



International
Civil Society Centre

CASE STUDY

From Curiosity to Capability:

WACSI's Approach to Equipping
West African Civil Society for
Tomorrow

At a glance

In a rapidly changing region, the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) has been steadily laying the groundwork to ensure civil society organisations are prepared for the future. What began as a curiosity sparked at the International Civic Forum 2023, organised by the International Civil Society Centre, has evolved into an intentional effort to embed foresight into training programmes, strategic conversations, and partner engagement across West Africa. Using the *Toolkit for Tomorrow: Anticipating Civil Society Futures*, WACSI has taken concrete steps to equip civil society organisations with the tools and mindset needed to anticipate change, build resilience, and strengthen sustainability.

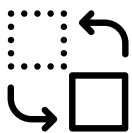


Where it all began

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) is a regional, non-governmental organisation established in 2005 with the mission to strengthen civil society in West Africa. Based in Accra, Ghana, the Institute serves civil society organisations in the 15 members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as well as in Cameroon, Chad, and Mauritania, through capacity development, knowledge sharing, and advocacy. The organisation's key focus areas include governance, civic space protection, youth leadership, and institutional strengthening.

Foresight was not always a formal part of WACSI's approach, yet the organisation had been informally engaging with elements of futures thinking prior to 2023. However, that year served as a major catalyst, prompting a more structured and deliberate integration of foresight into the organisation's work.

This shift was reinforced by WACSI's exposure to strategic foresight tools and methodologies, which revealed the practical value of futures thinking for navigating uncertainty and informing strategic planning. In response to the mounting challenges faced by civil society in West Africa – including donor restructuring, political instability, and technological disruption – WACSI began to embed foresight into its training programmes to help partners anticipate and adapt to change. From internal strategy discussions on sustainability to partner workshops that use scenario planning and trend analysis, foresight is now considered a vital tool for strengthening resilience across the civil society ecosystem.



What needed to change

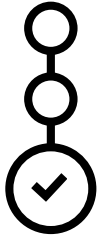
WACSI's structured journey into foresight began after the organisation's participation in the International Civic Forum (ICF) 2023, convened by the International Civil Society Centre. As global dynamics, ranging from donor shifts to geopolitical uncertainty, increasingly affected civil society operations, WACSI recognised the need to prepare its partners for emerging disruptions.

Two primary drivers of this shift stood out. First, the **restructuring of major funders** like the Open Society Foundations (OSF) left many partner organisations scrambling to diversify resources. Second, an increasing awareness of how trends like digitalisation, AI, and shifting political alliances (e.g., NATO and BRICS) might **reshape the civic space** pushed WACSI to explore futures thinking as a strategic response.

The organisation's decision to engage with foresight also reflected a **growing sense that traditional capacity-building methods were no longer enough**. Civil society actors needed to think systemically, explore uncertainty, and shape their own futures.



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How they went about it

After their participation in the ICF 2023 and exposure to the *Toolkit for Tomorrow: Anticipating Civil Society Futures*, the team began more seriously reflecting on how the organisation and its partners could better prepare for uncertainty.

Internally, WACSI initiated foresight conversations among staff and management. One key realisation that emerged during these early internal discussions was that the organisation could have been **better prepared** for eventual **shifts in donor funding**, such as the restructuring of USAID. This reflection underscored the practical value of **anticipatory thinking** and helped build momentum for a deeper integration of foresight. These conversations laid the foundation for embedding foresight more intentionally into the organisation's capacity-strengthening work.

“It came out clearly that even the USAID situation...we should have seen it coming.”

Melissa Juisi Simo, Programmes Assistant
– Capacity Development Unit, WACSI

Rather than launching stand-alone foresight programmes, WACSI **embedded foresight within existing training initiatives**, such as a 2024 training focused on **resource mobilisation** and **financial sustainability**. These were areas in which civil society organisations (CSOs) were already facing significant challenges, especially as traditional donors, such as the OSF, were restructuring or withdrawing.

The trainings were conducted in both **Anglophone and Francophone countries** with participants from across West Africa, including Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Benin, Niger, Mali, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. Most of the participating organisations were national CSOs. WACSI deliberately included foresight in their five-day training model, with the fifth day designated for a session on 'Navigating change', an entry point for foresight concepts.

The foresight segment of the training was designed to be **interactive, reflective, and practical**. Exercises from the toolkit were selected for their simplicity and accessibility. WACSI focused on:

- **Trend cards** to help participants identify and interpret key trends shaping their operating environment. These included both global and regional shifts, such as growing localisation and power shifts in the sector, as well as governance-related issues like the resurgence of military regimes in West Africa.

- **Futures wheels** to map the cascading impacts of these trends and specific events. Participants used them to unpack how such developments might affect civic space, organisational autonomy, and their ability to sustain operations over time.
- **Warm-up activities** like 'Zip-Zap' to encourage an open, creative mindset.
- **Scenario reflections** embedded throughout the sessions to encourage participants to explore possible futures and how to respond to them.

The training process was not limited to a one-off engagement. Rather, WACSI delivered foresight-integrated trainings as part of multiple projects, including:

- **A resource mobilisation and financial sustainability training in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire**, funded by OSF, in which foresight was used to help participants anticipate shifting donor landscapes and develop adaptive strategies to enhance financial resilience.
- **A Senegal-based workshop with a local partner CSO**, delivered in French, in which foresight was used to support strategic reflection on advocacy priorities and navigating uncertainty in a rapidly changing civic space.
- **Shifting the power programme supporting 36 CSOs in Ghana**, funded by Comic Relief/FCDO, in which foresight was used to deepen thinking around organisational sustainability, helping participants explore alternative futures for civil society and challenge assumptions about resilience and long-term impact.



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What they created

The most tangible outcomes of WACSI's foresight integration were personal and/or organisational action plans. Each participating CSO used trend exploration and futures wheels to reflect on their own vulnerabilities and opportunities. They then outlined specific strategies to **mitigate risks** related to donor dependency, technological shifts, and regional instability.

For example, **trends concerning governance and military rule** in West Africa prompted organisations to **prioritise the protection of democratic freedoms**, particularly within the civil society space. Another key trend of **growing localisation and shifting power dynamics** informed participants' thinking on **how to better position themselves** within the sector. These reflections led organisations to adopt more **community-centred approaches** and increase their engagement in **resource mobilisation**.

WACSI did not mandate uniform outputs; rather, the workshops allowed each organisation to walk away with their own set of foresight-informed insights and commitments. Internally, WACSI also began applying scenarios to explore its own **financial sustainability** strategy and **prepare for donor transitions**.



Changes that followed

Embedding foresight into WACSI's work has had **cultural and strategic impacts**. Staff report a growing awareness of the need to 'think ahead' and adapt proactively, rather than reactively. In turn, partners have begun to embrace foresight as a useful lens for **strategic planning**.

Foresight is now seen as more than just a conceptual tool; it has become **part of WACSI's facilitation style and institutional DNA**. Training participants have voiced appreciation for the confidence that comes from being able to scan the horizon and imagine potential futures, even if not all scenarios materialise.

The uptake of futures thinking has also revealed a **growing appetite for deeper, more structured foresight capacity strengthening**. Many CSOs have asked for follow-up training, mentorship, and tailored support in applying futures thinking over time.



Lessons they learnt

WACSI's experience highlighted how embedding foresight into existing structures can accelerate its relevance, and it also surfaced opportunities for further support:



Integrate, don't isolate

A key success in WACSI's foresight journey was the organisation's decision to integrate the *Toolkit for Tomorrow* into **existing training programmes, rather than creating separate initiatives**. This approach made foresight immediately accessible and relevant to CSOs already engaged in strategic and funding discussions.



Support facilitators with deeper training

While this integration was effective, it also exposed a **need to develop stronger facilitation skills**. Facilitators, while enthusiastic, felt underprepared at times to guide deep foresight exercises. Foresight language and structure is comprehensive and can be intimidating without additional support.

“We need to bridge the gap between awareness and application. It's not just about having the toolkit; it's about knowing what to do with it and feeling confident using it.”

Farouk Alhassan, Programme Officer
– Capacity Development, WACSI



Build internal capacity to sustain the work

To strengthen long-term adoption of futures thinking, both WACSI and partner organisations suggested a **'train the trainer'** model as a way to build internal capacity and confidence. This approach would help **make foresight a permanent, self-sustaining practice**.



What comes next

Looking ahead, WACSI is currently incorporating foresight into a new biodiversity and conservation programme being launched in Guinea. As part of the needs assessment process, they are exploring ways to **embed futures thinking in the programme from the start**, tailoring tools to partners' realities to ensure long-term relevance.

Beyond this project, WACSI intends to continue refining its foresight approach through strategic partnerships, deeper facilitator training, and a **broader push to democratise futures thinking** in the civil society sector.

“We want foresight to be open and accessible to all our partners.”

Farouk Alhassan, Programme Officer
– Capacity Development, WACSI

This ambition resonates with the intention of the toolkit to provide an open, adaptable resource that any organisation – regardless of size, language, or level of experience – can use to begin anticipating and shaping their futures.



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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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