

Anticipating Futures for Civil Society Operating Space

Summary

To create an enabling environment for civil society, the civil society sector needs to develop more anticipatory and proactive mechanisms to complement its reactive responses to civic space restrictions and changing operating conditions. The International Civil Society Centre (“the Centre”) is therefore embarking on a three-year initiative to strengthen anticipatory capacities and future readiness of civic space-focused civil society professionals, both in international and national civil society organisations (CSOs). The Centre is in a unique position to enable this capacity building by bringing together two of its key communities: its [Scanning the Horizon](#) community of civil society futures thinkers and strategists and its [Solidarity Action Network \(SANE\)](#) community of civic space-focused sector professionals. Together these communities will increase their understanding of their cross-over potential, engage in the collaborative futures scenario exercise ParEvo, workshop concrete organisational strategies to address scenarios, and build a set of tools to permeate the civic space community with required capacities. Within a crises-framing, there will be a likely focus on the effects of selected crises such as the climate crisis or growing securitisation to increase the sector’s preparedness.

Background: Challenges and Opportunities

It is widely recognised that CSOs, from community-based to international levels, and human rights to service delivery missions, have been facing undue restrictions and threats to their operating space around the world. There is a strong community of international and national CSOs that analyse and monitor these trends and devise collaborative response strategies to counter closing operational and civic space through a range of approaches (political advocacy, legal steps, narratives and perception of civil society, etc.). However, efforts to approach challenges from a more anticipatory, futures-informed position and thereby get beyond reactive, response-driven modes are much rarer. The most notable work here is the [International Center for Not-for-Profit Law’s \(ICNL\) Civic Space 2040 initiative of 2020](#), which we will build upon.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how crisis narratives and ‘securitisation’ framings have been used to justify civil society restrictions by states, but also how civic solidarity in such crisis contexts can create renewed vigour and opportunities for wider agendas of collaborative action. Similarly, the sector is learning from the Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. These insights need to inform scenarios for future emerging crises to prepare more effective potential responses. What framings are governments (as well as non-state actors) using to restrict civic space? What spaces could potentially open up when civil society helps states respond to crises? These questions start to illustrate some dimensions that need to be worked through more fully to derive better scenarios for anticipation and strategies for adaptation.



The “official futures” which many organisations rely on to inform their strategies are incomplete and can be misleading, as they are usually firmly rooted in the Global North - often private sector - perspectives of the people with the most resources to produce this analysis. This can lead to missing crucial signals for how crises can play out. For instance, we are seeing stark examples of this in the mixed, sometimes muted, reaction to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine from around the world, including the neutrality of many African countries because of a [complex set of considerations](#) at play. Therefore, ensuring diversity of international perspectives in thinking through the complex drivers of future scenarios is essential and avoiding centering consensus around one prevailing view of the world.

CSOs also tend to think almost entirely around the threats rather than opportunities for their impact from these crises. What new spaces or possibilities might open up for their advocacy work, or as fellow duty bearers of crisis response or service delivery alongside overstretched governments? For instance, the war on Ukraine is creating new space for advocacy and collaboration for Transparency International’s work on [cross-border flows of dirty money](#) as an enabler of Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine. Through its collaborative and participatory mechanisms this project will address these crucial dimensions.

Project Objectives and Activities

The project aims to increase the signal-scanning and future-facing capacities of CSOs, in line with the following three main objectives:

- 1) Increasing the awareness and readiness of CSOs in addressing current and future challenges at the intersection of civic space and crises;
- 2) Offering a convening and collaborative space for civil society professionals to develop future scenarios in the context of civic space and crises;
- 3) Translating developed scenarios into concrete strategies and strengthening capacities at the individual, organisational and sector level to be more futures-ready.

The project will encompass four phases:

1. Preparing the ground: June – October 2022

The Centre is currently engaged in early preparations for the programme, which include a mapping exercise and an exploration of possible partnerships. The mapping will draw out the range of potential connections between how governments frame and respond to crises, and the implications for civil society action and operating space. Looking at current government practices, the mapping will explore how states have pivoted to security framings in crises, the impact this has had on civic space and operating conditions, and the signals CSOs should increasingly become aware of. It will also build on existing future civic space scenarios, and analysis such as the [CLIMATE CHANGE - Civic Space Future Trend Report, commissioned by the International Centre for Non-for-Profit Law \(ICNL\) in 2020](#). The mapping will provide a thorough basis for the further activities below, particularly in identifying gaps that require collective sector approaches and initiatives.

In this preparatory phase, we will also focus heavily on building enabling and strong content and network partnerships with organisations such as FICS, ICNL, CIVICUS and [Internews-led consortium’s](#) data project for civic space forecasting. We are further looking for resource partners for financial support to this initiative.



2. Kick-off and first collaborative exercise: November 2022 – December 2023

a) November 2022: 2 – 3 November 2022: International Civic Forum, London and online

We will use the proven format of the [International Civic Forum \(ICF\)](#), the Centre's annual civic space platform to network, build trust and identify opportunities for collaboration on emerging issues to kick off the first phase of the project. We will bring up to 50 futures strategists (from Scanning the Horizon) and civic space experts (from SANE) together to jointly explore potential futures for civil society operating space. Participants will come both from international and national CSOs and special emphasis will be put on diversity of experience and perspectives. As the COVID-19 situation might worsen in autumn in Europe again, we are limiting the number of ICF participants to 50 people (+ the Centre's staff).

The event will raise awareness of the complex future interlinkages between state responses to crises (such as climate crisis, terrorism/extremism, pandemic, etc.) and the enabling environment for CSOs. We will alternate between different formats to enable rich and outcome-oriented discussions, including both panel and small group formats. We will set the scene by sharing key insights from the initial mapping, create a possible future crises setting (meta level) and use this to discuss intersections and implications (such as between climate change and closing civic space).

We will provide additional online offers to enable wider outreach and include further perspectives, such as streaming or providing recordings of selected panel discussions or sharing key takeaways from sessions to use for further engagement. Further accessibility measures will be taken, including international sign language interpretation and/or closed captions (online streaming/recording).

b) December 2022 – June 2023: ParEvo Exercise

Following the ICF, we will invite up to 20 CSO future strategists and civic space experts to engage for a six-month timeframe in the ParEvo Exercise: [ParEvo is an innovative online](#), open-source participatory process for developing evolving future scenarios. Together, the participants will develop future narrative scenarios for CSOs (for example in the context of climate crisis or growing securitisation and civic action) through this iterative, online collaborative narrative scenario-writing and 'signals-scanning' process. As integrated in the ParEvo methodology, we will regularly open the exercise to contacts from demographics and backgrounds missing from the 'writing' group, to further bolster the critical diversity of perspectives. The outcomes will provide an important reference for civil society actors to develop more anticipatory strategies. The outcomes of the ParEvo exercise will be documented in a report and shared widely in the following dissemination phase. The results will also inform the next steps and follow-on activities.

c) July – December 2023: Dissemination of narrative future 'reference scenarios'

Building on a highly successful dissemination strategy from SANE's [Solidarity Playbook](#), we will offer further dedicated webinars and conversations for interested CSOs to share the ParEvo insights and outcomes. This will enable inter-organisational discussion and mainstreaming of outcomes and wider 'socialisation' of the new knowledge. Both individual organisations and CSO networks will be key multipliers to target within this strategy.



In autumn 2023, an online workshop will share insights and lessons from the ICF and ParEvo exercise with a wider civil society audience (CSOs, networks and funders). The sessions will look at how effective anticipatory strategies could be developed, mainstreamed within individual organisations and utilised by the sector.

3. From scenarios to building concrete readiness: January 2024 – June 2025

The ParEvo Exercise will likely lead to the creation of distinct working groups, coordinated by the Centre and/or its partners, to dive more deeply into the implications of the respective scenarios. In addition, the dissemination activities will have brought new champions to the group of more closely involved civil society colleagues, and likely more partner organisations have joined our efforts. Through a series of online and offline workshops we will next develop with participants and partners what capacities those implications of the scenarios translate into, what strategies need to be developed and what partnerships need to be established to drive the anticipatory movement. The ICF 2024 will provide a key opportunity to consolidate and disseminate learnings of the process to date.

The next phase will also entail further capacity development, for and beyond the SANE community, to operationalise the insights from the scenarios, translate them into concrete strategies, and build capacities to become more futures-ready. This will take place at three levels: 1) At the individual level, capacities of CSOs colleagues involved in the project will be strengthened. 2) At the organisational level we will look at practical approaches individual CSOs are putting in place to improve and embed anticipatory competencies across their teams. A possibility of twinning between like-minded CSOs will be explored to enhance collaboration and mutual learning. 3) At the sector level, we will examine what kind of ongoing 'signals scanning' and intelligence analysis is possible and how it can be coordinated and accessed by the broadest range of CSOs. A particular focus will be given to how international CSOs and philanthropy can work together with their CSO partners on this in a more networked way. This capacity development will mark a key moment to ensure horizontal learning relationships and enable equitable learning access between international CSOs and their partner organisations. In this context the Centre is determined to integrate insights from its [Accelerating Inclusive Power Shift](#) project geared at supporting the transformation of the sector to becoming more locally led. Further details of this core phase will be developed throughout phases 1 and 2.

4. Evaluation and follow-up needs assessment: July 2025 – December 2025

In the final phase of the programme we will evaluate our efforts against objectives set at the beginning. We will analyse to what extent futures-readiness in the civic space community increased and map what type of further support is required, both at ICSO as well as at their partner level. The findings of these assessments will determine and inform a possible follow-on project.



Invitation to Partner on This Project

We welcome partners to get involved in strengthening anticipatory capacities and future readiness of CSOs and invite you to support the initiative in one (or more) of the following ways:

1. Resource partner to financially support the project or parts of it (e.g. Phase 1 and 2);
2. Content partner to co-develop this initiative or engage in one of its phases, bring in new ideas, insights and perspectives;
3. Network partner to help us connect to content experts, potential contributors, funders and further relevant stakeholders or reach out to new audiences to deepen the quality, relevance and application of the work.

About the International Civil Society Centre

The [International Civil Society Centre's mission](#) is to strengthen the impact and resilience of international CSOs to support people to change their world for the better. Our vision is the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals with the ambition to end all forms of poverty, achieve social justice and tackle climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind. Founded in 2007, it is owned by 15 of the largest international CSOs, working on poverty, social justice, environment, human rights and humanitarian issues. The Centre is a not-for-profit limited liability company, with an annual budget of approximately €1.5 Mio. It is based in Berlin, Germany, but delivers programmes targeting international CSOs and their local and regional partners worldwide.

The Centre hosts two well-established thematic communities, integral to the project:

- Developed out of the [2019 International Civic Forum](#) and formally initiated in 2020, the [Solidarity Action Network \(SANE\)](#) aims to strengthen resilience of and solidarity among civil society actors when faced with civic space restrictions or changing operating conditions. It connects international and national CSOs across all sub-sectors and brings them into discussions on civic space challenges and opportunities. What makes SANE distinct from other civic space networks is its strong focus on how international CSOs can better support their local partners, and on convening knowledge exchange and engagement directly with local organisations. Through sharing lessons learned and best practices across the network (see the [Solidarity Playbook](#)) and exploring different forms of solidarity (especially [beyond public advocacy](#)), it has become clear that countering closing civic space requires both timely, short-term reactions to crisis as well as long-term proactive thinking and engagement.
- [Scanning the Horizon](#) is the only cross-sector community for collaborative civil society horizon scanning to strengthen strategic thinking and explore future readiness on major sustainable development and human rights drivers. It has been convening since 2015 and has now more than 35 members from international civil society, philanthropy, academia and the private sector. Alongside running regular community events and peer exchange, it shares common experiences from this community as wider insights and recommendations for the broader civil society sector, such as on the [influence of global China](#), or how to prepare strategically for [complex and uncertain futures](#).