

International Civic Forum

Anti-rights groups on the rise: How can we jointly address this challenge?

Date 30 November – 1 December 2021

Location virtually

With the support of



Outcome

Convened in partnership with the [Funders' Initiative for Civil Society \(FICS\)](#), the International Civic Forum (ICF) 2021 focused on **“Anti-rights groups on the rise: How can we jointly address this challenge?”** and brought up to 70 participants to engage on the issue in the plenary discussions and breakout groups. Alongside the state apparatus, non-state actors play a crucial role in restricting space for civil society and threats and attacks from them are on the rise. Anti-rights groups represent a distinct category of non-state actors as they position themselves as part of civil society but attack fundamental and universal human rights¹. Therefore, the anti-rights groups were put under scrutiny at the ICF where we discussed what challenges they pose, what impacts they have, and how effective strategies could be developed to address them. In this outcome document you will find:

1) [Summary of setting-the-scene discussion](#); 2) [Key strategies and lessons learned to counter anti-rights groups](#); 3) [Framing tips to counter anti-rights narratives](#); and 4) [Main takeaways from taking-next-steps discussion](#).

Summary of discussions

Setting the scene: Who are the anti-rights groups? What challenges do they pose and what impacts do they have?

“Anti-rights groups” is a contested term and used as a label by “rights-based” or “progressive” civil society to refer to actors who position themselves as part of civil society but attack fundamental and universal human rights. Anti-rights groups are not a new phenomenon – they emerged as soon as women’s rights were declared human rights. They soon started to be viewed as agents of restriction as they were in opposition to women’s rights claims. Anti-rights actors can be framed around **two broad categories**: 1) anti-gender groups targeting women’s rights and LGBT+ rights; and 2) far-right groups opposing migrants’ rights. Drivers behind ascendancy of anti-rights groups differ depending on country and context. In some countries these groups have emerged bottom-up. In other countries, they have been driven by those in power. There are many reasons why anti-rights groups are on the rise but we should also ask ourselves as progressives whether the progressive

¹ CIVICUS (2019): Against the wave. Civil society responses to anti-rights groups. Available at: https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/action-against-the-anti-rights-wave/AgainstTheWave_Full_en.pdf



project on its own is failing to deliver and whether it contributes to anti-rights groups gaining ground. Should the progressive part of the society position itself clearer on the values claimed by anti-rights groups such as nation, family and tradition?

Anti-rights groups often use **fear-based narratives**. They instrumentalise threats and position themselves as defenders of democratic rights, protecting them against mainstream liberals. Anti-rights groups often use the same tactics as rights-based civil society such as lobbying, shifting public discourse, mobilising in the public space but they also use hate speech, spread disinformation and conspiracy theories. They create a threatening environment for activists and in some cases call for violence against them. Anti-rights groups are not restricted to their local spaces but increasingly target the international arena by appropriating spaces within regional and international institutions and co-opting human rights language in these spaces.

The **impact** of anti-rights groups is that they push against progressive civil society and make it more defensive. This leads to a binary thinking of “progressives vs. non-progressives” and makes it look like a battle to be won. For example, LGBT+ rights groups are portrayed as “anti-family” whereas their anti-rights adversaries portray themselves as “pro-family”. We need to be careful not to cement this dichotomy or we might lose the vital ground. One of the strengths of anti-rights groups has been their ability to effectively respond to opportunities created by **discontent, crisis and polarisation**. We need to explore further what we are learning during the COVID-19 pandemic on how anti-rights groups gain traction and exploit crisis and how such knowledge could be used to be better prepared for future crises.

Key strategies and lessons learned to counter anti-rights groups

Anti-rights actors are well-organised, coordinated as well as funded and use a range of tactics. Key strategies to counter them may include:

- Opposition monitoring, research and knowledge building
 - ✓ Mapping anti-rights movements and strategies
 - ✓ Exposing anti-rights actors, their ideologies, interconnections and funding
 - ✓ Debunking their discourses
 - ✓ Exposing their tactics at UN and Organization of American States (OAS)
 - ✓ Exposing their co-optation of human rights language
 - ✓ Identifying their long-term strategies
- Countering online threats and disinformation
 - ✓ Different manifestations require different responses and building capacities for a quick response is necessary
- Coming together across civil society sub-sectors and beyond
 - ✓ Sharing strategies, providing support and acting in solidarity
 - ✓ Breaking the silos in civil society, focusing on underlying issues affecting all communities and addressing them all together



- ✓ Reaching out to further possible allies – for example (moderate) religious actors who might be able to reach more conservative crowds
- Advocacy and alliance building in international and regional spaces
 - ✓ Emphasizing universality of rights
 - ✓ Increasing tactical exchange
 - ✓ Developing long-term strategies to obstruct anti-rights actors' agenda and advance rights-based agenda
- Narrative and messaging work to counter anti-rights actors
 - ✓ Developing narratives against fear-based messaging of anti-rights actors
 - ✓ Creating a narratives strategy based on values-based framing to change the narrative

Further information on these strategies could be found in the accompanying mapping on resources and initiatives to counter anti-rights groups.

Framing tips to counter anti-rights narratives

Developing a values-based framing to counter anti-rights narratives was underlined as one of the key strategies. These six framing tips can be used as a starting point:

- Understanding where we get our attitudes and opinions from

90% of our decision-making is subconsciously determined by our values, worldviews and dominant frames. There is no one public but several publics – a part of society agrees on the importance of human rights (“progressive side”) but a seemingly equally committed group is on the opposing side (“authoritarian side”). The biggest group tends to be shifting decisions depending on the messaging. The messaging can swing the “movable middle” between the two groups and using hope-based values can bring them to the progressive side.
- Conducting frame analysis

We need to tell our audience why they should support our position by using values. Messages that trigger values of benevolence, universalism and self-direction are the most powerful at moving attitudes in favour of human rights and equality. Messages that trigger values of achievement, power, security, tradition and conformity do not move attitudes in favour of human rights.
- Understanding how our opponents frame

Framing used by anti-rights groups targets marginalised groups (LGBT+ people, migrants, ethnic and religious minorities, etc.). It is often a threat-based framing that builds on values of security, culture/tradition and economic stability or a competition-based framing that builds on socio-economic hierarchies. Anti-rights groups see their civil society opponents as elites who help marginalised groups or advance threatening causes of their own (e.g. environmental protection).



- Eliciting the right emotions
Emotions like guilt and shame tend to demotivate – especially in a long run. Talking about a problem stimulates fear and fear tends to paralyse unless it is balanced out with hope. When we point out to the gap between what the world should look like (values) and the problem, it stimulates frustration or anger which can be a necessary spark but not the fuel. Hope fuels long-term engagement and support, and we can create hope by talking about what the world should look like (appealing to values) while pointing to what our solutions deliver.
- Recognising who makes a good messenger
To make messaging about human rights successful, it is necessary to break them down into more tangible terms. Rather than engaging in messaging about security or finances, a focus should lie on the universality of human rights and building a better world for all.
- Saying what we stand for rather than what we stand against
Contradicting a damaging frame only leads to repeating it. Instead of contradicting, it is better to reframe it.

Taking next steps

A mapping of resources and initiatives to counter anti-rights groups was conducted for the purposes of the ICF 2021 and shared with the participants in order to build on existing work and materials. Four themes of the mapping were selected for the final in-depth discussion in the breakout groups:

1) Deepening our understanding about anti-rights groups

- *Remaining gaps:*
 - ✓ More research on funding flows and how anti-rights groups come together in a coordinated way.
 - ✓ Need to work more with investigative journalists who might be more effective in uncovering hidden structures, power relations and linkages of anti-rights groups.
 - ✓ Need to invest in a range of languages for a wider accessibility.
 - ✓ Understanding shifts in anti-rights groups and movements post-pandemic.
 - ✓ Need to work on research and analysis across sectors – also with behavioural science researchers, strategic communications experts, transdisciplinary researchers, etc.

2) Countering disinformation coming from anti-rights actors

- *Biggest concerns:*
 - ✓ Easy spread of disinformation on social media platforms which undermine work of and trust in civil society.
 - ✓ Online campaigns against CSOs; staff members are being targeted and threatened online.
 - ✓ How to counter disinformation with facts vs. values-based narratives?



- *Effective solutions:*
 - ✓ Mapping of digital actors and ecosystems to understand where disinformation come from to better counter it (e.g. work carried out by Internews).
 - ✓ Identifying influencers on social media who can spread healthy information.
 - ✓ Educating organisation's staff on how to deal with mis- and disinformation, no matter what their role in the organisation is.
- *Remaining gaps:*
 - ✓ More attention to long-term awareness-raising and education, instead of only addressing immediate threats and managing reputational risks.
 - ✓ Need for a better moderation of the online content in different languages.
 - ✓ Instead of relying only on facts, we need to use more storytelling, anecdotes and humour to counter disinformation.

3) Addressing anti-rights narratives (shifting the narrative)

- *Biggest concerns:*
 - ✓ How do we reach the “moveable middle” which is not being reached by our current messaging?
 - ✓ Having enough propositional narratives that put forward a positive vision, rather than only debunking and responding to anti-rights narratives.
 - ✓ Limited resources to counter anti-rights narratives.
- *Effective solutions:*
 - ✓ Understanding the narratives of the opposition in order to disrupt them.
 - ✓ Using satire and comedy – especially by youth activists on social media – to change the narrative.
 - ✓ Collaboration with unlikely allies such as progressive religious actors. There are great examples from Latin America on how to get religious arguments to counter the opposition.
- *Remaining gaps:*
 - ✓ Need common, easy and cross-sector messages to counter anti-rights narratives.
 - ✓ Need more visual campaigns and appealing materials in multiple languages.
 - ✓ Need positive futures-looking and shared visions that our messages contribute towards.

4) Building coalitions to counter anti-rights actors and fostering dialogue (also with unlikely allies)

- *Biggest concerns:*
 - ✓ Collective sense of critical importance of coalitions to respond to anti-rights actors.
 - ✓ Lack of resources and funding; not enough recognition of how much time it takes to build a coalition.
 - ✓ Fear that bringing in LGBT+ groups will expose others in coalition to attack.
 - ✓ What kind of language is needed to appeal to unlikely allies?



- *Suggested solutions:*
 - ✓ Long-term relationship-building and trust-building are key. Need to build coalitions when sun is shining and sustain it also in relatively “calm” times.
 - ✓ Making invitations to coalitions easier – not forcing everyone to jump through hoops to join a necessary coalition.
 - ✓ Starting small and with a movement in mind building a momentum for the coalition.

Moving forward

Five main takeaways from the ICF 2021:

- We need more safe spaces like the ICF to exchange on countering anti-rights actors.
- We need a much greater investment in disruptive tactics and shared analyses. We cannot disrupt anti-rights without a feminist anti-racist framework.
- We finally need to invest at scale in work on strategic communications and narratives.
- We need to talk about what we want, not just what we don't want, what the barriers for cross-sectoral vision are and how the next steps look like.
- What civil society infrastructure is needed to enable us to do this work – both defensive and offensive?

The topic of addressing anti-rights groups will be further dealt with within the scope of the [Solidarity Action Network \(SANE\)](#) which aims at strengthening resilience of and solidarity among civil society actors when faced with civic space restrictions or changing operating conditions for civil society. If you want to follow up on the ICF 2021 or get involved in further steps, please contact Eva Gondorová, Project Manager: egondorova@icscentre.org.