

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 strengthening 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.

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 and trends to get ahead of the curve and prepare more effective responses.

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.

Rather than only responding to futures dictated by others – governments, military or corporations – civil society needs to proactively navigate through and shape the future. Civil society can offer alternatives and actively work towards a better future that don't carry the injustices and inequalities of the past into the future.

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) Increase awareness of CSOs on future trends impacting civil society operating space and their readiness to actively shape civic space future(s);
- 2) Offer a convening and collaborative space for civil society professionals to develop future scenarios for civic and civil society operating space;
- 3) Translate developed scenarios into concrete strategies and strengthen capacities at the individual, organisational and sector level to be more futures-ready.

The project will encompass four phases:

1. Preparing the ground and kicking off the initiative: June – December 2022

The Centre conducted a [landscape mapping](#) to understand crises and trends impacting civic space, the strengths and weaknesses of CSOs' responses and their reflections. Written by Heather Hutchings and Danny Vannucchi, the mapping compiled existing research, initiatives and resources on the future of civic space and CSOs' preparedness; analysed what CSOs have been learning from past and present crises that can inform future scenarios for civil society operating space; and identified gaps that require collective sector approaches.

The results of the mapping were presented and scrutinized at the [International Civic Forum \(ICF\)](#), the Centre's annual civic space platform to network, build trust and identify opportunities for collaboration on emerging issues. The Centre brought together 60 civil society representatives on the topic of **"Anticipating Futures for Civil Society Operating Space"** on 2-3 November 2022 in London, UK. The ICF raised awareness why CSOs need to move beyond reactive responses to shrinking space for civil society and become more anticipatory; showed examples of how futures thinking and foresight can be useful; and generated ideas on building collective cross-sector anticipatory capacities and actions. The [ICF outcome document](#) summarizes the sessions and main takeaways from the event.

We further introduced the initiative to a broader audience at the [Global Perspectives](#) virtual conference on 30 November 2022. At the [panel discussion](#) we scrutinized what the value of anticipation is, what is holding the civil society sector back from being more anticipatory, and how we can move from a "crises mindset" to "anticipatory action".



2. First collaborative exercise and further explorations: January – December 2023

a) January 2023 – July 2023: ParEvo Exercise

Building on the ICF, we will invite 15 CSO future strategists and civic space experts to jointly develop future scenarios for civil society operating space in an online, collaborative, narrative, scenario-writing and signals-scanning exercise called [ParEvo](#). ParEvo is a method of exploring alternative futures (or histories), using a participatory evolutionary process (hence ParEvo). The exercise will involve a core writing group (15 people) and will be regularly opened to contacts from demographics and backgrounds missing from the writing group to further bolster the critical diversity of perspectives. The outcomes of the ParEvo exercise will be documented in a report and shared widely in the following dissemination phase. The results will inform the next steps and follow-on activities.

b) August – December 2023: Dissemination of narrative future ‘reference scenarios’

We will present and engage on the ParEvo results in an online workshop to share insights and lessons with a wider civil society audience (CSOs, networks and funders). Additionally, building on a successful dissemination strategy from SANE’s [Solidarity Playbook](#), we will offer further dedicated webinars and conversations for interested CSOs to share the ParEvo insights. 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.

c) January – December 2023: Exploration of further ideas and partnerships

Further ideas that were brought forward by the participants of the ICF 2022 will be examined in 2023. The ideas included creating a common and clear language on civic futures, making existing futures work and initiatives more visible and accessible, democratizing foresight work and creating inclusive spaces, and exploring the theme at the country level. There was a considerable buy-in by the ICF participants to be involved in the next steps – advising on the overall initiative and developing the proposed ideas further as well as contributing to the ParEvo exercise.

We will further explore content partnerships to lead or shape these ideas with us. Additionally, we are looking for resource partnerships to support our efforts. Possibilities of partnering with us on this initiative are outlined below.

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 CSO as well as at their partner level. The findings of these assessments will determine and inform a possible follow-on project.



Project Supporters

“Anticipating futures” initiative as part of SANE is currently funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the Ford Foundation. The Open Society Foundations and Deutsche Postcode Lotterie are supporting the second phase of the initiative focused on developing future scenarios for civil society operating space (ParEvo exercise).

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 of the following ways:

1. Resource partner to financially support the project or parts of it;
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. Founded in 2007, it is owned by 14 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:

- 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. 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](#).