership with 'mission over me' - comfort with the theory of needing to transform, but then in practice the real challenges around accountability for organisational survival and also individual implications, around job security or even identity. We need to be more critical about understanding institutional incentives for change vs. maintaining the status quo. It is important to meet leaders where they are at, providing framing rather than direction and not forcing conversations when the timing is not right, and also being realistic about the pressure of urgent concerns and uncertainty. For instance, leaders may be doubting what they felt they knew before and think it is difficult to drive a change or strategy in these circumstances. Or they may feel that even with an ambition to ensure more equality with different chapters or partners, it is difficult to see how to do this when their overall resourcing and income outlook still feels turbulent.

When organisations were asked about their experiences of balancing longer-term strategic conversations with more immediate reactive operational ones with leadership teams over the past six months, there was an interesting series of contrasts:

- income/cost conversations had crowded out strategy but this cost-cutting is also acting to accelerate conversations around organisational effectiveness;
- strategy conversations may have been delayed to a future/next phase but this thinking may then be 'bigger and bolder';
- the initial effect was to bring the whole organisation together, making it more open and 'permeable to the outside' but there was a risk of this already now starting to feel more



mundane, with enough 'normality' that people do not see the need to change as not so urgent or radical anymore.

However, there is a sense that the right conversations are now being had, with 'head' or regional offices now giving more space to innovation which already existed locally or nationally, but did not have recognition or visibility before.

Day 3 (15 October) – Session 3: Leading strategy in a 'whirly' world

What are your lessons and recommendations for leading strategy in complex and uncertain times?

There was common agreement on the need to focus on **vision and high-level goals** rather than strategy. Defining long-term directional 'north stars' which make the overall vision and mission concrete for a certain length of time (e.g. five or ten years) enables everyone to focus and stay aligned with these regardless of all possible scenarios. This ownership, resilience and stability of these 'north stars' across the organisation through times of turbulence is best ensured by levels of high and deep participation when they are first set.

Strategic planning should also focus on the guiding principles (not the mechanics) of the 'how' and not the 'what': how we should be in the future, how we can be more diverse, more legitimate, less competitive with local actors, etc. as we move towards our long-term goals. This means that **agility can then be embraced in implementation** – review and decide what you do and the mechanics of 'how' you organise yourselves to achieve it (operating model) in shorter cycles, with localised or decentralised strategies for flexibility. Agility does not mean volatility, or just being reactive to every opportunity, threat or crisis through which you lose strategic coherence – your 'north stars' gives you this. One useful maxim is '100% mission as usual, 0% business as usual'. Commonly agree and understand parameters in advance as to how much you can flex in times of turbulence e.g. a certain percentage of redeployable funding also allows for quick decision-making.

Continuous, systematic foresight helps alleviate the tensions of the uncertainty of the moment by focusing on the end goals/'final picture' you want to achieve, not plans on how to achieve it. It is important to bring together national and global context understandings and regional trend analysis in a more regular (annual) and dynamic way as the shared base for organisational decision-making. Organisations should equip country offices with a scenario planning tool and participatory process for this, so it is not just involving the senior management team. You can use scenarios which others have developed, but looking at them through your own lens. But either way, it is important to **keep scenarios live**, not just as inputs at certain points in the strategy cycle, and be much clearer about the assumptions underpinning your strategic analysis and planning processes. Both of these can then allow for more rapid research to understand the potential impact and implications of new events and shifting variables and overlay on pre-existing strategy.

Other guiding principles are to **focus on individuals rather than the technical** to frame your foresight processes – don't overcomplicate things, understand their range of psychological responses, profiles and preferences (analysts, activists, etc.) and bring the mission closer to people. And really be ready to drop things – see the ideas of [Henry Mintzberg, the 'godfather of emergent strategy'](#).

Finally, **virtuality has really opened up scale, diversity and equity** of participation and engagement (internal and external) in strategy processes and decision-making forums over the past few months. We need to continue this consistency and investment in widening digital access (within/beyond our organisations) and not revert back to pre-COVID ways of working even in the event of a vaccine coming soon.