



civil society innovation and digital power shift

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INNOVATION REPORT 2022

Civil society innovation and digital power shift

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4. SOS Children's Villages International's Digital Villages
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6. Amnesty International's Decode Surveillance NYC
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RECOMMENDATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction

Our hopes for this report

The International Civil Society Centre hopes this report:

- **recognises the amazing efforts of the innovators** who have understood and shared the opportunities and roles which exist for civil society organisations working within digital and data ecosystems to influence and transform these to be more inclusive and equitable.
- **offers you creative inspiration** as you explore strategies and roles to reach and work with new partners, engage new audiences, and devise new ways of working – and thinking - in complex digital contexts.
- **inspires sharing and learning across our sector**, thereby catalysing further innovation and ultimately a stronger, and more resilient and impactful civil society. We want to spur organisations to work together to implement and scale these strategies, wherever possible.

Our reasons for the report

The International Civil Society Centre's strategy aims to highlight innovations that can benefit the civil society sector internationally. We seek to advance understanding of the most promising innovations, both inside and outside our sector, that can be applied to tackle common contemporary challenges. To achieve this aim, we have collected and shared some of the most inspiring and interesting examples in this third edition of our Civil Society Innovation Report format, with the hope of fostering an interactive platform for sharing innovative ideas and best practices among international and local civil society organisations and networks.

Civil society organisations are innovators. They test new approaches to both traditional and emerging problems. Rapid digitalisation is one of today's most prominent and influential global drivers of change, but decisions on how future digital development and data use proceeds still sit almost exclusively with the governments and businesses already powerful and privileged enough to influence and receive its benefits today, further growing the equity gap to the half of humanity who remain unconnected. While civil society organisations have achieved some success in shifting power around these challenges, there is a significant opportunity for organisations to learn and benefit from the lessons others have encountered. That is the goal of this innovation report.

Digitalisation as a driver for civil society innovation and impact

Digitalisation is a fundamental global driver of change¹ influencing how we work, what work is valued and our means and media for dialogue and deliberation, which in turn shape how we communicate and think and, ultimately, our cultures.² Understanding and productively navigating the opportunities and threats presented by digitalisation's widespread impact on communications, economics, values and culture across our diversity of global societies presents a challenge so multi-faceted and fast-moving as to feel impossible. Yet we must learn to do so. Digitalisation will proceed, with no finite end point, increasing tension between those already powerful and privileged enough to receive its benefits today - and its further promise to increase the amount of data available to truly understand our world and power better decision-making - and the half of humanity who remain unconnected.

As our relationship with technology continues to evolve, decisions about what rules govern digital development and use will have to be made. These decisions will be made by those who are already in power (whether they are digitally literate or not) with the data that they have the resources and influence to access. This will further concentrate definition and decision-making power around our future relationships with technology with those who already have this access, risking further acceleration of digital divides and increasing the likelihood of both real and perceived digital imperialism.

The risk of increased digital inequity can be countered by ensuring that communities have access to the digital infrastructures they need to participate and begin establishing their own relationships with technology and learning how to build their own digital futures, i.e. digital equity. Digital equity efforts must ensure that, as the relationship between technologies and communities evolves, they have the ongoing power to assume leadership in managing this relationship on their own terms, for their own needs, with their own data. Equipping more citizens with access to the internet and digital tools and skills will in turn enable them to contribute their own voice and data to achieve richer collective intelligence and situational awareness around the lived realities of sustainable development challenges.

¹ <https://www.pwc.com/qx/en/government-public-services/assets/five-megatrends-implications.pdf>

² <https://www.mdpi.com/2078-2489/12/2/68/pdf>

DIGITAL EQUITY

is when all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation – on terms and levels of their choice - in society, democracy and the economy. It is a necessary enabler of civic and cultural participation, employment and lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

This will allow civil society and government to work better together to engage and interrogate insights with communities to clarify service improvements, the impacts of policies and programmes, and further data needs, and influence the design of appropriate and inclusive new, including frontier, technologies. It will also increase the capability of the business sector to design and deliver solutions with and for historically underserved and marginalised communities.

To mitigate the negative impacts of digitalisation through adapting existing agreed human rights frameworks to the digital age, civil society organisations (CSOs) must work across sectors to build out the appropriate digital infrastructures needed to end digital poverty in communities. Only through the plurality of voices and insights which can be raised on the back of these infrastructures can we gain better collective understanding of the influence and impacts of digitalisation - and other global drivers - on the breadth of humanity, to adjust and plan how to navigate them. But who will have the power to access these understandings and use them to make decisions? CSOs have a critical role to play in ensuring that it is increasingly communities which can do this on their own behalf, rather than governments or tech companies with different interests and incentives.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SHIFTING POWER TOWARDS DIGITAL EQUITY

There are more than 10 million organisations making up civil society, and they have critical roles to play in enabling the power shift towards inclusive and equitable digitalisation of society - as rights representatives, witnesses and watchdogs, service providers, and channels to reach historically underserved and marginalised communities:

- 1 | As rights representatives, civil society works to consolidate power for communities who have been and would otherwise remain voiceless in influencing important decisions which have bearing on their lives and digital futures.
- 2 | As witnesses and watchdogs, civil society works with these communities through a multitude of programmes, gaining deeper insight into the daily challenges they experience, and generating and using data to assess the impact of decisions and use and misuse of power by duty-bearers and other service providers.
- 3 | As service providers themselves, civil society delivers many services across diverse areas which, if appropriately digitalised, could help communities benefit from internet usage while also delivering data back into the system to drive further service improvements.
- 4 | As a channel to historically underserved and marginalised communities, civil society gains invaluable first-hand, real-time insights into the challenges faced by humanity which could be captured and shared with governments to improve policies, assuming this is a common aim/agenda. However, far too often this data remains hidden, unlinked and unusable. Building the digital capacities of CSOs and increasing their access to minimum viable appropriate digital infrastructures to ensure they can safely share this data – as they in turn help build the digital capacities of communities – would dramatically increase cross-sector capacities to design more effective and inclusive interventions and policies.

THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

itself is the process of delivering a 'minimum viable digital infrastructure' (see below), determining and adopting policies, increasing staff capacity, and implementing specific technology systems so that organisations can:

- Deliver their services with greater impact for the individuals they serve,
- Collectively harness technology and data to streamline work processes and address common concerns,
- Leverage data for both their own, and to shift power towards, collective decision-making and deliberative processes and movement-building.

AN INNOVATION SPECTRUM FROM ENABLING DIGITAL EQUITY TO LAYING PATHWAYS TO FRONTIER TECHNOLOGIES

There is a considerable excitement about the potential for 'frontier technologies', such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, to increase knowledge through powerful data insights, and increase efficiencies through automation of processes and communications. There is equal concern about the use of such technologies to increase surveillance, automate authoritarianism and scale misinformation, and further exacerbate the digital divide, such as leaving potential social service recipients behind with their data excluded from the design of decision-making algorithms that increasingly determine inclusion – or reproduce discrimination.

Civil society must understand the potential impacts of frontier technologies and establish well-founded arguments and options that steer us toward the beneficial and progressive outcomes we would prefer for society. Frontier technologies rely on vast amounts of highly-structured data, but with half of humanity still not online producing this data, these technologies will at best have to rely on the 'best guess' approximations of designers who rarely come from the communities most likely to be left behind by digitalisation. At worst, not even approximate data will be considered, leading to more outcomes like facial recognition technology misidentifying or excluding individuals according to skin colour, or many more instances of misapplied social service cases which automate inequality and ["profile, police and punish the poor"](#).

Getting the best of the positive potential of frontier technologies is fully dependent on first achieving basic key elements of enabling infrastructure for digital equity, so that all communities have the power to both produce their own data and at least some agency over how it is used, and by whom. It also requires data capture and storage in structured ways that enable frontier technologies to build relevant and inclusive data models for algorithmic decision-making.

For civil society to build a credible position as a stakeholder in digitalisation and ensure frontier technologies achieve more social and economic good than harm, we need to increase our ability to understand and accelerate innovations across this spectrum of basic digital equity, more advanced data generation, storage, management and analysis, and inclusive pathways to frontier technologies.

A lot more is still needed, but the portfolio of case studies in this report highlight an important range of approaches already being delivered by CSOs around the world, focusing towards the digital equity and data lakes elements of our innovation spectrum below. The use of frontier technologies in the international civil society sector still seems fairly nascent, and early use cases are now starting to emerge and be shared for learning with others. At the moment, there seems to be particular focus on artificial intelligence chatbots – some interesting cases to follow in future include: Clear Global/Translators Without Borders' [Shehu chatbot for COVID-19](#) information in Northeast Nigeria, Save the Children US' and Omde-na's [online sexual predator warning chatbot](#), and SOS Children's Villages International's [Rafiki digital child and youth care assistant](#).

Digital Equity

Overall aims: To ensure that all individuals are able to participate in digitalisation on their own terms, enabled by baseline digital infrastructure.

BASELINE INFRASTRUCTURE:

- Meaningful access
- Tools
- Skills, literacy and learning communities
- Policy

Data Lakes

Overall aims: To provide the infrastructure for data storage and management as data is generated through digital usage, and ensure necessary data is available (especially on issues around social inequity).

GENERATE, STORE, MANAGE AND ANALYSE DATA:

- (Missing) data generation (inc. crowdsourcing) or data release (from authorities/companies)
- Data management
- Data representation
- Data insights and analysis
- Data legal frameworks e.g. data trusts ¹
- Encryption and similar security systems ensuring data can be mined/modelled without exposing an individual's data
- Data governance models that clarify rights and responsibilities for data as it travels through the internet

Frontier Technologies

Overall aims: To drive insight into the data available for powerful new knowledge and increased efficiencies and inclusion through automation.

INSIGHT AND AUTOMATION

- Build our own (with open standards, open data, open source, and open innovation for wider public good)
- Apply/adapt for social good
- Advocate for ethical and inclusive guidelines/policies (e.g. mandatory human rights impact assessments of all government-contracted technology)
- Monitor impacts of both applications and policies

¹ Data trusts that ensure data is held in trust for a community and communities have increased rights over the representation and exploitation of their data.

A MODEL FOR BASELINE INFRASTRUCTURE TO ACHIEVE DIGITAL EQUITY

The ability for any person or group to be able to participate in digitalisation requires guaranteed existence of and assured access to four critical pillars:

- the internet,
- tools,
- skills, literacy and learning communities and
- relevant digital policies for digital rights and inclusion.

This combination – the baseline digital infrastructure for digital equity – is both the fundamental backbone to enable data lakes and lay inclusive pathways to frontier technologies, and only achievable through cross-sector collaboration between governments, business and civil society. While there are many more layers of digital infrastructure that might be useful, focusing on this minimum essential standard gives all these stakeholders a common digital equity foundation from which to enable the inclusion of communities on their own terms.

ELEMENTS OF THE MODEL:

- 1 | **Meaningful internet access:** more than half of humanity is not connected to the internet. Many more are under-connected, limited by slow internet speeds and high costs. However, CSOs have demonstrated the capacity to help connect communities in some of the most remote areas of the planet. Governments, business and civil society must work together to ensure that regulatory frameworks allow multiple types of actors to run a variety of non-profit, not-for-profit and for-profit business models to access internet spectrum licenses, build upon existing knowledge, and compete to deliver affordable internet access for all. Without it, the data and voices of the unconnected and historically underserved and marginalised will remain invisible to and excluded from policy-making and programme development aimed at achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- 2 | **Tools to use the internet:** access to even the minimum ‘first devices’ to use the internet once connected also remains a major barrier. This was particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic when millions of families around the world found themselves unable to afford basic tablets or laptops necessary for children to join online education, and adults to move their economic activities into the virtual space. Governments, business and civil society must work together to develop the business models, supply chains, hardware resilience standards, affordable software services and e-waste recycling programmes to sustainably increase access to at least these first devices.

- 3 | **Skills, literacy and learning communities:** Access to the internet and the tools to use it is meaningless, and potentially dangerous, without digital and media literacy training and ongoing access to supportive expert/user communities for learning and support as things rapidly evolve and age. Governments, business and civil society must collaborate to ensure 'on-device', 'in-community' and 'in-classroom' education approaches at scale to ensure digital adoption whilst minimising risks of exposure to predation, misinformation and other digital risks and threats. Civil society has an extensive track record of developing and implementing digital education programmes and [standards](#) as technology has evolved, which can be mainstreamed with government cooperation.
- 4 | **Policies:** without appropriate policies which enable and reinforce standing commitments to human rights, digitalisation will deliver ever-diminishing returns for the good of society, as increased usage leads to increased surveillance and data-mining of digital citizens by governments and business. These two sectors must work with civil society to re-commit to human rights conventions in the digital era, implement and monitor the impacts of policies needed to increase access to the internet, tools and skills/learning and ensure progressive, inclusive, rights-first approaches to digital design and usage.

Each pillar is necessary, dependent on and reinforcing of the others. Without internet access, tools and skills are of little use and vice versa. Without policies ensuring meaningful access and digital rights, usage of the internet will only be limited to those who have the means to pay for this privilege. Without skills, literacy and learning communities, the policies and solutions designed to deliver meaningful access, and useful tools for inclusion, will inevitably and rapidly age as technology evolves.

[TechSoup](#) has warned of the urgent need for CSOs to establish their own full baseline digital competencies to weather digital disruptions, especially as technology continues its swift move to the cloud. Currently, more than 95% of CSOs use on-premise software which will no longer be supported within 10 years. Organisations which do not have sufficient tech support or connectivity to 'manage themselves into the cloud' - will experience critical service degradation or collapse, as the software they rely on begins to fail. Governments which care about these services for their most marginalised populations should also work to include civil society in digitalisation strategies – as they in turn work to help include and integrate these communities in these strategies as well, and influence the directions of digitalisation more broadly in society.

Important aspects articulated by the case studies

Power dynamics

All the case studies in this report have articulated their understanding of the wider digital power dynamics in the system in which they are intervening, and how their approach is intended to shift them. They describe the drivers their innovation work was designed to respond to, and the scale and dimensions of the challenge or opportunity it is addressing. The digital equity case studies also considered the four key elements of the baseline digital infrastructure for digital equity outlined above – meaningful access, tools, skills and learning communities, and policy.

Innovation

Each case study identifies the ways in which it is innovative, with a focus on practice rather than product, by considering the following types of questions:

- Has it identified a new problem or understanding of the problem/system/power dynamics?
- Is it a new/novel solution for an existing problem?
- Is there something novel about the intervention strategy/approach?
- Is there something novel about the implementation partnerships?
- Is there something novel about the tools/technology or frameworks being applied?

Like our previous Civil Society Innovation reports, the same maturity definitions (below) are used to indicate the stage of each innovation. For this theme, all the case studies are either emerging pilots or already well-established initiatives, rather than early experimental approaches.

LEVEL OF MATURITY	
Emerging	The innovation is in the process of being implemented. Some evidence or lessons may be generated to inform iteration or adaptation of the innovation and to assess if it is demonstrating effectiveness, influence or impact.
Established	The innovation has been fully implemented. Evidence is available to assess if and how it has been effective or achieved influence or impact. Wider lessons or conclusions can be shared with others.

Design equity

CSOs also have the responsibility to ensure design equity within their approaches involving communities in efforts to enable digital power shift. All eight case study contributors in this report articulate in their accompanying interviews how their approach has been designed ‘with’ rather than ‘for’ or ‘at’ user communities, such that they have been included in aspects of design and implementation, rather than seen just as recipients simply expected to adopt something which has already been developed and built.³

Anticipation – the next 5+ years

Given the speed and scale with which new developments and uses of digital technology can take hold, the case study contributors were also asked how they incorporate forward-looking, anticipatory elements into their ongoing design and implementation. They were asked to articulate the main scenarios which they are factoring in for the next 5+ years, in terms of new developments or opportunities for how either they or others might use or develop the technology, which could impact positively or negatively on its original intended purpose.

³ A useful reference is The Digital Impact Alliance (DIAL)’s nine [Principles for Digital Development](#): 1. Design With the User, 2. Understand the Existing Ecosystem, 3. Design for Scale, 4. Build for Sustainability, 5. Be Data Driven, 6. Use Open Standards, Open Data, Open Source, and Open Innovation, 7. Reuse and Improve, 8. Address Privacy and Security, and 9. Be Collaborative.

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ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY CENTRE

The [International Civil Society Centre](#) was founded in 2007 to support international civil society organisations (ICSOs) to maximise their impact for a sustainable and more equitable world. Our mission is to strengthen the impact and resilience of these organisations to support people to change their world for the better. The Centre is owned by 15 of the largest ICSOs working across environmental, human rights, social justice and humanitarian issues.

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ABOUT TECHSOUP

[TechSoup](#) equips changemakers with transformative technology solutions and skills they need to improve lives globally and locally. TechSoup's Global Network of partners are all leading CSOs delivering impact at scale in 236 countries and territories worldwide, and managing a range of capacity building programmes in their countries. Together, they have connected more than 1.2 million organisations with the tools they need to improve lives.

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The [Patrick J. McGovern Foundation](#) is a global 21st-century philanthropy bridging the frontiers of artificial intelligence, data science, and social impact to create a thriving, equitable, and sustainable future for all. The Foundation's work focuses on bringing together academia, practitioners, and civil society to pursue the potential of AI and data science to address some of the world's most urgent challenges.

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