International Civil Society Centre

‘Civil Society Innovation and Inclusive Digital Transformation’

2021 Innovation Report - Concept

January 2021

The International Civil Society Centre’s 2021 Innovation Report will highlight innovations responding to the transformative potential – positive and negative - in our societies triggered by digital technologies, achieving people-centred or nature-positive approaches and outcomes for equity, sustainability, scale and impact.

The evolving use of digital technologies can disrupt, stabilise, reinvent or reinforce and entrench social and power relationships at every level, from family to global. They can also transform the ways in which people relate to each other and interact with the environment, potentially accelerating progress in addressing global sustainable development challenges. Civil society organisations need to help shape rapidly accelerating and increasingly complex digital developments and power interests, to ensure that the positive potential impacts for and on people and nature are achieved.

The International Civil Society Centre’s ‘Civil Society Innovation’ annual report series takes a major common contextual opportunity or challenge significantly shaping the world we live in, and showcases innovative responses from a range of civil society organisations (CSOs) on this theme. After populism and urbanisation, 2021 will be a timely look at how far our sector has come - and is still yet to go - in advancing people-centred and nature-positive digitalisation.

Our 2021 Innovation Report will challenge our sector’s main current focus on digital technology as an internal operational enabler, and consider it instead as a major, ongoing, transformative social force. In this context, we will showcase the most promising developments by CSOs in delivering solutions for digital inclusion, impact and rights at scale, promoting progressive people-centred, nature-positive approaches and outcomes, and putting digital rights, ethical and sustainability values and norms into practice.

Background

Current debates around digital technologies and capabilities in the civil society sector often focus on the operational use of tools to optimise or expand existing organisational functions, such as campaigning or marketing. Many organisations prioritise advancing their own digital capacities and use of technology for effective internal working purposes. In addition, some are also developing specific use cases for digital technologies, such as blockchain for humanitarian interventions or supply chain transparency. However, where digital tools are supporting programming, there are important questions about their use as extractive mechanisms for a one-way flow of data from communities to CSOs.

There seems to be missing emphasis on promoting the core principle of how digital innovation should instead be anchored in actually empowering individuals and communities with control

and use of their own personal data and digital identities, or supporting them with new insights from collective data-gathering exercises to which they have contributed. There are also interesting emerging approaches assigning elements in nature digital identities as part of conservation or environmental sustainability efforts - for instance, enabling remote digital monitoring of forests or animal populations for health, safety and wellbeing.

There is also vibrant discussion and practical support on defensive measures to protect civil society activists. While concepts of digital rights are still emerging, discussions often narrow focus to Internet access and resisting shutdowns. However, thinking about rapidly-evolving digital transformation of our societies requires wider reflection about where these developments are going, and how they carry both significant potential opportunities and risks. These relate not only to 'digital space' in a narrow sense, like Internet access and digital literacy, but also more far-reaching implications for safety, fundamental rights and freedoms, such as of assembly, association and expression, and political and civic participation. Power imbalances and digital inequality exists with growing divides in access to hardware, software, and connectivity between the Global North and South, but also with those who shape and consume digital content.

Being able to benefit equitably from the positive economic, social and political engagement opportunities enabled by digital technologies and services will increasingly determine the control that marginalised, minority and vulnerable groups can have over their own lives. At the same time, they need to exist in a wider system with adequate safeguards in place against the risks and negative consequences which can also result from these technological advances. CSOs therefore have important roles both as advocates for and enablers of a progressive digital transformation agenda based on universal rights, access and social justice, which fully encompasses current and future political, social, and economic and environmental implications and drivers.

Considering innovation in all these contexts will not just involve optimal and creative use of or response to *current* digital technologies and capabilities, risks and opportunities of today's Internet - for information, communication and social organisation. It also demands a strong forward-looking and *anticipatory* dimension which can further evolve to accommodate rapidly emerging or cutting-edge future developments. By identifying, showcasing and analysing exciting examples of this type of innovation, this Report will contribute to the fast-growing knowledge base supporting the future scale, impact and influence of CSOs in the use of digital technologies and their impact on our societies and the environment around us.

International CSOs in particular need to innovate how to make the most use of their local-to-global reach to promote the inclusion of digital rights and ethical and sustainability values in the work they do or aim to influence. And there are strong indications of significant innovation by smaller or national CSOs which have yet to be fully captured and shared to inform wider learning and application. The systematic and forward-looking peer learning which the Centre's Innovation Report Series enables between diverse CSOs is a powerful facilitator to share resources, reduce risk and strengthen scale and impact.

Our 2021 Innovation Report on 'Civil Society Innovation and Inclusive Digital Transformation'

We define innovation as "an iterative learning process which identifies, adapts/adjusts and shares novel ideas for improving civil society action, impact and operating space". Following on from the successes of our first two Innovation Reports: in 2019 on 'Civil Society Innovation and Populism

in a Digital Era', and 2020 on 'Civil Society Innovation and Urban Inclusion', our 2021 edition will focus on people-centred and nature-positive digital transformation.

Whilst achieving universal connectivity to the Internet is of course critical, this is highly country-specific and also largely infrastructural solutions which will need to be delivered by the public and private sectors. There are many innovative ideas being tested to improve this, including Internet balloons, drones, and infrared towers. But at this level of scale and resourcing, there are major limits to what CSOs can do to transform access, availability and affordability. However, there are important opportunities and roles which CSOs can play in terms of **adoption, application and use** of digital technologies, platforms and spaces, to make these safer for and more inclusive and empowering for people who are connected.

Aims of the 2021 Innovation Report

The report will **aim** to:

- Discuss, analyse and categorise effective approaches, solutions and new ways of working in relation to achieving inclusive people-centred or nature-positive outcomes enabled by digital technology, by showcasing innovative case studies from leading international and national and grassroots CSOs around the world;
- Facilitate interactive exchange and contribute to sector learning networks for civil society practitioners and other stakeholders on practical approaches for people-centred and nature-positive digital transformation;
- Provide a common understanding on challenges and opportunities for CSOs in achieving positive digital social and environmental outcomes, and draw conclusions about what is and is not working with existing approaches, identifying overall recommendations and innovation 'success factors' for the sector in this area;
- Include what might be the first sector-wide look at civil society innovation in relation to the digital transformation dimensions of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 - both direct responses to the outbreak and broader second-order impacts - as it is widely seen as another huge force accelerating digital transformation;
- Highlight influential factors in the evolving external environment and interaction with other global megatrends which will continue to influence future ICSO digital innovation approaches

Scope of the 2021 Innovation Report

In a short recent thinkpiece 'Rethink: Rethinking Digital Access', the inventor of the world wide web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, makes a compelling argument for the need to start designing new digital habits. The 2021 Report will adopt three of these with minor changes as its main scope:

- **Ensuring trusted, safe and informed spaces**: Enabling the ability to trust in what we read online, engage in constructive, honest debate and ensure that everyone can have their voices heard safely online, especially people with minority identities;
- **Harnessing positive power of the collective**: Reimagining platforms for distributed creativity, collaboration, compassion and collective action, and enabling individuals and groups to own their roles as democracy builders, intelligence gatherers and accountability monitors, etc.
- **Empowering individual control of representation, data and decision-making**: Redistributing control of personal data and digital identities back into the hands of the people whose lives this data traces and enabling them to use this data themselves and contribute to the 'greater good'. Additional emphasis for the purposes of this Innovation Report could also include consideration of if and how CSOs are playing a role in guaranteeing or safeguarding decentralised identities, and also constructively challenging or demonstrating alternative models to centralised corporate or state data capture and use.

To be inclusive of **nature-positive outcomes**, a further emphasis added in this Report will be new digital habits which also extend collective or pooled insights relating to tree or animal populations in nature, or include decision-making by people for the wellbeing of individual trees or animals with digital identities. Together, these are four digital habits in which CSOs can innovate to help accelerate the inclusive transformation of adoption, application and use, and will be the focus areas of the case studies sought out and showcased in the report.

Civil society approaches included could span: advocacy and influencing, data/information gathering or collective intelligence, social organising, service delivery, skills development, standard-setting, etc. Individual case studies will need to strongly demonstrate the following:

i. Practical and applicable lessons for others;
ii. Strong linkages between on- and offline components;
iii. Not only respond to or optimise the state of Internet and the mainstream digital technologies and capacities existing today, but also anticipate and demonstrate the potential to evolve with rapid future developments based on plausible scenarios for what these might become or be used for in future;
iv. Leveraging ecosystem-wide partnerships and approaches - with communities, public and multilateral actors, academia and the private sector – for comprehensive people-centred digital development outcomes and solutions.

Other criteria for inclusion are: novelty and creativity, impact, scaleability and sustainability, as well as achieving an overall balanced global geographic portfolio.

Repeating successes from our previous 2019 and 2020 reports

Building on the strengths from our first two Innovation Reports, in 2021 we will prioritise:

1. *Engaging strong partnerships and sector practitioners*: an advisory group of experienced CSO digital strategic leads, peers from specialist tech-focused CSOs and expertise from beyond the sector will help shape the analytical framework and guide the selection of case studies, to promote broad sector relevance.
2. *Ensuring diversity and universality:* There will be up to 14 case studies across the four above themes of protected spaces, the power of the collective, individual control of data and digital identity, and nature-positive digital identities. At least 50% will come from national CSOs, with the remainder international CSOs. Examples will continue to span the Global North and South to reflect the universal nature of the sustainable development agenda.
3. *Sustaining the lessons from the report in our sector:* The Centre will take forward the report recommendations in our sector leadership convening in 2021-22, carry out follow-up dissemination through social media and sector 'multipliers', and integrate with other new learning platforms and resource hubs on digital rights, identity and inclusion being developed by other organisations in our network.

The report will be launched at the Centre's Global Perspectives sector leadership conference in November 2021, presenting the key recommendations and interactive case study workshops.

Opportunities to get involved

CSOs are invited to identify an innovative initiative from their digital programming or advocacy portfolios as a case study for inclusion in the report.

Find out more

If you are interested in joining this exciting project, please contact Vicky Tongue, Head of Futures and Innovation, at vtongue@icscentre.org.