

# Scanning the Horizon – Project Concept, 2023-24

## Countering mis-, dis- and malinformation in civil society

### Concept Note

#### Project Summary

The International Civil Society Centre's (Centre) [Scanning the Horizon](#) collaborative platform is the only dedicated international civil society community for collaborative trend analysis and futures thinking in the wider social justice sector. Starting in 2023, the Centre plans a collaborative learning project, convening this community (and additional partners) to share insights, explore key trends and develop relevant strategies which challenge and catalyse international Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to incorporate a more integrated approach to mis-, dis- and mal-information (MDM). The project will strengthen sector understanding of how this trend manifests now; what innovative approaches have been developed by (I)CSOs to counter MDM and what possible futures the sector has to prepare for and how.

#### Background

Misinformation (false information shared accidentally), disinformation (false information spread deliberately), and malinformation (information that is true, but it is intentionally conveyed to inflict actual harm on a person, organisation or country) are not a new phenomenon, but their diffusion has been well nurtured by the widening of societal divides and the rise of authoritarianism. In recent years, MDM have become a common challenge in the civil society sector targeting (I)CSOs and the communities they serve as well as challenging fundamental values on which their work rests. There is a wide array of illustrations, how this phenomenon plays out and affects (I)CSOs and their partner communities:

- Health: The “infodemic” and “misinfodemic” around COVID vaccines have been a stark example of how also (I)CSO health programmes had been questioned on their efficiency by the communities they targeted. Same goes for the treatment of Ebola cases in African countries where communities question the existence of the Virus due to false information and thus hamper the efforts of local and regional CSOs to improve health care services which are utterly needed in states with little to no public health care.<sup>1</sup>
- Democracy: Research has shown that particular efforts to fuel mis and disinformation is put in place to sway public opinion during high-pressure political instances, like elections or significant constitutional reforms. During the highly controversial Kenya’s constitutional review process, the Building Bridges Initiative, disinformation campaigns were used to inauthentically attack CSO activists that voiced their opposition to the reform.<sup>2</sup> In countries where there is little or no regulatory framework to protect the integrity of electoral process and to identify and stop MDM, these tactics are even more widespread and ICSOs end up playing a critical role to respond to these tactics and protect the quality of the civic space.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/nov/09/misinformation-hampers-ugandas-battle-against-new-outbreak-of-ebola>

<sup>2</sup> <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/blog/meet-odanga-madung-holding-tech-platforms-accountable-in-kenya/>



Misinformation or weaponised information can undermine trust in organisations that provide essential services. It fuels conflicts, perpetuating political divides and demonising the 'other'. It can lead to governments taking action that not only tries to regulate MDM but policies that might have a backlash on information rights. Thus, ICSOs as well as national and local CSOs whether they focus on human rights, development, peacebuilding or humanitarian issues have a high stake in a healthy information environment for being able to support the communities they work for.

Since 2020, the Centre has been bringing the topic of Mis- and Disinformation, as well as Malinformation, to its communities such as the Scanning the Horizon, [Solidarity Action Network](#), [peer community of ICSO Programme Directors](#) and [peer community of ICSO CEOs](#). There is a stronger need than ever to exchange on existing tools and strategies, find new models and mechanisms to respond and make them available to all ICSOs and CSOs. At the same time, we need to join forces and explore solidarity and support mechanisms to defend individual organisations, the civil society sector and our common values.

## Project aims and approach

This project aims to challenge and catalyse international CSOs to incorporate a more integrated approach to organisational, programmatic and advocacy strategies. It will do this through developing and sharing new strategic insights on how to work more holistically against MDM. Building from Scanning the Horizon's work around the [sector guide on complexity and uncertainty](#), the project will include the following outcomes:

1. Enable and empower I/CSOs to learn and integrate more coherent thinking around MDM by sharing good practice from a range of international and national CSOs, and other sectors
2. Building capacity of the sector by identifying strategic opportunities, developing collective analysis and insights and sharing practical methods to ensure ongoing relevance and resilience of international CSO strategy-making, by:
  - better anticipating and adapting to a range of key plausible future disruption scenarios
  - making sense of key emerging framings and narratives being used by influential stakeholders (for different agendas) and what this means for our sector.
3. Strengthening future strategic thinking by equipping I/CSOs with Documents, disseminating and 'democratising' the knowledge outcomes from three areas of enquiry (see below) as civil society 'sector good' Sector Guide analysis and good practice guidance to. This will include diversifying both contributing organisations and audiences to increase sector reach and relevance.

## Areas of enquiry

We currently anticipate that our learning will be guided by the following areas of enquiry. However, this should be taken very much as work in progress:

1. Direct Effects: Direct effects of MDM on the reputation and operations of (I)CSOs
2. Policy and indirect effects: The role of (I)CSOs in shaping the information policy environment, including the dangers of authoritarian governments using MDM as a fig leaf to decrease citizen participation and democratic rights
3. The adversaries: The particular role of anti-rights actors, in spreading disinformation and how (I)CSOs intersect with them on the topic
4. Technology: technological frontiers that will further shape MDM and the capabilities (I)CSOs have to respond to this.



## Project activities and outputs

The project will run on an 18-month time frame from February 2023 to August 2024, with the following outputs:

- A baseline survey and informal interviews with international CSO strategists to identify the current status, challenges and possibly future frontiers;
- Bi-monthly peer exchange webinars from both the community and external content inputs to share current practice, analysis and thought provocations about opportunities and risks;
- One in person workshop for discussion, sense -making and analysis to explore potential disruption scenarios, emerging framings and narratives, using inclusive tools;
- 4-5 Case studies of innovative (I)CSOs approaches to countering MDM, ranging a diversity of thematic dimensions and regions, to be published in 2023, becoming part of Sector Guide in 2024 (see below)
- Regular content communication pieces – thought piece blogs/podcast interviews; i.e. on the Centre's [Disrupt&Innovate Blog](#)
- Scanning Sector Guide (no. 3) in 2024 covering these areas (after [Global China, 2019](#) and [Uncertainty and Complexity, 2021](#)) based on community lessons, research and analysis.

## About the Centre

The International Civil Society Centre was set up in 2007 to support international civil society organisations (ICSOs) maximise their impact for a sustainable and more equitable world. The Centre is owned and supported by more than 20 of the largest international civil society organisations, working across environmental, human rights, social justice and humanitarian themes. Our mission is to strengthen the impact and resilience of international civil society organisations to support people to change their world for the better.