



International
Civil Society Centre

CASE STUDY

From Reaction to Readiness:

How the Uganda National NGO
Forum is Using Foresight to
Navigate Shrinking Civic Space
and Electoral Uncertainty

At a glance

In the lead-up to Uganda's January 2026 general elections, the Uganda National NGO Forum confronted a familiar challenge: how to anticipate and respond to the country's shifting civic and political landscape. Futures thinking was not a new approach for the Forum; however, the organisation's participation in the International Civic Forum 2023, convened by the International Civil Society Centre, marked a turning point from which scenario thinking became more intentional, structured, and collective than before.

This case study highlights how the Forum, a key player in Uganda's civil society landscape, has leveraged futures thinking to navigate uncertainty, sharpen strategy, and support its member organisations in preparing for an increasingly constrained civic space.



Where it all began

The Uganda National NGO Forum, a national platform for NGOs in Uganda, has a broad membership comprising more than 600 NGOs, about half of which are actively engaged. It focuses on two broad programmatic areas: civil society strengthening (including capacity building, compliance, local fundraising, and training) and policy advocacy (monitoring governance processes, citizen engagement, elections, and public policy implementation). While its core operations are based in Uganda, the Forum also convenes regional dialogues through its membership in key regional and global platforms.

Prior to 2023, the Forum applied informal scenario-building methods based on contextual analysis, political trends, and community insights to try to make sense of unfolding events and prepare accordingly.

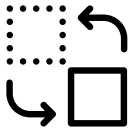
The team's exposure to the International Civil Society Centre's 2023 International Civic Forum (ICF) in Brussels and the publication of the *Toolkit for Tomorrow: Anticipating Civil Society Futures* led the Forum toward a more deliberate integration of structured futures thinking into their work.

“The kind of violence that happened [in the previous general elections] and the drivers of that violence were unprecedented. And organisations were somehow inept and ill-equipped to actually be effective during that time. We started asking ourselves the question around being proactive, being predictive, but also being not reactionary all the time but rather contributing to informing what drives the change that’s likely to happen. And in our convenings as a platform, we would be having these kinds of reflections, (...) but they were like postmortem reflections. And I remember we started challenging ourselves to start thinking about the future rather than reflecting on the past.”

Chris Nkwatsibwe, Team Leader, Programmes,
Uganda National NGO Forum



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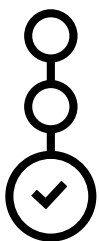
What needed to change

The Forum's move toward a more structured approach to foresight methods stemmed from hard-earned lessons. In the 2016 Uganda general elections, the civic space tightened in unexpected ways, as **social media shutdowns, election-related violence, and government restrictions** caught civil society off guard. During the 2021 general elections, these patterns were better anticipated, yet civil society organisations still struggled to respond effectively:

“A lot of things that took place [in the 2021 general elections], we expected for them to happen but were not necessarily equipped to respond. We knew that they would happen, but we did not prepare to respond to those things. So now, as we prepare for [the] 2026 [general elections], the understanding was we should find ways in which we are very firm and prepared to actually adapt if scenarios that we have predicted happen.”

Chris Nkwatsibwe, Team Leader, Programmes,
Uganda National NGO Forum

As the 2026 general elections approached, the Forum recognised a gap in their work: knowing what could happen is not enough. Civil society actors must be better equipped to not only anticipate challenges but proactively adjust strategies and collaborate without attracting undue scrutiny. The foresight process offered the Forum a **way to transition from reactive to proactive planning, build collective intelligence, and prepare internally and with partner organisations for what lay ahead.**



How they went about it

In 2024, the Forum convened a three-day in-person scenario-building workshop, gathering internal governance staff and external civil society partners. The plan for the workshop was to use the *Toolkit for Tomorrow: Anticipating Civil Society Futures* as the main reference. Programmes Team Leader Chris Nkwatsibwe chose to adapt the toolkit process to better fit the context and participant needs. Drawing on the toolkit's overall structure and its focus on scenario development and trend analysis, he blended familiar methods to the organisation with selected new elements from the toolkit, like the **scenario immersion using a 2×2 matrix.**

Participatory storytelling, cue cards, simple matrices, and ranking exercises were used to guide the process in a culturally resonant and accessible way. Each group developed a scenario narrative and explored the likely drivers, opportunities, and risks of their scenario:

“We asked the question: What is likely to happen? And people started, you know, developing different scenarios. And in fact, once we had maybe, let’s say, five, six scenarios, we started asking the questions around the drivers: What would be the drivers of these scenarios? (...) What is the likelihood of this happening? (...) Is it low? Is it medium? And then we categorised them according to what is desirable and what is not desirable. And then the last part was: What do we need to do now to shape, inform, or bring about the desirable scenarios? And what can we do to stop the less desirable scenario?”

Chris Nkwatsibwe, Team Leader, Programmes,
Uganda National NGO Forum

Grounded in local storytelling traditions and reflective dialogue, participants assessed past electoral events and current trends, including **militarisation and the dominance of security forces** in electoral processes, **digital surveillance, internet shutdowns and information control, eroding public trust in electoral institutions, and emergence of paramilitary and vigilante groups**. From these assessments, they co-created a set of plausible futures:

- **Dynastic Succession:** Transition of power from President Museveni to his son, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, was seen as a likely outcome underpinned by elite continuity and militarised backing.
- **National Dialogue:** A more optimistic scenario, in which a broad-based consensus process addressed historical and structural challenges through an inclusive forum.
- **Violent Election:** A worst-case scenario, featuring intensified repression, militarisation, and civil unrest.

These scenarios were mapped and visually coded using coloured markers, and thematic clusters were developed through card-sorting exercises.

The workshop also included structured information-gathering sessions with key stakeholders like members of the Electoral Commission, offering real-time insights into planned government actions.



What they created

The workshop followed the [Chatham House rules](#) with limited formal documentation; however, several key by-products were generated:

- A **civil society strategy paper** for the 2026 elections: *“The Road to 2026: A CSO Engagement strategy for the 2025/2026 general elections”* (October 2024). Informed by scenario-building conversations, this paper outlines coordinated approaches to citizen mobilisation, key contextual risks, the three plausible political transition pathways, and a coordinated action plan for CSOs to boost civic engagement, counter electoral violence, and promote accountability.
- A **position paper** outlining anticipated challenges and response frameworks.
- A joint understanding among participants of plausible future civic space trajectories and collective priorities in the lead-up to 2026. Through **scenario development and trend discussions**, participants aligned on a common language and awareness around potential futures, laying the groundwork for collective anticipation and collaboration.
- **Internal tools**, such as scenario matrices and visual aids, that capture likelihood and impact assessments.

The workshop process seeded a shared readiness and strategic alignment across organisations.



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Changes that followed

The foresight process directly influenced key decisions:

- In anticipation of restrictions on election observer coalitions (as seen in 2021), civil society groups are now choosing to **decentralise accreditation efforts**. Rather than form a visible coalition that might attract government suppression, individual organisations applied independently while informally coordinating.
- **Learning from trends analysis and scenario building**, participants recognised that traditional donor financing for election-related work, such as observation and voter education, might be at risk. This recognition led to proactive mobilisation of volunteer networks, community-based observers, and informal citizen reporting mechanisms to sustain oversight and engagement. The Forum explored working through loose networks and alternative platforms that would enable them to maintain momentum even if funding was limited:

“We did not anticipate that USAID would be closed, but we had built a scenario around financing for elections work being limited, because DGF had been closed in 2021.”

Chris Nkwatsibwe, Team Leader, Programmes,
Uganda National NGO Forum

- The anticipation of increased militarisation and repression has led to a **shift in public engagement strategies**. Civil society actors collectively decided to tone down public messaging and adopt a moderate tone to avoid arrests and organisational shutdowns.

The foresight workshop also strengthened peer learning, fostering a sense of shared strategy among organisations operating in a complex political environment.



Lessons they learnt

The workshop offered rich insights into how foresight can be adapted to local contexts, and it also revealed key areas for improvement to sustain the impact of these lessons over time:



Track progress, not just inspiration

One of the main challenges of the workshop was the absence of systematic documentation and follow-up. While the workshop effectively mobilised intelligence and inspired action, its outputs were not formally tracked or updated over time. This lack of documentation has limited participants' ability to revisit or refine scenarios as political conditions evolve.



Adapt the tools to the context

The *Toolkit for Tomorrow* served as a useful reference for framing the foresight process. While some participants initially found the language and format somewhat complex, certain elements of the toolkit offered valuable guidance, including the structure for scenario development, trend analysis, and reflection on implications. They further blended these elements with more culturally resonant approaches, such as storytelling, colour-coded matrices, and visual cue cards. This flexible, hybrid application of the toolkit allowed participants to meaningfully engage with the material in a way that felt **intuitive and locally grounded**.

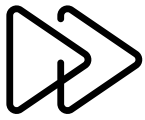


Make foresight accessible and flexible

A key takeaway from the process was the **importance of democratising foresight**. For futures thinking to take root, it must be accessible in both language and facilitation style. Democratising foresight involves being open to different words, formats, and entry points:

“There has to be a way in which we democratise it – even in language – we become liberal to people adopting different words, different options, to imply exactly the same thing. Because incidentally, you always arrive at the same results.”

Chris Nkwatsibwe, Team Leader, Programmes,
Uganda National NGO Forum



What comes next

The Uganda NGO Forum plans to reconvene partners for a reflective session in late 2025, using learnings from recent events to update its scenarios and planning. Partners have expressed interest in **building more structured, cyclical foresight processes**, potentially integrating 'train the trainer' approaches to build internal capacity.

The Uganda NGO Forum sees strong value in **engaging with other foresight practitioners** across the region. They believe that practitioner feedback sessions or peer reflection circles could help surface what is working in different contexts and what needs to evolve to make foresight more practical, accessible, and impactful for civil society organisations in East Africa.





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Written by Patricia Mugenzi

Edited by Eva Gondor, International Civil Society Centre

About us

At the International Civil Society Centre, we work to ensure the international civil society sector remains resilient, relevant, responsive and forward looking, so it can better support the most vulnerable and marginalised communities worldwide.

Get in touch

If you have any questions or feedback, get in touch with Eva Gondor from the International Civil Society Centre at egondor@icscentre.org

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