

The Futures of Localisation: Scenarios for Civil Society in 2046

Full report



Executive Summary

Civil society stands at crossroads. Traditional, donor-driven models of international cooperation are under unprecedented pressure, while demands for localisation, power shift and wider systemic transformation are growing louder. This report examines the potential futures of civil society through a foresight-driven approach, combining horizon mapping, scenario analysis, stakeholder engagement, and strategic stress testing. The aim is not to predict a single trajectory but to illuminate plausible pathways, identify uncertainties, and equip international civil society organisations (ICSOs), local actors, and donors with tools for action for the next twenty years. Scenario development is not about predicting the future but about preparing organisations for uncertainty. By exploring contrasting but plausible futures, civil society actors can stress-test strategies, anticipate risks, and identify opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked. For international and local CSOs, but also for stakeholders such as donors, governments, and multilateral institutions, scenarios provide a structured way to reflect on their roles and choices, ensuring they remain proactive rather than reactive in a rapidly changing landscape.

Global Trends and Uncertainties

Across the globe, civil societies are navigating a rapidly shifting landscape underpinned by political, economic, social, and technological changes. Overlapping and intersecting crises shape civil society: geopolitical fragmentation, conflict and fragility, digital authoritarianism and disruption, climate meltdown, funding volatility (donor fatigue and shifting priorities), authoritarianism and populism, and shrinking civic space. There is high uncertainty in the future influence, survival, and legitimacy of civil society. Alongside these risks, there are signs of opportunity: increasing recognition of community-led action, growth in South–South cooperation, flexible partnerships, and innovative financial models. The uncertainties for the sector are around how power is distributed (centralised in the Global North or decentralised to communities) and how resources are mobilised (scarce donor-driven flows or abundant, locally generated finance).

Horizons of Change

A horizon scanning analysis¹ shows three overlapping layers of transition. The first horizon (H1) is the entrenched, donor-driven aid architecture that continues to dominate but is losing legitimacy. The second horizon (H2) highlights transitional innovations, such as community philanthropy, social enterprise and hybrid financing, though often nested within old systems. The third horizon (H3) envisions transformative futures defined by locally led governance, regenerative finance, and decolonised narratives. Regional perspectives from

¹Horizon scanning analysis is a systematic approach used to identify and evaluate new trends, technologies, and potential threats that could impact decision-making and strategic planning.

Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia reveal distinct entry points but a shared aspiration for H3 futures.

Four Scenarios for Civil Society

Scenario mapping generates four divergent futures:

- **The Desert:** Centralised power and scarce resources leave civil society restricted and survivalist.
- **Scarce Horizon:** Civic space is open with limited funding by major donors, with fragile innovation constrained by donor legacies.
- **Community Capital:** Local actors lead under mid-level financial scarcity, driving legitimacy but lacking scale.
- **Resourced Revolution:** A transformative, decentralised, well-resourced ecosystem redefines civil society as just, resilient, and equitable.

These scenarios highlight starkly different trajectories, underscoring the risks of inertia but also the opportunities of bold reimagination.

Strategic Implications

Across all futures, ICSOs must justify their continuity and redefine their value proposition—shifting from implementers and gatekeepers to facilitators, conveners, and knowledge brokers². Donors must move from short-term projectised funding to regenerative, trust-based financial ecosystems and from paternalistic tendencies to equitable and trust-based partnerships. Local actors must seize opportunities for self-determination through community philanthropy, hybrid financial models, local social private investments, solidarity economies, and South–South solidarity. No-regrets strategies include promoting flexible funding, strengthening solidarity networks, and embedding foresight practices into decision-making.

Risks and Opportunities

Civil society faces acute risks, including shrinking civic space, co-optation, the financial collapse of traditional aid models, institutional inertia, technological disruption (surveillance and misinformation), dominance of corporate partnerships, and erosion of grassroots

² For the purpose of this report, the term knowledge broker refers to the potential role of NGOs as facilitating exchange between Global North and Global South organisations, when it comes to operations and advocacy. This concept does not infer that Global North organisations should have a dominant role in knowledge production, but rather aims to acknowledge the power imbalance still existing in knowledge production, while being cognisant of the leading role of local organisations in pioneering novel approaches as documented in the [“Power of \(Making\) Futures report \(2024\)”](#).

legitimacy and public trust. Yet opportunities exist to reverse these dynamics through collective action, innovative finance, and climate and justice leadership. Civil society renewal and resilience can also be achieved through digital platforms and activism, as well as innovative, intersectional, and participatory forms of inclusion that engage different actors in the civil society space, leveraging emerging legal protections for civic space. It is possible then for civil society to adapt under pressure within an uneven, fragmented landscape.

Conclusion

Civil society cannot afford business as usual. Incremental reform will not suffice. To remain relevant, legitimate and effective, ICSOs, CSOs, donors, and local movements must collaborate to dismantle outdated systems, invest in new financial ecosystems, and embed foresight into governance. By doing so, the sector can move beyond localisation as a technical adjustment and towards a *Resourced Revolution*: a future where power, trust, and resources are equitably redistributed, power is meaningfully shifted towards local organisations and civil society thrives as a force for justice, resilience, and solidarity.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	<i>i</i>
Global Trends and Uncertainties	<i>i</i>
Horizons of Change	<i>i</i>
Four Scenarios for Civil Society	<i>ii</i>
Strategic Implications	<i>ii</i>
Risks and Opportunities	<i>ii</i>
Conclusion	<i>iii</i>
Table of Contents	<i>iv</i>
List of Tables	<i>vii</i>
List of Boxes	<i>vii</i>
List of Figures	<i>vii</i>
1.0 Introduction	<i>2</i>
1.1 Background and Rationale	<i>2</i>
1.2 Objectives of the Report	<i>3</i>
1.3 Scope of Work	<i>3</i>
2.0 Methodology and Conceptual Framework	<i>6</i>
2.1 Research Phases	<i>7</i>
2.2 Stakeholder and Community Engagement	<i>7</i>
2.3 Online Survey	<i>7</i>
2.4 Ethical Commitments	<i>8</i>
3.0 Global Trends and Critical Uncertainties	<i>10</i>
3.1 Global Trends	<i>10</i>
3.2 Emerging Uncertainties Shaping Localisation and Civil Society Futures	<i>11</i>
4.0 Trend Analysis	<i>14</i>
4.1 Global Trends Shaping Civil Society	<i>14</i>
4.2 Opportunities for Civil Society	<i>15</i>
4.3 Risks and Critical Uncertainties	<i>16</i>

4.4 Positive Trends in Localisation.....	16
4.5 Early Signs of Change	17
4.6 Indicators of a Real Power Shift	18
5.0 Futures Analysis Foundations	20
5.1 Futures Triangle: Tensions Shaping Civil Society	20
5.2 STEEP Analysis: Drivers and Disruptors.....	23
5.3. Backcasting: Roadmap from Preferred Futures	23
5.4 Transition to Horizon Scanning	24
6.0 Horizon Mapping.....	26
6.1 Global Horizon Mapping Overview	26
6.1.1 Horizon 1 (H1): The Current Dominant System	26
6.1.2 Horizon 2 (H2): Transitional Innovations	27
6.1.3 Horizon 3 (H3): Transformative Futures.....	28
6.2 Regional Horizons: Contextual Transitions	29
6.3 Overlaps and Tensions Between Horizons	30
6.4 Redundant, Sustained, Adapted, Transformed (RSAT) Model:.....	31
7.0 Scenario Planning.....	34
7.1 Scenario Matrix: Power and Resourcing Futures.....	35
7.1.1 Scenario 1: The Desert (Centralised Power + Scarce Resources)	36
7.1.2 Scenario 2: Scarce Horizon (Centralised Power + Limited Resources, Open Civic Space)	38
7.1.3 Scenario 3: Community Capital (Decentralised Power + Scarce Resources)	40
7.1.4 Scenario 4: Resourced Revolution (Decentralised Power + Abundant Resources)	42
7.2 Future Wheels: Ripple Effects of Civil Society Futures	44
7.3 Comparative Scenario Analysis	46
7.4 Wind-Tunnelling: Strategic Stress-Testing.....	48
7.5 Synthesis and Implications	49
7.5.1 Key Insights	49
7.5.2 Strategic Implications for ICSOs	50
8.0 Implications for Civil Society	53
8.1 For ICSOs.....	53
8.2 For Local CSOs and Movements	53
8.3 For Donors and Funders	53
8.4 Governments and Multilateral Institutions	54

8.5 Social Movements and Community-Based Actors	54
8.6 Private Sector and Philanthropy	54
8.7 Regional and Transnational Networks	55
8.8 Cross-Cutting Implications	55
9.0 Strategic Options and Recommendations.....	57
9.1 Actions for ICSOs, Donors, and Local Actors	57
9.2 Backcasting from Preferred Futures	57
9.3 Foresight Practices to Institutionalise	57
10.0 Risks and Mitigation	60
10.1 Shrinking Civic Space and Authoritarian Pushback	60
10.2 Funding Volatility and Donor Dependence	60
10.3 Competition and Institutional Inertia	60
10.4 Technological Disruption and Misinformation	61
10.5 Loss of Grassroots Relevance	61
11.0 Conclusion	62
References	63

List of Tables

Table 1: Key Regional Insights	30
Table 2: RSAT Analysis	31
Table 3: Possible Futures	34
Table 4: Scenario Matrix	35
Table 5: Scenario Comparison	46
Table 6: Strategy Stress-Test	48

List of Boxes

Box 1: Civic spirit endures in a barren landscape of scarcity and control	36
Box 2: Open space, fragile resources: innovation thrives but struggles to survive.	39
Box 3: Resilience built on trust, solidarity, and local ingenuity.	41
Box 4: Abundance unlocks transformation if power truly shifts.	43

List of Figures

Figure 1: Global trends expected to shape civil society (next 20 years)	14
Figure 2: Positive Trends Shaping Localisation	17
Figure 3: Futures Triangle: Forces Shaping Civil Society	21
Figure 4: Backcasting Roadmap	24
Figure 5: Horizon Overlaps and Tensions in Localisation Pathways	30
Figure 6: Future Wheels	45

Introduction



1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Civil society is undergoing profound changes. Traditional models of international cooperation, often led by large international civil society organisations (ICSOs), are being questioned and reshaped by demands for localisation, growing recognition of community-led action, and the need to confront global challenges such as climate crises, shrinking civic space, and disruptive digital technologies. Donor commitments to localisation have opened new possibilities but also exposed tensions around power, legitimacy, and accountability. At the same time, the geopolitical landscape is shifting, inequality is deepening, and authoritarianism and populism are on the rise. The civil society landscape is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). Against this backdrop, the International Civil Society Centre (ICSC) launched this process to explore the *futures of localisation* in civil society as part of the [Futures of \(I\)CSOs](#) initiative. Rather than predicting a single outcome, the purpose is to map plausible trajectories, identify the drivers and uncertainties shaping them, and generate scenarios that can inform strategic decisions. The rationale is clear: without anticipating how localisation might unfold, civil society risks being reactive rather than proactive, limiting its ability to shape more just and resilient futures.

Scenario development is a practical tool for organisations facing deep uncertainty. It does not attempt to forecast a “most likely” future but instead offers multiple plausible stories that reveal how different forces might interact and evolve. This approach helps organisations:

- Stress test strategies against a range of possible futures rather than assuming continuity.
- Surface assumptions that often go unchallenged in strategic planning.
- Encourage innovation by envisioning how new forms of collaboration, resource allocation, or governance might evolve.
- Prepare for surprises by widening the range of what is considered possible, making organisations more agile and resilient.

For civil society, and especially ICSOs, scenario thinking is particularly useful because the sector is highly exposed to external shocks, whether financial volatility, authoritarian pushback, or climate emergencies. It is driven by values, relationships, and legitimacy that cannot be measured solely in economic terms. Scenarios provide a structured space to explore how these intangible dimensions may evolve and what roles organisations might choose to play. The purpose of this report is therefore twofold. First, it seeks to inform strategic dialogue by presenting a set of scenarios that illustrate divergent but plausible

futures for localisation in civil society. Second, it aims to support action by helping organisations reflect on their current strategies, identify gaps or blind spots, and consider practical steps that could move them closer to more desirable outcomes. By combining foresight methods with grounded regional perspectives, the report aspires to be both an analytical resource and a catalyst for collective reflection and experimentation.

1.2 Objectives of the Report

The report has five interlinked objectives:

1. **Map Drivers and Trends:** to identify the key social, political, economic, environmental, and technological forces shaping localisation.
2. **Surface Critical Uncertainties:** to clarify areas where future pathways remain unclear or contested, such as resourcing models and the governance of digital tools.
3. **Develop Scenarios:** to create a set of divergent yet plausible futures that capture how localisation might evolve and the continuity of civil society in such a landscape.
4. **Analyse Implications:** to assess what these futures mean for ICSCs, local actors, and communities, highlighting risks, opportunities and trade-offs.
5. **Support Strategic Dialogue:** to provide practical tools for ICSC and its partners to prepare for uncertainty and identify actions that could help move towards more desirable and resilient futures.

1.3 Scope of Work

This work covers three main areas. First, it involves a desk review and synthesis of existing foresight materials, particularly outputs from regional workshops in Africa, West Africa, and Latin America, as well as the Centre reports and complementary literature. Second, it incorporates targeted engagement with civil society actors, including interviews with partners in Southeast Asia, West Africa, and Latin America, as well as participation in the Centre's Scanning the Horizon community meeting. These inputs ensure that perspectives from the Global South are central and that findings resonate across diverse contexts. Third, it entails the development of a scenario mapping document, which synthesises drivers, uncertainties, scenarios, and implications into a resource for strategy and action. The scope is global in orientation but explicitly grounded in the lived experiences and everyday practices of civil society actors in the Global South. By combining foresight methods with participatory insights, the work aims to offer a credible, inclusive, intersectional and practical examination of localisation futures. At its core, this work views localisation and the

promotion of locally led development³ not only as a structural adjustment in funding flows and governance but also as a window of opportunity to reimagine the role of civil society in addressing global challenges. By grounding futures thinking in diverse regional perspectives and shared foresight, the consultancy aims to help civil society actors seize this moment of transition to build more legitimate, resilient, and equitable systems of cooperation.

³ The Centre is dedicated to helping organisations shift the power to local organisations, promote locally led development, as well as supporting the efforts of (I)CSOs which are committed to localise their operations. We acknowledge that “localisation” and “locally led development” are intertwined but not interchangeable terms, and both terms are used across this report with the purpose of reflecting the breadth of the Centre’s work.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework



2.0 Methodology and Conceptual Framework

This work directly builds the work of the Centre's *Scanning the Horizon* initiative, extending its methods (e.g., horizon scanning, scenario development, and signal tracking) into participatory workshops in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. The *Scanning the Horizon* community convenes foresight practitioners and civil society leaders to explore emerging trends and signals. The methodology combines structured foresight tools with participatory workshops to ensure a diverse and grounded analysis. Adopting participatory and intersectional approach, we the Centre engaged a diverse set of voices to explore alternative pathways and roles for ICSCs in the future international civil society constellation. In line with ICSC's work, an envisioning process is also conducted to understand participants' visions for a more equitable and localised civil society. The process involved four core elements:

- **Trend Analysis:** This is the first step in the Scanning the Horizon methodology. The idea is to assess the current state of civil society. In tandem with the ICSC workshop report participants were asked to provide the current context of the civil society landscape and identify trends or developments that will shape its future. The idea is to show trends, drivers and weak signals.
- **Scenario Building:** Scenarios were developed using a framework tested in the *Scanning the Horizon* annual meeting convened by ICSC. Participants worked with four contrasting futures defined by levels of localisation and resourcing: *Community Capital*, *Resourced Revolution*, *Survival Mode*, and *Remote Control*. These scenarios provided a structured way to explore how civil society might adapt under different funding and power-shift conditions.
- **Backcasting from Preferable Futures:** Building on these scenarios, participants identified "preferable futures" and worked backwards to define the steps needed to achieve them. This exercise highlighted creative solutions, priority actions, and critical gaps between the present state and envisioned futures
- **Three Horizons Reflection:** Finally, participants engaged in a three-horizon reflection process, mapping immediate actions, medium-term opportunities, and longer-term investments. This ensured that the resulting insights not only described possible futures but also pointed toward concrete pathways for civil society organisations today.

Throughout, discussions emphasised shared principles and explored how international civil society organisations (ICSCs), local actors, and communities might uphold these principles in different futures. This inclusive lens ensured the analysis went beyond ICSCs alone, capturing the roles of other actors in shaping the civil society space landscape.

2.1 Research Phases

The process unfolded in four interconnected phases. First, a desk review synthesised outputs from previous ICSC foresight workshops in East Africa, West Africa, and Latin America, alongside complementary literature on localisation, resourcing, and civic space. This provided a foundation of trends, drivers, and weak signals. Second, a mapping exercise was conducted to identify critical uncertainties. Using tools such as the [Futures Wheel](#) and STEEP framework (social, technological, economic, environmental, political), drivers were clustered and tested against prior workshop insights. From this process, two to three uncertainties were prioritised to form the basis for scenario axes. Third, scenario development applied the two-axis method to generate 3–4 divergent future pathways. These scenarios were enriched through the Three Horizons framework, which situates current systems (H1), emerging innovations (H2), and transformative visions (H3) along a temporal arc. Narratives, headlines, and storylines were developed to bring each scenario to life and facilitate engagement. Finally, an implications analysis was undertaken using four cross-cutting lenses: power and governance, resourcing and sustainability, civic space and legitimacy, and disruptive forces such as digitalisation and climate change. This stage also incorporated elements of backcasting, identifying strategic steps that could help civil society actors move towards more desirable and resilient futures.

2.2 Stakeholder and Community Engagement

While much of the analysis was desk-based, stakeholder participation was central to grounding the work. Interviews were conducted with civil society partners and funders in Southeast Asia, West Africa, and Latin America, ensuring that perspectives from underrepresented contexts were included. These conversations provided critical insights into regional differences, for example, the financing challenges facing West African CSOs, the digital transformations underway in Southeast Asia, and the shifting donor funding landscape and shrinking civic space in Latin America. They also helped to test the plausibility of draft scenarios and highlight region-specific opportunities for localisation. In addition, participation in the ICSC Horizons community meeting allowed the team to validate emerging findings with a wider group of practitioners. This forum brought together international and local actors to discuss ongoing sectoral shifts, offering a valuable space to refine scenarios and check their resonance across diverse constituencies.

2.3 Online Survey

The survey *“Futures for International Development and Localisation”* was conducted online and attracted 609 visitors. Of these, 72 chose to participate, yielding a response rate of 11.8%, and 71 went on to complete the questionnaire in full (a completion rate of 98.6%). The survey consisted of 15 questions and, on average, took participants just over five and

a half minutes to complete. Respondents represented a wide range of organisations. The largest group came from national civil society organisations (40.6%), followed by international CSOs (29%). Smaller proportions were drawn from donor agencies and foundations (7.3%), social enterprises (2.9%), and academic or research institutions (2.9%). Another 17.4% of respondents identified with other types of organisations, including NGOs, faith-based groups, community-based organisations, and networks. In terms of professional roles, the largest share of participants were senior leaders (42.9%), with programme and project managers making up nearly a third (31.4%). Smaller groups included policy and advocacy specialists (4.3%) and foresight or strategy professionals (4.3%). The remaining 17.1% reported roles such as advisors, consultants, MEL or gender advisors, and coordinators. Geographically, most respondents were engaged in work in Africa (66.2%). Other regions were less represented, with 7% working primarily in Asia-Pacific, 4.2% in Europe, 2.8% in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 1.4% in the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, 31% of respondents indicated they worked on a global scale, alongside their regional focus.

2.4 Ethical Commitments

Strong ethical commitments underpinned the methodology. All interviews were conducted with confidentiality and informed consent. Particular attention was paid to elevating perspectives from grassroots organisations, youth-led initiatives, and marginalised voices, in order to avoid reproducing existing power asymmetries in the localisation debate and knowledge generation. This mixed methodology, combining desk-based foresight analysis, regional interviews, and participatory validation through the Horizons community workshop/meeting, ensured that the scenarios produced are not only analytically robust but also reflective of the lived realities of civil society actors navigating localisation.

Global Trends and Critical Uncertainties



3.0 Global Trends and Critical Uncertainties

3.1 Global Trends

- **Geopolitical Shifts: Conflict and Fragmentation:** The geopolitical landscape is increasingly fragmented, with state-based armed conflict ranked as the top global risk in 2025. Wars in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Sudan illustrate how conflict has re-emerged as a dominant driver of instability (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2025). This “geopolitical recession” is marked by multipolar competition, weakening multilateral systems, and rising geoeconomic confrontations such as tariffs, sanctions, and technology restrictions (WEF, 2025).
- **Technological Acceleration: Promise and Peril:** Technology continues to evolve rapidly, with artificial intelligence (AI), biotech, and digital platforms reshaping economies and societies. While these advances hold potential for innovation, they also exacerbate risks of misinformation, disinformation, and surveillance. Generative AI is accelerating the spread of false narratives, complicating democratic processes and conflict resolution (WEF, 2025). Civil society groups warn that new technologies, such as the EU’s AI Act, risk reinforcing selective protections of rights rather than ensuring universality (European Civic Forum [ECF], 2024). Digital authoritarianism - surveillance, censorship, cyberattacks, and data breaches are on the rise.
- **Climate Crisis and Environmental Stress:** Climate change remains the greatest long-term global risk. Extreme weather events, biodiversity collapse, and pollution are not distant threats but urgent realities. Recent years have seen intensifying droughts, floods, fires, and heatwaves across continents, and environmental degradation is increasingly interlinked with migration and conflict (WEF, 2025; National Intelligence Council [NIC], 2021). Moreover, austerity-driven fiscal rules in Europe risk sidelining climate action in favour of competitiveness (ECF, 2024). In sum, whilst trying to reinforce fortress Europe through more defence spending, green transitions, climate justice, and resilience are being sidelined.
- **Funding and Economic Pressures:** Funding challenges persist for civil society. Across Europe, organisations remain locked in a “starvation cycle,” struggling with restrictive legislation, foreign funding stigmatisation, and unpredictable resources (ECF, 2024). Globally, inequality is now considered the most central interconnected risk, amplifying polarisation and eroding trust in democratic institutions (WEF, 2025). The closure of USAID in 2025, once a key funder of international NGOs, marks a symbolic and material shift away from sustained support (Bush & Hadden, 2025). Cuts in Germany, France, the UK, and the Netherlands further compound this squeeze. ICVA (2025) noted that the US funding freeze comes amid a broader decline in humanitarian financing, with major donors such as Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, and the UK also cutting aid budgets. Meanwhile,

few NGOs have found alternative funding to offset losses, and competition for scarcer resources is intensifying.

- **Civic Space Under Strain:** Civic freedoms have steadily declined. Only 2% of the world's population lives in "open" civic environments (CIVICUS, 2024). In Europe, civic space has deteriorated even in long-standing democracies, with growing restrictions on protest, harassment of activists, and legislation under the banner of "foreign interference" that stigmatises NGOs (ECF, 2024). These restrictions align with global patterns, where misinformation, polarisation, and erosion of civic freedoms rank among the top ten risks to 2027 (WEF, 2025). Globally, over 130 countries have adopted restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs, often modelled after Russia's "foreign agent" law (Bush & Hadden, 2025). Meanwhile, scandals such as Oxfam's sexual abuse cases in Haiti and the DRC have eroded public trust, with surveys showing businesses now rated as more competent and nearly as ethical as NGOs (Bush & Hadden, 2025).

3.2 Emerging Uncertainties Shaping Localisation and Civil Society

Futures

- **Rising Authoritarianism Vs. Resilient Civil Societies:** Autocratisation and populist trends in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Serbia are reshaping the futures of civil society (ECF, 2024). Yet, civil actors continue to mobilise across networks, often filling gaps in state provision of rights and services. Whether localisation efforts empower these actors or subject them to co-optation remains an open question.
- **Technology as a Double-Edged Sword:** Emerging technologies can either strengthen local civic capacities (through digital organising/activism and AI-supported advocacy) or undermine them (through disinformation, surveillance, and a loss of trust in institutions). The trajectory depends on governance frameworks, which are currently fragmented and reactive (WEF, 2025).
- **Climate and Migration:** Climate-induced displacement is expected to accelerate, raising questions about how localised civil society structures will respond. Migration Governance in Europe, for instance, increasingly frames people on the move as threats, fueling xenophobia rather than solidarity (ECF, 2024).
- **Funding Futures:** Funding uncertainties represent a critical hinge point. While international donors increasingly prioritise localisation, the risk remains that funding modalities replicate top-down control rather than empower grassroots actors. Without systemic change, civil society may remain trapped in cycles of under-resourcing and vulnerability (ECF, 2024).
- **Civil Society's Legitimacy Dilemma:** Public trust in NGOs has declined sharply, undermining their watchdog role. Scandals, donor-driven agendas, and competition for visibility have blurred the distinction between NGOs and corporations (Bush &

Hadden, 2025). The uncertainty lies in whether CSOs can rebuild their legitimacy through transparency, accountability, and reclaiming grassroots trust, or whether corporate and state actors will continue to dominate civic life. Concerns about autonomy, neo-colonial influence, downward accountability, political manipulation and funding rivalry continue to be weak signals for real transformation.

Trend Analysis



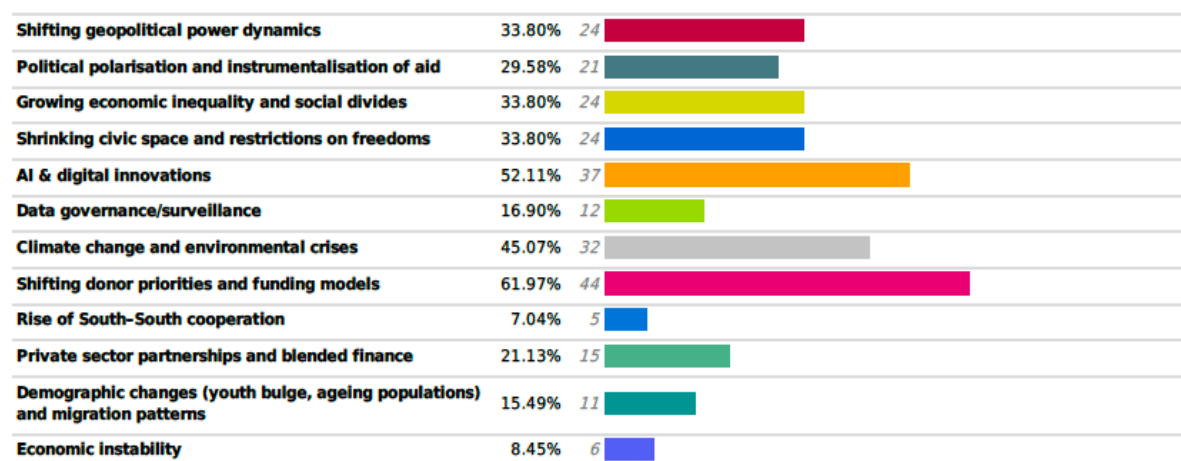
4.0 Trend Analysis

This section explores the key global trends, opportunities, risks, and signals of change that respondents believe will shape civil society and the future of localisation. It draws on both the quantitative survey data and the qualitative responses, blending numerical insights with direct voices/narratives from participants. The aim is not simply to list findings but to understand what they mean for civil society's trajectories, and how they could translate into divergent futures.

4.1 Global Trends Shaping Civil Society

The survey asked participants to select the trends they believed would most significantly shape civil society over the next two decades.

Figure 1: Global trends expected to shape civil society (next 20 years)



The most widely shared concern is shifting donor priorities and funding models, selected by nearly two-thirds of respondents (62%). This finding highlights the structural fragility of a sector deeply reliant on international aid flows. For many, the uncertainty around donor policies represents a potential existential threat. As one respondent explained, "Donors will stop donating", while another warned of a "stoppage of donor support" and a third of "competition for limited funds." These stark statements underscore the belief that the traditional model of aid is eroding, and that civil society must urgently develop diversified,

resilient financial systems. This also emerged in the RACI workshop in Argentina, where funding is the critical variable, international cooperation alone is no longer sufficient, while domestic philanthropy remains underdeveloped. Technology was the second most cited trend, with AI and digital innovations selected by over half of respondents (52%). Many expressed excitement about the opportunities digital tools can bring for building online counter-narratives, mobilisation, participation, and transparency. Yet the open responses also revealed unease about the risks of surveillance, misinformation, and digital exclusion. One participant described a looming future of *“authoritarian techno-governance: consolidation of surveillance tools, platform gatekeeping, and disinformation that erodes trust, curtails association, and fragments public spheres.”* This statement crystallises the double-edged nature of digital change. There are opportunities for transnational coalition building in cyberspace, but also accompanied by increasing digital authoritarianism characterised by mass surveillance, censorship, control, propaganda and disinformation, cyberattacks, delegitimisation and erosion of privacy and security for civil society.

Climate change and environmental crises were selected by 45% of respondents, signalling the recognition of the escalating role of environmental pressures in shaping civil society’s agenda. Several responses linked climate impacts with increased humanitarian need and local resilience, positioning civil society as a first responder and global advocate. A cluster of mid-level concerns, shrinking civic space (34%), growing inequality (34%), and shifting geopolitical power (34%) further reinforces the expectation of a turbulent political environment. Participants foresee rising polarisation, authoritarianism, and extremism, often intersecting with digital surveillance and civic restrictions. These findings suggest that the future will not be defined by one single trend but by the intersection of financial instability, technological disruption, climate stress, and political volatility. Civil society leaders are therefore preparing for an era of compounded challenges, rather than linear change. Resource conflicts from the climate crisis and ecological degradation make struggles for climate justice problematic, hence forcing civil society to rethink fortifying their alliances with indigenous communities, confront state-corporate relations and conceive long-term systemic alternatives.

4.2 Opportunities for Civil Society

Despite these pressures, participants also identified areas where civil society can seize opportunities to shape a better future. Open responses reveal a strong call for collective action and solidarity, both within and across regions. One participant wrote: *“Civil society’s major opportunity for a better future lies in harnessing collective action and technology to drive systemic change and promote social justice.”* Another argued that *“solidarity between southern CSOs will be necessary to mobilise and show how it should be done, away with technocratic aid.”* These voices highlight a desire to move beyond donor dependency and towards South–South cooperation and grassroots-driven agendas.

Financial innovation is also framed as an opportunity. Several participants highlighted local philanthropy, blended finance, and social enterprise as strategies to reduce dependence on volatile donor funding. The underlying message is clear: autonomy and ownership must rest with local actors if localisation is to be sustainable. Technology, particularly AI and digital platforms, was also described as a potential enabler of inclusive participation. Yet here again, participants cautioned that technology must be deployed responsibly, ensuring that it widens rather than narrows access. Climate action was repeatedly mentioned as a strategic opportunity. Civil society is seen as uniquely positioned to connect local realities with global climate advocacy, mobilise communities, and hold governments and corporations to account on environmental issues.

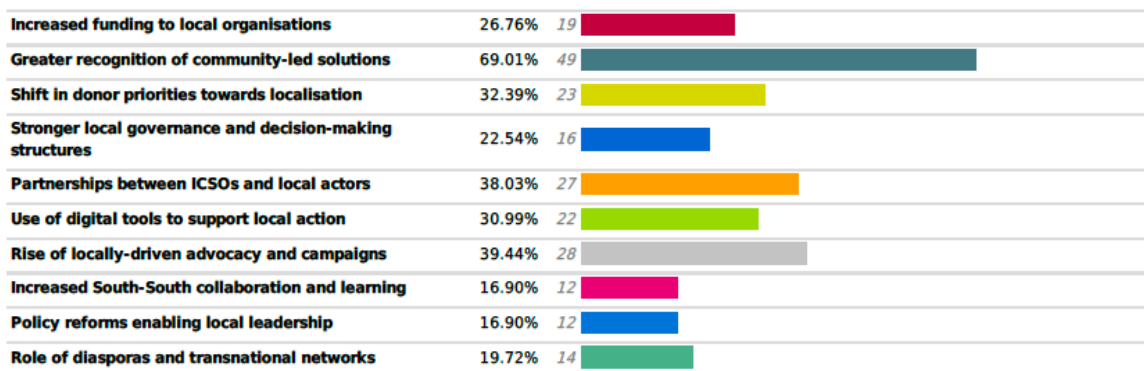
4.3 Risks and Critical Uncertainties

Participants were asked to identify the biggest risks civil society must prepare for. Their answers reveal deep anxieties about both structural and emergent threats. The most common concern is funding instability, with many describing the risk of a collapse of traditional aid models. One participant noted: *“A major risk civil society must prepare for is the potential collapse of traditional funding models, especially those tied to bilateral and government support.”* This is not only about scarcity, but also about cut-throat competition and fragmentation, where organisations are forced into rivalry rather than collaboration. The second cluster of risks relates to shrinking civic space and authoritarianism. It was described as “increasingly difficult operational environments” and “negative narratives” about civil society. Digital repression was a particular concern, with fears of “restricted online environments” and surveillance and censorship that undermine freedom of association. The phrase *“authoritarian techno-governance”* appeared repeatedly, showing that respondents see digital governance as central to future repression. Participants pointed to geopolitical instability, polarisation, and climate crises as amplifying risks. Some described these as “existential threats” to communities already vulnerable to conflict, displacement, poverty, and environmental shocks. Civil society leaders anticipate operating in a context of shrinking resources, restricted freedoms, and polycrisis, an environment where resilience will depend on new models of funding, governance, and collaboration.

4.4 Positive Trends in Localisation

While much of the analysis highlights risk, participants also identified encouraging trends in the movement toward localisation.

Figure 2: Positive Trends Shaping Localisation



The strongest signal of progress is the greater recognition of community-led solutions (69%). This finding suggests that legitimacy is shifting toward local actors, whose knowledge and leadership are increasingly valued. Respondents pointed to growing examples of donor funds going directly to local organisations, and of local advocacy driving systemic change. Locally driven advocacy and campaigns (39%) and partnerships between ICSSOs and local actors (38%) were also seen as positive developments. Regarding partnerships, the Global Humanitarian Platform (2007) endorsed five principles of partnerships, which still resonate with the needs of today's shifting civil society landscape (equality, transparency, complementarity, result-oriented approach, and responsibility). Several participants described new consortium models where local organisations are in the lead, with international NGOs providing technical support rather than direction. The use of digital tools to support local action (31%) was also emphasised, with respondents seeing technology as a way to amplify local voices, document impact, and enhance accountability. Yet caution remains. Some respondents warned that localisation risks being instrumentalised as a donor "exit strategy," shifting burdens to local actors without shifting resources. One noted that "some INGOs are competing with Global South CSOs, turning localisation into a convenient exit strategy." This highlights the need for deep structural change, not token gestures.

4.5 Early Signs of Change

Participants pointed to several early signals that localisation is beginning to take hold. These include:

- Donor pilots in equitable compliance and indirect cost coverage.
- Growth of community philanthropy and regional pooled funds.

- Diaspora capital and skills circulation.
- Increased South–South learning and cooperation.

One participant described a shift already underway: *“Despite the challenges, a few actors are moving beyond rhetoric and taking bold steps to make localisation work. They’re funding with urgency and purpose... This is a promising sign that meaningful localisation is possible.”* These examples suggest that while systemic change is slow, there are experiments and innovations that could accelerate localisation if scaled.

4.6 Indicators of a Real Power Shift

When asked what would count as successful localisation, participants emphasised decision-making power, resource flows, and accountability. Many argued that most funds should flow directly to national and local organisations, with flexible, multi-year support. Decision-making authorities must also sit with local actors in governance structures. One participant summarised this vision: *“Decision-making, resources, accountability, and narrative authority sit with local actors... with international actors playing enabling roles.”* Another added that *“ICSOs would evolve into enablers and facilitators, rather than implementers.”* This vision goes beyond funding. It involves reconfiguring accountability downwards toward communities, valuing indigenous knowledge, and shifting legitimacy away from external validation toward local ownership and trust-based relationships.

The analysis paints a picture of a civil society sector at a crossroads. On one hand, it faces escalating risks: volatile funding, authoritarianism, digital repression, and climate breakdown. On the other hand, it sees opportunities in localisation, digital innovation, collective action, and climate leadership. The question is whether civil society will be able to translate recognition into structural change. If resources, authority, and legitimacy are genuinely embedded in communities, civil society could emerge more resilient, equitable, and relevant. If not, it risks fragmentation, dependency, and shrinking influence. The future is therefore open. The trends identified here do not dictate one outcome but outline a set of possible pathways. The challenge and the opportunity are to act now in ways that push the sector toward the futures it desires.

Futures Analysis Foundations



5.0 Futures Analysis Foundations

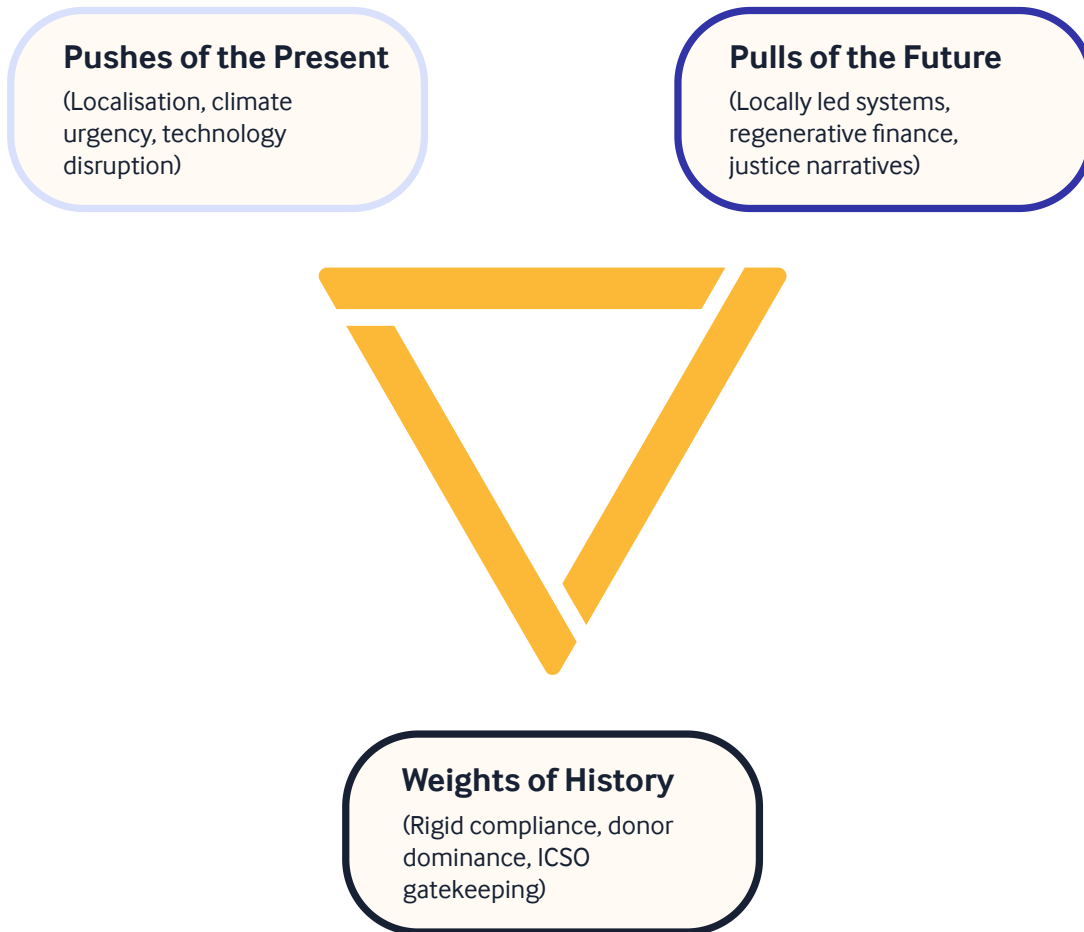
5.1 Futures Triangle: Tensions Shaping Civil Society

The Futures Triangle (see the Figure 3) illustrates the forces pulling civil society forward, pushing change in the present, and holding it back.

- **Pulls of the Future:** Narratives from Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia reveal strong aspirations for locally led systems, regenerative financing ecosystems, South–South solidarity, and justice-based narratives. These futures are increasingly visible in movements for community philanthropy, solidarity economies, hybrid resourcing models, and demands for systems change and decolonisation of the sector.
- **Pushes of the Present:** Current drivers identified in ICSO Scanning workshops include donor commitments to localisation, digital transformation, grassroots innovation, and climate urgency. These are already reshaping practice but remain constrained by institutional inertia.
- **Weights of History:** Across regions, legacies of donor-driven funding, ICSO-led programming, rigid compliance, neo-liberal aid architecture and neo-colonial power dynamics continue to limit agency. These structures risk absorbing innovations into old systems, creating “localisation without transformation.”

To unlock transformational futures, ICSOs and donors must weaken the weights of history while amplifying the pulls of justice and local agency.

Figure 3: Futures Triangle: Forces Shaping Civil Society



5.2 STEEP Analysis: Drivers and Disruptors

A STEEP scan across regions and foresight reports highlights the external context shaping civil society's futures:

- **Social:** Rising demands for equity, approaches to decolonisation, and inclusion. Latin America workshops noted distrust in civic institutions but renewed grassroots mobilisation.
- **Technological:** Digital activism and AI tools create new opportunities, yet surveillance, disinformation, and digital exclusion threaten civic freedoms (as seen in Southeast Asia).
- **Economic:** Declining Northern aid budgets, fragile philanthropy in Africa and Latin America, but openings for hybrid financing models and community resource mobilisation.
- **Environmental:** Climate crises increasingly define civil society agendas, linking environmental justice with humanitarian and social justice issues across all regions.
- **Political:** Authoritarian pushback against civic space is widespread, but localisation commitments and South–South cooperation offer pathways toward decentralisation.

Civil society must navigate multiple, interacting disruptions. Climate and digital transformations are “wild cards⁴” that could either accelerate regression (*The Desert*) or enable transformation (*Resourced Revolution*).

5.3. Backcasting: Roadmap from Preferred Futures

Using the aspirational *Resourced Revolution* future as a guiding horizon, backcasting identifies milestones between present conditions and transformation:

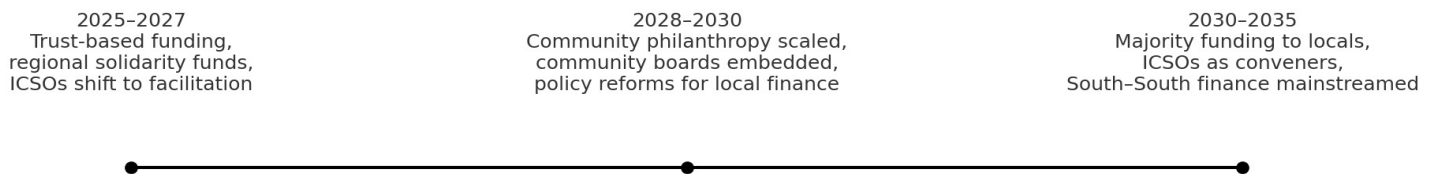
- **By 2025–2027:** Pilot trust-based funding, embed participatory and more equitable governance in ICSSO projects, and launch regional solidarity funds (as suggested in Africa and Latin America foresight reports).
- **By 2028–2030:** Scale up community philanthropy ecosystems, reform donor reporting into learning systems, and institutionalise community boards in ICSSO governance.
- **By 2030–2035:** Ensure the majority of funds flow directly to local actors; ICSSOs reposition as conveners and supporting knowledge exchange; South–South financing becomes mainstream.

⁴ Wild cards refer to highly uncertain, high-impact developments or forces whose direction, timing, and consequences are difficult to predict.

Backcasting emphasises that preferred futures will not emerge organically. They require immediate action, staged reforms, and bold investment in locally led governance and finance.

Figure 4: Backcasting Roadmap

Backcasting Roadmap: From Present to Preferred Futures



5.4 Transition to Horizon Scanning

The Futures Triangle, STEEP, and Backcasting provide the analytical foundation for horizon scanning. They clarify the tensions (triangle), drivers (STEER), and pathways (backcasting) that frame civil society’s futures. The next section on Horizon Scanning builds on this foundation by mapping how these dynamics play out across time and identifying the signals of transition from H1 to H3.

Horizon Mapping



6.0 Horizon Mapping

The horizon mapping process extended the ICSC's *Scanning the Horizon* work, linking global trend analysis to participatory workshops. The mapping connected signals identified through foresight scanning with scenario exploration, providing a structured way to understand how today's weak signals may evolve into drivers of change. As the international development sector grapples with shifting power dynamics, fragile geopolitical relations, changing donor priorities, and demands for decolonisation, horizon mapping offers a critical lens to understand how systems evolve over time. This approach, rooted in strategic foresight, allows us to explore three overlapping horizons of change:

- **H1 (First Horizon):** The dominant system that is currently in place.
- **H2 (Second Horizon):** Emerging innovations that challenge the dominant model.
- **H3 (Third Horizon):** Transformative future possibilities.

Through this framework, we trace how civil society, particularly in relation to localisation, is transitioning from externally driven models to locally led, community-driven ecosystems. This section presents horizon analysis based on global consultations, regional workshops, and scenario planning exercises conducted across Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia.

6.1 Global Horizon Mapping Overview

The horizon mapping exercise draws from extensive research, scenario workshops, and strategic foresight consultations conducted with key actors across the International Civil Society Centre (ICSC) network. It captures the evolution of localisation and power shifts within civil society through three horizons as outlined below:

6.1.1 Horizon 1 (H1): The Current Dominant System

H1 represents the legacy aid architecture, a system deeply embedded in:

- Donor-defined priorities and conditionalities
- International Civil Society Organisations (ICSOs) as intermediaries
- Project-based, compliance-heavy funding
- Power is concentrated in the Global North, particularly among INGOs and donors

H1: Current Dominant System

- International aid architecture
- Donor-driven funding
- ICSO-led (International Civil Society Organisations) models

H2: Transitional Innovations

- Donor commitments to localisation
- Hybrid resourcing models
- Growth of community philanthropy

H3: Transformative Futures

- Locally led development systems
- Redistributed power and governance
- South–South solidarity and collaboration
- Emergence of new financing ecosystems

This system emerged from post-Second World War aid and humanitarian paradigms and has proven effective in large-scale crisis response. However, it undermines local agency, sidelines community expertise/knowledge, and reinforces neo-colonial power dynamics, as noted across stakeholder interviews and regional workshop discussions (e.g. Ghana, Argentina, Southeast Asia). As one participant from the Latin America foresight workshop noted: *“We are still operating in a system where donors set the agenda, and local actors are implementers, not decision-makers.”* While entrenched, this system is increasingly losing legitimacy, especially in regions where civic space is under threat and foreign aid is declining.

6.1.2 Horizon 2 (H2): Transitional Innovations

H2 reflects efforts to reform the system from within, including:

- Donor commitments to localisation (e.g., the Grand Bargain)
- Hybrid resourcing models, including B-Corps, pooled funding and social enterprises
- Growth in community philanthropy, local social investments and domestic giving
- Use of foresight and futures tools to reimagine civil society's role

However, these innovations are nested within H1 frameworks:

- Localisation is often administrative (i.e., shifting implementation) rather than transformational (i.e., shifting power).
- Flexible funding remains limited, and direct funding to local actors is minimal (2–6% globally).
- International civil society organisations continue to dominate visibility, access, and legitimacy.

As highlighted in the Centre's Scanning the Horizon Annual meeting, which took place in 2025, there's a risk of "localisation without decolonisation", where local actors inherit the same rigid systems rather than discarding them and defining new ones. Despite limitations, H2 innovations are vital steppingstones: they create space for experimentation, begin to challenge donor orthodoxy, allowing for transitional legitimacy in shifting the narrative around who holds knowledge, power, and accountability.

6.1.3 Horizon 3 (H3): Transformative Futures

This horizon envisions a fundamentally restructured civil society ecosystem, defined by:

- Locally led systems where communities hold decision-making authority
- Redistributed power between ICSOs, donors, and local actors
- Regenerative financing models, including:
 - Community foundations
 - Solidarity economies
 - Domestic resource mobilisation
 - South–South cooperation
 - Unrestricted and trust-based funding

It also includes:

- narratives embedding power shift and decolonisation where local knowledge, history, and values define success.
- Horizontal partnerships that emphasise solidarity over service delivery.
- Strategic withdrawal or transformation of ICSO roles from implementers to facilitators, knowledge brokers, and conveners.

A participant from the Southeast Asia session articulated: *"It's not enough to have locals at the table. We must be redesigning the table itself."* H3 represents a future that challenges the core logic of H1, particularly around power, control, legitimacy, and who defines value. It does not emerge organically from H1; it must be intentionally built and protected.

Africa

- **H1:** External donor control, weak local agency
- **H2:** Hybrid financing, emergence of local giving
- **H3:** Self-reliant, policy-backed, community-led systems

Latin America

- **H1:** Heavy dependence on foreign aid, low trust in civic space
- **H2:** Innovative models like B-Corps, revitalised movements

- **H3:** Regional solidarity, trust-based and sustainable local funding

Southeast Asia

- **H1:** Top-down programming with little local voices
- **H2:** Advocacy for justice-based localisation
- **H3:** Fully decolonised aid and empowered community governance

6.2 Regional Horizons: Contextual Transitions

The Regional Horizon Mapping offers a comparative view of how localisation is unfolding across three global regions, highlighting distinct starting points, transitional innovations, and aspirational futures. It draws on foresight workshops, interviews, and scenario analyses involving civil society actors and ICSSOs in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. In Africa, the dominant system (H1) remains heavily shaped by external donor control, with limited autonomy for local civil society actors. Decision-making often rests outside the region, leading to weak local ownership. However, H2 signals are emerging, including hybrid financing mechanisms and the growth of community giving models, particularly in countries like Ghana and Kenya. The transformative future (H3) envisions a self-reliant ecosystem, backed by supportive policies and grounded in community leadership and resource mobilisation from within.

Latin America's H1 context is defined by foreign aid dependence and a fragile civic space, often constrained by political volatility and mistrust. As the Future Scenarios workshop report (August 2025) shows, there is a general sense of being threatened, weakened, and in crisis, with recurring references to financial shortages, uncertainty, harassment, and organisational paralysis. Moving into H2, the region showcases innovative financial models, such as B-Corporations, and a resurgence of grassroots social movements, a trend particularly strong in Argentina and Colombia. The H3 vision involves regional solidarity, reduced dependency on external actors, and trust-based funding systems driven by local needs and values. In Southeast Asia, the current system (H1) reflects top-down development frameworks with minimal local participation, especially in countries historically influenced by international NGOs. However, there is growing momentum in H2, with civil society pushing for justice-based approaches and greater inclusion in decision-making in countries such as Indonesia. The H3 aspiration is bold and systemic: a future shaped by fully decolonised aid relationships and locally governed development, where community voice and power are not just recognised but prioritised. This mapping illustrates not just where regions are, but how far they have to go. Some are further along the transition curve (H2), while others are still navigating structural constraints from H1. By visualising this, the tool becomes a strategic lens for understanding readiness, resistance, and pathways to H3. It enables donors, ICSSOs, and local actors to align support, interventions, and partnerships based on contextual realities, rather than one-size-fits-all

assumptions. The table below provides an analysis of the key barriers, innovations and enablers across the regions.

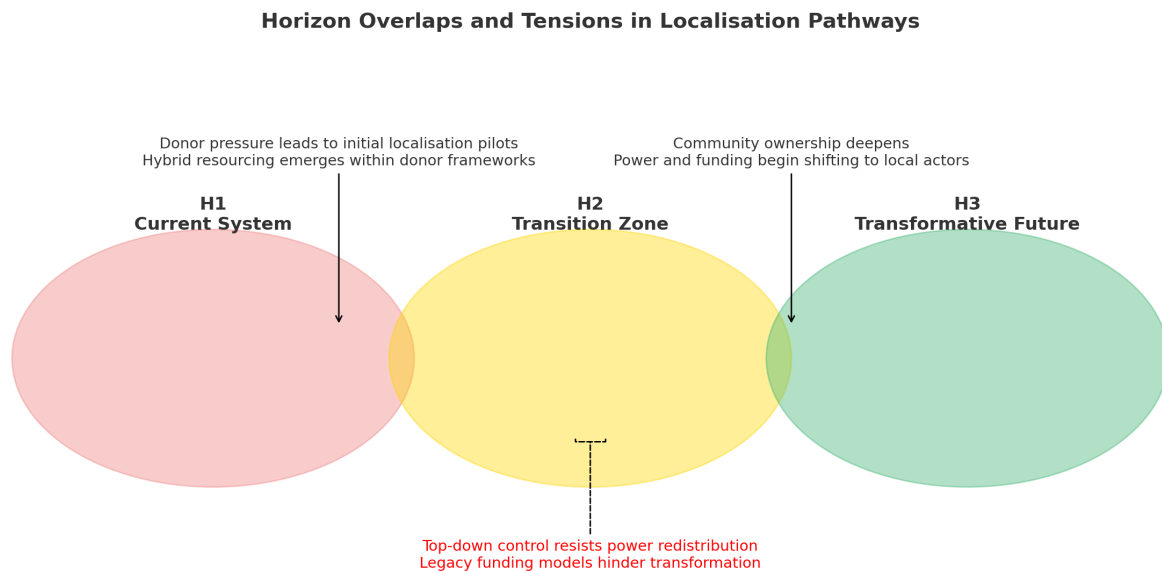
Table 1: Key Regional Insights

Region	H1 – Barriers	H2 – Innovations	H3 – Enablers
Africa	Donor control, weak ownership	Community philanthropy, hybrid models	Self-reliance, policy reform, local leadership
Latin America	Aid decline, shrinking civic space	B-Corps, grassroots revival, solidarity economies	South–South solidarity, sustainable local finance
Southeast Asia	Externally led programs, minimal local input	Justice-based models, local decision-making pilots	Decolonised frameworks, ecosystem-based funding

6.3 Overlaps and Tensions Between Horizons

This section explores the dynamic relationships between the three horizons, highlighting how innovations emerge, evolve, and at times clash within broader systems of change. The figure below outlines some of these key tensions.

Figure 5: Horizon Overlaps and Tensions in Localisation Pathways



The diagram illustrates how:

- H1 (Dominant System) overlaps with H2 (Transitional Innovations) as donors begin piloting localisation efforts. However, these remain tightly controlled, often reinforcing donor-defined limits rather than shifting power.
- H2 transitions toward H3, where community ownership and local decision-making gain ground. This marks a meaningful move away from compliance to agency and trust.
- The greatest tension lies between H1 and H3. Their values, mechanisms, and structures are fundamentally incompatible. Legacy funding models, restrictive compliance requirements, and ICSSO gatekeeping directly obstruct the emergence of truly locally led systems.

This mapping reminds us: to realise H3, it is not enough to innovate within the existing paradigm. We must also be willing to relinquish outdated assumptions and structures that no longer serve an equitable future.

6.4 Redundant, Sustained, Adapted, Transformed (RSAT) Model:

Building on the horizon analysis, the RSAT model identifies what aspects of the system should be kept, changed, or let go entirely. As the localisation agenda gains momentum, ICSSOs must not only ask what comes next, but also what must be left behind. The RSAT model provides a structured approach to assess which practices and systems are holding the sector back, which must evolve, and what bold new models should be pursued. Derived from stakeholder dialogues, foresight workshops, and horizon mapping analysis, this model is designed to help ICSSOs, donors, and partners make intentional, values-aligned strategic decisions in a time of systemic transition. The table below outlines the RSAT analysis based on the responses from participants:

Table 2: RSAT Analysis

Redundant	Sustained	Adapted	Transformed
Rigid compliance	Humanitarian principles	Donor reporting → learning	Governance by local communities
Expatriate dominance	Solidarity networks	INGO roles → facilitation	Justice-based narratives

Top-down decisions	Technical expertise (on invitation)	Funding models → flexible	Ecosystem-based financing
Tokenistlocalisation	Accountability mechanisms	Capacity → recognised as strength	Trust-based partnerships

The RSAT model offers more than a categorisation of practices. It presents a strategic imperative for ICSOs navigating the transition toward more equitable and locally led systems. Elements marked as redundant, such as rigid compliance frameworks, expatriate dominance, and tokenistic localisation, must be intentionally phased out. These practices not only reinforce inequities but also inhibit innovation, local ownership, and long-term sustainability. At the same time, certain values and practices must be sustained. Humanitarian principles, technical expertise (when requested), and transnational solidarity remain essential to the identity and legitimacy of civil society, even as power shifts to local actors.

Adaptation is equally crucial. ICSOs must evolve from implementers to facilitators, enabling local actors to lead. Reporting, traditionally a compliance tool, must be reimagined as a vehicle for shared learning and accountability to communities rather than just donors. The transformed elements signal the horizon ahead, where civil society ecosystems are rooted in local governance, justice-centred narratives, and regenerative funding models. These are not incremental changes; they are paradigm shifts. For ICSOs, the RSAT model serves as both a diagnostic and directional tool.

It helps organisations:

- Identify internal systems that no longer serve their mission
- Prioritise equitable partnerships and community-defined value
- Redesign roles based on trust, facilitation, and humility
- Create space for innovation emerging from historically marginalised actors

This model supports a shift away from localisation as a technical fix, toward a transformative reimagining of how civil society operates, in solidarity, from the ground up. The framework provides a strategic tool for organisations and donors to assess where they are investing energy, and where they may need to unlearn and redesign.

Scenario Planning



7.0 Scenario Planning

Trends and signals gathered through the *Scanning Horizon* community were clustered and tested in workshop settings. These were then organised into four scenarios reflecting different combinations of localisation and funding: *Community Capital*, *Resourced Revolution*, *Survival Mode*, and *Remote Control*. While the *Scanning the Horizon* workshops produced four core scenarios, further analysis and consultation refined these into slightly different configurations. The *Scarce Horizon* scenario, for instance, highlights a transitional future of open civic space but financial fragility, which did not emerge as strongly in the original typology. As the analysis progressed, these workshop scenarios were further refined. *The Desert* scenario developed for this report closely mirrors *Survival Mode*, capturing a future of low funding and limited localisation where civil society struggles to endure. In addition, the new *Scarce Horizon* scenario was introduced to reflect a transitional future not fully visible in the original categorisation: one in which civic space remains relatively open and vibrant, but where financial fragility and centralised structures constrain long-term sustainability. Together, these refinements build continuity with the workshop process while incorporating additional insights from regional studies and consultations. Drawing on this broader evidence base, including studies of Latin America and Africa, Argentina’s case, and the ICSO Scanning Workshop, two critical uncertainties stand out as defining forces for the future of civil society. The first axis concerns power distribution: whether decision-making remains concentrated among Global North donors and large ICSOs, or shifts toward local communities, regional networks, and grassroots organisations. The second axis focuses on resourcing models: whether funding remains scarce and donor-driven, or whether new streams of abundant, locally generated resources emerge through mechanisms like community philanthropy and South–South cooperation. These axes provide the foundation for the scenario framework that follows.

Table 3: Possible Futures

	Scarce, Donor-Driven Funding	Abundant, Locally Generated Funding
Centralised Power	Scenario 1: The Desert	Scenario 2: Scarce Horizon
Decentralised Power	Scenario 3: Community Capital	Scenario 4: Resourced Revolution

These scenarios are not predictions but tools for exploration. By mapping them, we can better understand the range of possibilities ahead and the strategic implications for different actors navigating this uncertain landscape.

7.1

Scenario Matrix: Power and Resourcing Futures

Building on the two critical uncertainties (power distribution (centralised vs. decentralised) and resourcing models (scarce vs. abundant) we mapped four distinct but plausible futures for civil society. Together, they form a 2x2 scenario matrix (Table 4 below). The matrix highlights that the future of international civil society is likely to emerge from the interplay between who holds power and how resources are mobilised and distributed. Each scenario embodies a different balance of risks and opportunities, requiring tailored strategies and responses from ICSOs and local actors alike. These scenarios were originally developed and validated through the Scanning the Horizon workshop process, where participants explored futures across localisation and resourcing dimensions.

Table 4: Scenario Matrix

Scenario 1:

The Desert



Civic space shrinks. ICSOs dominate what's left. Local actors are silenced.

- **Power:** Centralised
- **Funding:** Scarce
- **Features:** Restrictive political environments, collapsing donor support, civic repression
- **Role of ICSOs:** Gatekeepers and survivalists
- **Future Outlook:** Civil society is present in form but not in function

Scenario 2:

Scarce Horizon



Communities mobilise, but financial drought limits impact.

- **Power:** Centralised
- **Funding:** Scarce, but civic space is open
- **Features:** Community initiatives emerge, but lack financial independence
- **Role of ICSOs:** Some shift toward support roles, but constrained by old systems
- **Future Outlook:** Fragile innovation; risk of burnout and stagnation

Scenario 3:

Community Capital



Local actors lead, but funding remains uncertain.

- **Power:** Decentralised
- **Funding:** Limited, piecemeal, and unsustainable
- **Features:** Locally driven agendas, participatory models, lack of scale
- **Role of ICSOs:** Facilitators and allies
- **Future Outlook:** Powerful examples of change, but vulnerable to collapse

Scenario 4:

Resourced Revolution



A decolonised, regenerative civil society ecosystem emerges.

- **Power:** Decentralised
- **Funding:** Abundant and diverse
- **Features:** Local philanthropy, South–South flows, horizontal partnerships
- **Role of ICSOs:** Knowledge brokers, co-learners, conveners, ecosystems builders and solidarity actors
- **Future Outlook:** Transformational and resilient

7.1.1 Scenario 1: The Desert



In this future, international civil society is caught in a cycle of decline and restriction. Donor withdrawal and economic contraction lead to collapsing funding flows, while authoritarian trends and restrictive policies constrict civic space. ICSOs, with their greater institutional capacity and international networks, consolidate power as gatekeepers to limited resources. Local organisations struggle to survive, often reduced to subcontracting roles, with little say in decision-making. Communities are left with fewer independent voices, and social movements are pushed to the margins or underground.

Key Features

- **Civic Space:** Highly restricted, with governments and donors imposing rigid controls.
- **Funding:** Scarce and volatile, concentrated in a few international channels.
- **Role of ICSOs:** Predominantly gatekeepers; focus on compliance and survival.
- **Local Agency:** Weak with communities largely sidelined or forced into informal action.

Implications for ICSOs

- ICSOs risk being seen as obstacles to localisation, reinforcing inequitable structures.
- Survival strategies dominate, potentially eroding legitimacy and trust.
- Opportunities may exist in protecting civic space, digital security, and advocacy, but within tight constraints.
- Long-term sustainability is doubtful unless ICSOs can pivot toward enabling resilience rather than monopolising resources.

This scenario illustrates the risks of inaction and the dangers of failing to dismantle outdated systems. It is a warning case for ICSOs: without bold change, they may entrench themselves in roles that ultimately undermine their relevance.

7.1.1 Scenario 1: The Desert (Centralised Power + Scarce Resources)



Box 1: Civic spirit endures in a barren landscape of scarcity and control

Civic spirit endures in a barren landscape of
scarcity and control

It is 2031. Civil society has retreated into survival mode. International donors, facing political pressure and economic turbulence at home, have redirected much of their funding inward, leaving global solidarity a shadow of what it once was. Large ICSOs, once seen as the anchors of international cooperation, have been reduced to skeletal operations, maintaining a presence but with little capacity to lead or support. Localisation remains largely rhetorical, as the shift of resources and decision-making power to the Global South never fully materialised. On the ground, community organisations continue to exist, but they do so on fragile terms. Many survive almost entirely on volunteer energy and unpaid labour, constantly improvising to respond to mounting crises. Collaboration between groups is increasingly rare; competition for scarce and fragmented grants fosters mistrust rather than partnership. The language of rights still circulates, a reminder of past struggles, but translating those words into action is increasingly constrained by authoritarian governments, shrinking civic freedoms, and relentless resource scarcity. In this arid environment, trust, relationships, and solidarity networks become more valuable than money. Civil society persists but stripped to its barest bones — resilient in spirit, yet profoundly fragile in practice.

7.1.2 Scenario 2: Scarce Horizon



In this scenario, civil society operates in an environment where civic space is relatively open, but resources remain limited and unpredictable. Major donors still constitute the crux of resourcing but support civil society through short term funding and do not embrace innovative civil society movements, while domestic philanthropic ecosystems remain underdeveloped, and government support for local civil society is almost non-existent in the Global South. Concurrently, while domestic philanthropy is growing it is still not fully developed, and most organisations live from one short-term grant to the next. Local organisations and movements are active, often experimenting with creative, low-cost approaches, but face constant struggles to secure sustainability. ICSOs continue to hold structural power through their access to international funding and visibility, yet the gap between their rhetoric on localisation and their actual practices becomes increasingly visible. Progress is possible, but fragile; innovation often emerges in pockets without the resources to scale and build resilience. In Somalia, humanitarian coordination has increasingly relied on national NGOs because of international access constraints. Local organisations now lead eight area-based coordination focal points, six of them in primary leadership roles. However, many of these posts are filled by double-hatted programme staff without secure funding, resulting in discontinuity and overstretch (ICVA, 2024a). This example shows how even when local actors step up, resource scarcity undermines sustainability, leaving fragile systems vulnerable to collapse.

Key Features

- **Civic Space:** Open, enabling mobilisation and activism, though fragile in some places.
- **Funding:** Fragmented, dominated by major donors, short-term, creating uncertainty.
- **Role of ICSOs:** Straddling both worlds, still holding centralised control of funds but pressured to support local actors more directly.
- **Local Agency:** Emerging strongly in ideas and initiatives but limited by weak financial foundations.

Implications for ICSOs

- ICSOs must adapt to support capacity without overshadowing it, acting as connectors and knowledge brokers.
- Traditional donor reporting and compliance systems appear out of step, requiring transformation toward trust-based approaches.
- This scenario offers a test bed for innovation and solidarity but requires ICSOs to accept reduced visibility and influence.
- While financially fragile, this future presents pathways toward justice-based, locally legitimate systems that could form the foundation of long-term transformation.

This scenario highlights the strength and creativity of locally led civil society, while also exposing the risks of underinvestment. For ICSOs, the challenge is to be supportive without dominating, and to invest in financial ecosystems that can sustain community-led futures.

7.1.2 Scenario 2: Scarce Horizon (Centralised Power + Limited Resources, Open Civic Space)



Box 2: Open space, fragile resources: innovation thrives but struggles to survive.

Open space, fragile resources: innovation thrives
but struggles to survive.

It is 2035. Civic space remains relatively open, and communities can organise, protest, and mobilise without facing the heavy restrictions, surveillance and censorship of past decades. Small youth-driven movements flourish in this freer environment, experimenting with creative, low-cost ways to address local challenges. Despite promising progress, the energy of mobilisation is often undercut by the lack of financial stability. Major donors, upon which funding is still dependent, have decreased much of their long-term financial support and rarely fund movement organisations still preferring to give to traditional ICSOs. Concurrently, while domestic philanthropy is growing it is still not fully developed, and most organisations live from one short-term grant to the next. International CSOs still hold structural advantages: access to global platforms, established donor ties, and the visibility that local actors lack. Their rhetoric speaks of localisation, but the slow pace of meaningful power-sharing leaves frustration just beneath the surface. Communities question whether ICSOs are allies or gatekeepers, especially when innovation emerges at the grassroots but withers from lack of resources to scale. It is a time of fragile progress: ideas abound, but without stable foundations and space for growth they often remain in isolated pockets of potential. The future feels uncertain, open to new possibilities, but always shadowed by financial precarity.

7.1.3 Scenario 3: Community Capital



In this future, power shifts decisively toward local actors and communities, who increasingly have decision autonomy and set their own agendas and priorities. Civil society becomes more rooted in grassroots energy and community leadership, with social movements, cooperatives, and local networks taking the lead. However, these systems still operate under unstable financial conditions. Some progress is made through community philanthropy, mutual aid, and hybrid resourcing models, but the lack of sustainable and large-scale funding still makes it challenging to expand and institutionalise successes. Nevertheless, civil society funding has expanded beyond traditional funding from the Global North and this future is rich in local ownership, innovation, and legitimacy, demonstrating that civil society strength and sustainability can be measured in terms beyond financial. New financial operating models have been tested and launched by local organisations and championed by international NGOs supporting fundraising. South Sudan provides an illustration of this possibility. National NGOs now co-coordinate six clusters and the Cash Working Group alongside UN and INGO colleagues. While they face challenges of unequal influence, their involvement has helped embed community perspectives into decision-making and foster trust between humanitarian responders and local populations (ICVA, 2024b). This demonstrates how collective energy and local legitimacy can anchor responses, even when material resources remain limited.

Key Features

- **Civic Space:** Open but uneven, with communities actively shaping agendas.
- **Funding:** Limited, but steadily increasing and rooted in local giving.
- **Role of ICSOs:** Reframed as facilitators, co-learners, ecosystem builders, allies, and conveners rather than implementers.
- **Local Agency:** Strong, with communities leading decision-making and experimenting with new models.

Implications for ICSOs

- Risk of credibility loss if localisation is spoken of but not meaningfully enacted.
- Need to invest in new funding models (community philanthropy, pooled resources, social enterprise) that align with this resource-constrained environment.
- ICSOs can play a critical facilitator role, helping to bridge gaps and support innovation, but only if they step back from gatekeeping.
- Failure to adapt may lead to erosion of legitimacy as communities question ICSOs' added value in contexts where funding is scarce.

This scenario reflects a transitional future, full of grassroots creativity and potential, but highly vulnerable to financial fragility. ICSOs' ability to reimagine their role as enablers, rather than controllers, becomes decisive.

• For the purpose of this report, the term knowledge broker refers to the potential role of NGOs as facilitating exchange between Global North and Global South organisations, when it comes to operations and advocacy. This concept does not infer that Global North organisations should have a dominant role in knowledge production, but rather aims to acknowledge the power imbalance still existing in knowledge production, while being cognisant of the leading role of local organisations in pioneering novel approaches as documented in the "Power of (Making) Futures report (2024).

7.1.3 Scenario 3: Community Capital (Decentralised Power + Scarce Resources)



Box 3: Resilience built on trust, solidarity, and local ingenuity.

Resilience built on trust, solidarity, and local ingenuity.

Civil society thrives on relationships rather than money. Although funding remains scarce and external grants are inconsistent, localisation is deep and authentic. Grassroots organisations, neighbourhood associations, and social movements become the true anchors of community resilience. They rely on mutual aid, volunteer energy, and small but steady local contributions that keep initiatives alive, even in the absence of major financial backers. In this environment, international civil society organisations are present but often marginal, their influence diminished by limited resources and reduced relevance. Instead, informal networks and community-driven coalitions step forward, creating low-cost, high-impact solutions tailored to local realities. Innovation often emerges from necessity: community kitchens, cooperative enterprises, and volunteer-led digital platforms flourish, addressing pressing needs with minimal resources. These efforts frequently bypass international structures altogether, drawing strength from local legitimacy rather than donor recognition. While resource limitations constrain the ability to scale up projects, the vibrancy of civic energy proves enduring. In this context, international civil society organisations adapt by acting as connectors and amplifiers, helping to share local lessons across borders and offering solidarity rather than direction. This scenario underscores the possibility of a civil society less dependent on external aid, rooted in local ownership, solidarity, and the everyday ingenuity of communities.

7.1.4 Scenario 4: Resourced Revolution (Decentralised Power + Abundant Resources)



In this future, civil society undergoes a transformative shift. Power and resources are decisively redistributed to local actors, communities, and regional networks. Funding is abundant, flexible, and diverse, driven by thriving community philanthropy, South–South cooperation, domestic resource mobilisation, and regenerative financial models. Civil society becomes deeply embedded in local contexts, with governance structures led by communities and accountability directed primarily to them rather than to donors. ICSOs adapt by moving into roles as knowledge brokers, co-learners, interpreters, solidarity actors, and global connectors; they are no longer at the centre but part of a broader, more equitable ecosystem. This is a future of justice, resilience, and solidarity, where civil society is redefined from the ground up. In Colombia, local NGOs and community organisations have taken a lead role in negotiating humanitarian access in conflict-affected areas. Their embeddedness and trust among affected populations enable them to reach communities where international actors cannot, and they are increasingly shaping humanitarian priorities from the ground up (ICVA, 2024d). This illustrates how, with recognition and resourcing, local actors can move beyond delivery roles to set strategic direction, embodying a rebalanced system where power and resources follow legitimacy.

Key Features

- **Civic Space:** Open, and resilient, supported by community legitimacy and legal and policy reforms.
- **Funding:** Abundant, diverse, and regenerative, spanning philanthropy, endowments, and regional flows.
- **Role of ICSOs:** Transformed into facilitators of knowledge exchange, innovation hubs, and connectors across borders.
- **Local Agency:** Strong, and decisive, with communities driving both strategy and resource allocation.

Implications for ICSOs

- ICSOs must redefine their value proposition, shifting from service delivery to roles centred on solidarity, capacity building, advocacy and convening.
- Organisational structures will need to become lighter, more flexible, and accountable to local partners.
- Investment in policy advocacy, South–South collaboration, and regenerative finance ecosystems will be critical.

This scenario challenges ICSOs to relinquish control and embrace mutually beneficial partnerships based on genuine, equal terms, transparency and responsibility.

• For the purpose of this report, the term knowledge broker refers to the potential role of NGOs as facilitating exchange between Global North and Global South organisations, when it comes to operations and advocacy. This concept does not infer that Global North organisations should have a dominant role in knowledge production, but rather aims to acknowledge the power imbalance still existing in knowledge production, while being cognisant of the leading role of local organisations in pioneering novel approaches as documented in the “Power of (Making) Futures report (2024).

7.1.4 Scenario 4: Resourced Revolution (Decentralised Power + Abundant Resources)



Box 4: Abundance unlocks transformation, if power truly shifts.

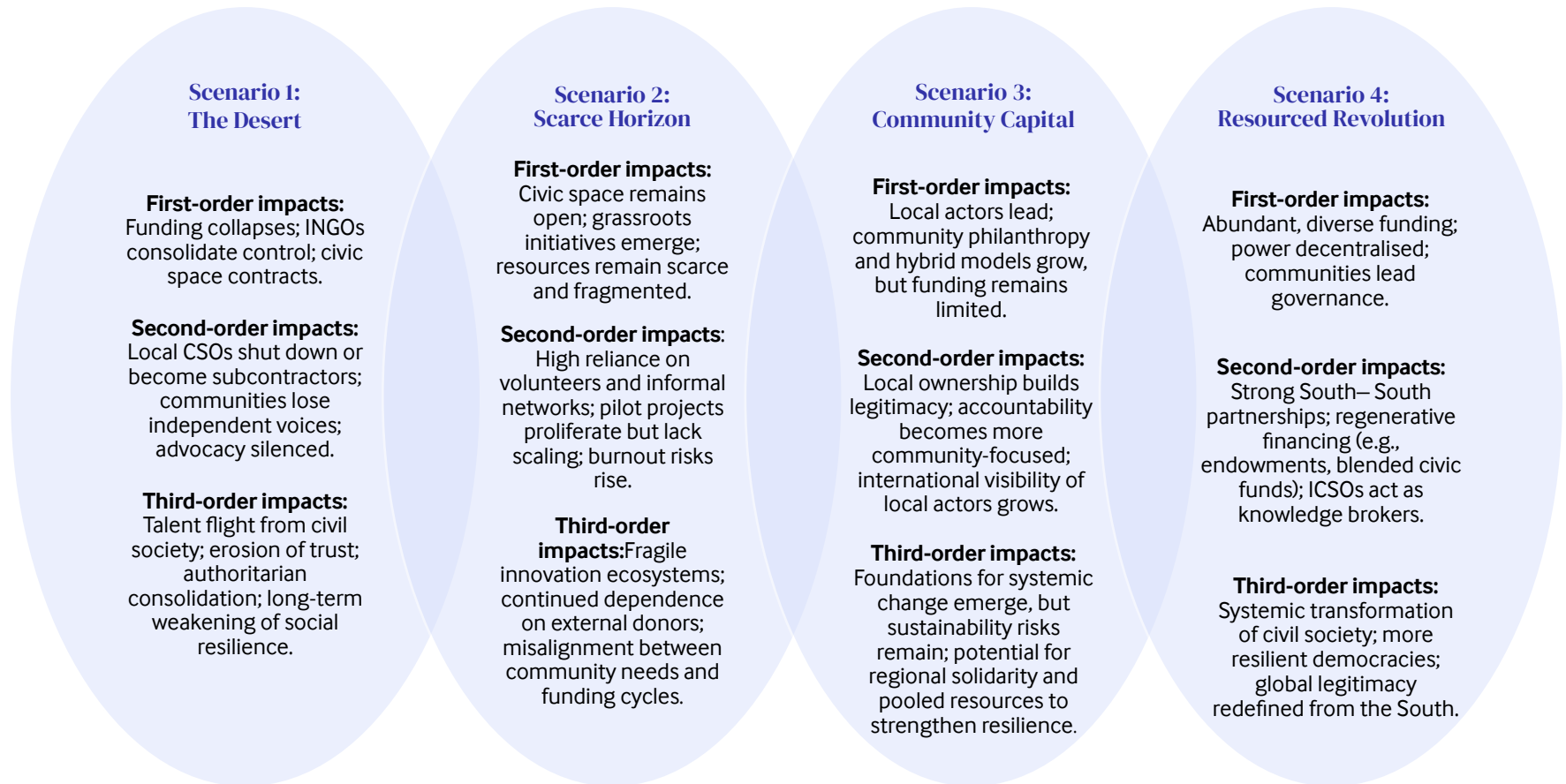
Abundance unlocks transformation, if power truly shifts.

By the mid-2030s, civil society finds itself in the midst of a resourced revolution. A combination of innovative philanthropy, impact investment, and bold shifts in donor behaviour has unlocked new flows of funding that are abundant, flexible, and increasingly aligned with community priorities. Domestic philanthropic ecosystems have matured, with local foundations and community funds complementing international resources. For the first time in decades, funding is not the main constraint; instead, the challenge lies in how to harness it effectively. Local civil society organisations take the lead, experimenting with ambitious programmes that combine service delivery, advocacy, and innovation. Their legitimacy, rooted in the proximity to their communities, allows them to direct resources toward needs defined locally rather than externally. ICSOs remain active, but their roles have shifted fundamentally. No longer gatekeepers of global humanitarian spaces, resources and power, they function as facilitators, platforms for learning, and brokers of accountability. Communities experience tangible improvements: stronger social protection systems, greater civic participation, and more resilient responses to crises. Yet this abundance is not without risks. Competition for influence emerges as new funders and actors enter the field. Managing resources equitably, while guarding against dependency and elite capture, becomes the central challenge. Still, compared to past decades of scarcity, this is a moment of possibility. A future where resources finally fuel, rather than constrain, civic transformation.

7.2 Future Wheels: Ripple Effects of Civil Society Futures

While the scenario narratives describe what each future might look like, future wheels help us dig deeper into the ripple effects of change. A future wheel maps first-order consequences (direct impacts), second-order consequences (indirect effects), and third-order consequences (longer-term systemic shifts). This approach highlights how decisions and trends in one area, such as funding or power distribution, can cascade across governance, community resilience, legitimacy, and social outcomes.

Figure 6: Future Wheels



- **Scenario 1**—A warning scenario where civil society risks irrelevance. Any survival strategy here would require ICSOs to act as protectors of civic space and rights, even under tight constraints.
- **Scenario 2**: An opportunity-rich but fragile scenario, requiring ICSOs to facilitate innovation and build bridges between donors and local actors.
- **Scenario 3**: A transitional future where ICSOs must shift roles to enablers and conveners, while also strengthening financial ecosystems to sustain local leadership.
- **Scenario 4**: The aspirational future requires ICSOs to let go of control and embrace solidarity while investing in the infrastructures that sustain equitable power and resources.

Future wheels demonstrate that the consequences of each scenario extend far beyond immediate funding or power shifts. They shape long-term legitimacy, sustainability, and equity in global civil society. For ICSOs, this tool highlights the need for anticipatory strategies, not just reacting to direct changes, but preparing for cascading systemic impacts.

7.3 Comparative Scenario Analysis

While each scenario offers a distinct lens on the future of civil society, comparing them side by side highlights the core trade-offs and tensions. The table below summarises how each scenario differs in terms of civic space, funding, power distribution, the role of ICSOs, and the degree of local agency. This comparative view enables ICSOs to identify which strategies may be robust across multiple futures and which require context-specific adaptation.

Table 5: Scenario Comparison

Dimension	Scenario 1: The Desert	Scenario 2: Scarce Horizon	Scenario 3: Community Capital	Scenario 4: Resourced Revolution
Civic Space	Restricted, shrinking	Open but fragile	Open, shaped by communities	Open, resilient, policy-supported
Funding	Scarce, volatile, donor-led	fragmented, short-term	Increasingly locally mobilised	Abundant, diverse, regenerative

Power Distribution	Centralised with INGOs/donors	Centralised but under pressure	Decentralised, community-led	Fully decentralised, locally governed
Role of ICSOs	Gatekeepers, survivalist	Controlled supporters, brokers-in-training	Facilitators, conveners, allies	Knowledge brokers, solidarity actors
Local Agency	Weak, sidelined	Emerging but constrained	Strong, innovative, legitimate	Strong, decisive, system-defining
Overall Outlook	Civic collapse, irrelevance	Fragile innovation	Resilient but financially fragile	Transformational and just

This comparative view reveals three critical insights:

1. Fragility vs. Transformation:

- Scenarios 1 and 2 show fragile or regressive futures where civil society’s survival is at risk.
- Scenarios 3 and 4 point to transformative potential, especially when local agency is prioritised.

2. Funding is a Decisive Factor:

- Scarcity (Scenarios 1–2) consistently undermines sustainability.
- Abundance (Scenario 4) unlocks transformation, but only when coupled with decentralised power.

3. ICSOs’ Role Must Shift Across All Futures:

- From gatekeepers in H1-style systems → to facilitators in transitional settings → to solidarity actors in transformational futures.

For ICSOs, this table is not just a snapshot of futures; it is a strategic compass. It shows where adaptation is necessary, and it highlights which investments (such as flexible funding, South–South networks, and local governance) are critical no matter which scenario unfolds.

7.4 Wind-Tunnelling: Strategic Stress-Testing

Scenarios are not predictions; they are tools for testing strategies under different conditions. Wind-tunnelling is a foresight method that examines how a given strategy performs across multiple futures. The goal is to identify:

- **No-regrets moves:** strategies that remain viable across all scenarios.
- **Context-dependent moves:** strategies that succeed only under specific conditions.
- **High-risk moves:** strategies that collapse under most scenarios.

By applying wind-tunnelling, ICISOs can make more resilient choices in the face of uncertainty.

Table 6: Strategy Stress-Test

Strategic Move	Desert	Scarce Horizon	Community Capital	Resourced Revolution	Overall Assessment
Shift INGOs from implementers → facilitators	Limited (gatekeeping dominates)	Moderate (emerging need)	Strong (central role)	Strong (essential)	Robust, but requires adaptation
Invest in community philanthropy ecosystems	Weak (repression, donor control)	Limited (fragile funding base)	Strong (lifeline for local actors)	Strong (pillar of finance)	High potential in H3, risky in H1
Promote flexible, trust-based funding	Weak (compliance-heavy context)	Moderate (can stabilise grassroots)	Strong (aligns with local leadership)	Strong (core practice)	Transformational when conditions allow
Strengthen South-South solidarity networks	Limited (restricted mobility)	Moderate (peer learning possible)	Strong (resilience driver)	Strong (system-defining)	Critical investment for long-term
Defend civic space and digital rights	Strong (essential survival)	Strong (needed to keep space open)	Less urgent, but still relevant	Less urgent (space already strong)	Context-critical, especially in H1/H2
Build unrestricted/core reserves	Strong (survival buffer)	Strong (financial resilience)	Strong (stability support)	Less urgent (funding abundant)	Resilience-building, especially under scarcity

The wind-tunnelling exercise highlights several insights:

1. No-Regrets Strategies:

- Shifting INGOs into facilitation roles,
- Building South–South solidarity, and
- Promoting flexible, trust-based funding all proven valuable across multiple scenarios, though implementation must be adapted.

2. Context-Critical Strategies:

- Defending civic space and digital rights is vital in restrictive environments (The Desert, Scarce Horizon), but less urgent in Resourced Revolution.
- Core reserves are a survival necessity under scarcity, but less relevant when funding ecosystems are abundant.

3. Transformational Levers:

- Community philanthropy ecosystems and trust-based funding are the building blocks of Community Capital and Resourced Revolution: they represent the strategic investments that can accelerate transitions toward H3 futures.

For ICSOs, wind-tunnelling provides a practical roadmap. It shows which strategies are “no regrets,” which to prioritise under scarcity or repression, and which require bold investment to build transformative futures.

7.5 Synthesis and Implications

The combined foresight methods Horizon Mapping, RSAT analysis, Scenario Mapping, Future Wheels, and Wind-Tunnelling provide a layered understanding of how civil society might evolve and what ICSOs must do to remain relevant. Together, they highlight the difference between incremental adaptation and systemic transformation, showing both risks of inertia and opportunities for bold reimagination.

7.5.1 Key Insights

1. Three Horizons Show the Trajectory

- **H1:** A donor-driven, ICSO-led system still dominates but is losing legitimacy.
- **H2:** Transitional innovations (hybrid resourcing, community philanthropy) are emerging but remain trapped in old structures.
- **H3:** Transformative futures demand redistributed power and regenerative finance, a paradigm shift.

2. RSAT Clarifies What Must Change

- **Redundant:** Rigid compliance, expatriate dominance, tokenist localisation.
- **Sustained:** Humanitarian principles, solidarity, accountability.
- **Adapted:** INGOs roles as facilitators, reporting as learning, flexible funding.
- **Transformed:** Community-led governance, trust-based partnerships, ecosystem financing.

3. Scenarios Stress-Test the Future

- **The Desert** warns of regression and collapse.
- **Scarce Horizon** highlights fragility despite an open civic space.
- **Community Capital** shows the promise of local leadership but risks financial fragility.
- **Resourced Revolution** embodies a just and resilient future.

4. Future Wheels Reveal Ripple Effects

- Restrictive futures (Desert, Scarce Horizon) generate cycles of fragility, burnout, and loss of trust.
- Transformative futures (Community Capital, Resourced Revolution) create pathways for legitimacy, equity, and systemic renewal.

5. Wind-Tunnelling Identifies Strategic Priorities

- **No-regrets moves:** shifting INGOs into facilitation roles, building South–South solidarity, promoting flexible funding.
- **Context-critical moves:** defending civic space and digital rights in restrictive contexts, growing core reserves under scarcity.
- **Transformational levers:** investing in community philanthropy ecosystems and regenerative finance.

7.5.2 Strategic Implications for ICSOs

1. Redefine the Value Proposition

- ICSOs can no longer rely on being the primary implementers of international aid. In futures dominated by local leadership (Community Capital, Resourced Revolution), their legitimacy depends on becoming facilitators, conveners, and knowledge brokers.
- This shift requires rethinking internal structures, reducing overheads, and moving away from a “service delivery” mindset to roles centred on solidarity, co-learning, advocacy, and system-building.

2. Invest in Financial Ecosystems

- Sustainable futures depend on regenerative finance: community philanthropy, pooled funds, endowments, and South–South flows.
- ICSOs should channel their influence and expertise into helping build these systems, rather than competing for dwindling donor funds.
- This means capacity building in financial management for local actors, and advocacy to shift donor policies towards direct, trust-based funding.

3. Prioritise Legitimacy and Trust

- In restrictive or fragile scenarios (The Desert, Scarce Horizon), ICSOs risk being perceived as extensions of donor control.
- To counter this, they must reorient accountability: reporting not just upward to donors but downward and sideways to communities and partners.
- Building legitimacy also means acknowledging power imbalances and making tangible steps toward power shift, localisation and embedding decolonisation aid structures.

4. Prepare for Multiple Futures

- Scenarios show that civil society's path is highly contingent. ICSOs cannot bet on a single outcome.
- Instead, they need portfolio approaches: combining investments in defending civic space (critical under restrictive futures), supporting grassroots innovation (under fragile ones), and building financial ecosystems (under transformative ones).
- Scenario-robust strategies, such as shifting roles, promoting flexible funding, and strengthening solidarity networks, ensure resilience no matter which future unfolds.

5. Let Go of Redundant Practices

- Practices like rigid compliance, expat dominance, and tokenist localisation consistently undermine legitimacy across all scenarios.
- ICSOs must deliberately unlearn these habits and dismantle systems that reproduce inequities.
- Letting go frees up energy and resources to focus on transformational levers of community-led governance, ecosystem-based financing, and trust-based partnerships.

The path ahead for civil society is not linear. Futures may diverge, overlap, collapse or collide. But the analysis across horizons, RSAT, scenarios, and wind-tunnelling makes one thing clear: incremental reform will not be enough. For ICSOs to remain relevant and credible, they must be willing to relinquish outdated systems, invest in emerging models, and embrace transformation rooted in local leadership and justice.

Implications for Civil Society



8.0 Implications for Civil Society

The horizon and scenario analysis reveal that the future of civil society will be shaped by shifting power, resourcing models, and systemic disruptions. These changes carry specific implications for different actors, ICSOs, local CSOs and movements, donors and funders, as well as cross-cutting themes that transcend institutional boundaries.

8.1 For ICSOs

For International Civil Society Organisations (ICSOs), the future demands a fundamental rethinking of roles and structures. The era of acting as the primary implementers of aid is closing, with legitimacy now tied to facilitation, solidarity, and knowledge-sharing. To stay relevant, ICSOs will need to decentralise governance, shed gatekeeping practices, and invest in platforms that enable local voices to lead. This shift requires both courage and commitment to let go of power, redesign accountability, and adopt lighter, more flexible organisational models. If ICSOs fail to adapt, they risk being perceived as obstacles to transformation, reinforcing outdated hierarchies instead of dismantling them. Conversely, those who embrace facilitation and act as connectors across regions and sectors will retain influence and relevance. Their future value lies less in control and more in their ability to strengthen ecosystems, mobilise solidarity, and elevate justice-driven narratives that are defined by communities themselves.

8.2 For Local CSOs and Movements

For local CSOs and movements, the scenarios highlight both empowering opportunities and persistent risks. In decentralised futures, these actors gain space for decision autonomy, lead agendas, set priorities, and innovate in ways that are deeply rooted in community realities. Their proximity to crises and community-based legitimacy position them as the natural leaders of civil society transformation. Yet risks remain: without sustainable financing, many will fail to scale up, face burnout, fragmentation, or reliance on precarious volunteerism. Opportunities lie in building community philanthropy, mutual aid systems, social enterprises, and South–South networks that strengthen autonomy. These pathways can help move beyond donor dependency while embedding accountability in local communities. Ultimately, local actors hold the potential to redefine success and legitimacy in civil society, shifting the narrative from donor metrics to justice, equity, and impact measured by communities themselves. If adequately resourced, they are the engine of systemic transformation.

8.3 For Donors and Funders

For donors and funders, the analysis underscores a need to transform financing and accountability models. The projectised, short-term grant system is increasingly out of step with the realities of locally led change. To remain credible, donors must move

toward regenerative, trust-based funding ecosystems: endowments, pooled funds, unrestricted grants, and blended models that support long-term resilience. This shift requires not only different tools but also different mindsets. Donors must redefine their roles to become partners and enablers rather than remain paternalistic, willing to share governance with local actors. Accountability must be reframed, away from rigid compliance toward learning, trust, and community-defined outcomes. Failure to change risks perpetuating dependency and undermine the very localisation agendas many donors have pledged to support. Those who embrace flexibility, humility, and risk-sharing will be best positioned to enable genuine systemic transformation.

8.4 Governments and Multilateral Institutions

For governments and multilateral institutions, the scenarios illustrate how political choices and governance models can either open or close space for civil society. In futures of abundance and localisation, enabling policy frameworks and multilateral standards create fertile ground for civic innovation. Governments that prioritise participation, transparency, devolution and rights protection become key allies of civil society transformation. In more restrictive or centralised scenarios, however, states and multilaterals risk reinforcing hierarchies, privileging compliance over collaboration. Their credibility will hinge on whether they uphold democratic norms and align resources with community-driven priorities, rather than controlling agendas from above. Governments and multilaterals can either act as catalysts of inclusive change or as gatekeepers that entrench and reproduce inequality. Their willingness to shift from regulation and control toward partnership and co-creation will define their role in shaping civic futures.

8.5 Social Movements and Community-Based Actors

For social movements and community-based actors, the scenarios reaffirm their role as the heartbeat of civic energy. Their proximity to lived realities grants them unparalleled legitimacy, enabling them to mobilise quickly, innovate with limited resources, and hold power to account. In times of scarce funding, they demonstrate resilience through mutual aid, volunteerism, and solidarity economies. In more resourced contexts, they act as watchdogs, ensuring accountability and preventing co-option by external funders or elites. Yet these actors also face risks of burnout, fragmentation, and repression, especially in restrictive environments. The challenge lies in sustaining their vitality while scaling their influence beyond local contexts. Their future value will rest in their ability to weave networks of solidarity, embed justice at the centre of civic agendas, and ensure that transformation remains rooted in community priorities.

8.6 Private Sector and Philanthropy

For private sector and philanthropic actors, the future brings both opportunity and responsibility. With resources and technology at their disposal, they hold the power to

unlock transformative potential for civil society. In progressive futures, this means embracing trust-based models, impact investment, and partnerships that centre local leadership. Done well, such approaches can shift power dynamics and enable long-term resilience. Yet the risks are clear: in centralised or donor-dominated futures, corporate philanthropies and large foundations may entrench dependency, reinforcing the very inequities they claim to address. Their legitimacy will depend on whether they are willing to share decision-making, prioritise equity, and align resources with community-defined visions rather than external metrics. The choice is between perpetuating extractive relationships or becoming genuine allies of civic transformation.

8.7 Regional and Transnational Networks

For regional and transnational networks, the scenarios highlight their pivotal role as connectors across borders. They amplify local struggles, spread innovations, and provide platforms for solidarity and activism that national contexts often constrain. In resource-rich and enabling environments, they can scale local solutions and create shared agendas across regions. In restrictive or fragmented futures, they serve as lifelines, sustaining advocacy and visibility when civic actors are silenced at home. Their strength lies in weaving together diverse movements into coherent voices that influence global discourses. Risks remain without inclusiveness; networks may replicate northern dominance or overlook grassroots realities. Their relevance will depend on their ability to democratise governance, balance power across regions, and act as genuine platforms for collaboration. If they succeed, they will be critical engines of resilience, enabling civil society to act collectively in shaping just and sustainable futures.

8.8 Cross-Cutting Implications

Across all scenarios, several themes cut across actors and geographies. Digital transformation will be pivotal: while it offers tools for organising, data-driven advocacy, and global connection, it also brings risks of surveillance, disinformation, and exclusion that must be actively addressed. Climate change will be the defining crisis, demanding integrated responses that link environmental, social, and justice agendas. South–South collaboration and local philanthropy emerges as a vital strategy, enabling local actors to learn from each other, pool resources, and scale innovations without reliance on Northern donors. Finally, civil society must confront intersectional inequities of gender, race, class, and geography to remain legitimate and inclusive. These cross-cutting issues will shape civil society regardless of the scenario that unfolds. Organisations that embed them into strategy today will be better prepared to thrive across uncertain futures.

Strategic Options and Recommendations



9.0 Strategic Options and Recommendations

9.1 Actions for ICSOs, Donors, and Local Actors

The scenarios highlight that transformation will not occur without shared responsibility across the civil society ecosystem. For ICSOs, the priority is to redefine their value: shifting from implementers to facilitators and knowledge brokers, decentralising governance, and letting go of redundant practices like rigid compliance and expat dominance. Donors must urgently reform financing models by scaling unrestricted, trust-based, and long-term funding, while also investing in community philanthropy and South–South resource flows. Local CSOs and movements should seize opportunities for self-determination, building mutual aid networks, hybrid enterprises, and regional solidarity to reduce dependency. Across all actors, trust, equity, and humility must guide partnerships. Incremental reforms are not enough; strategic collaboration is needed to dismantle outdated systems and build regenerative ones.

9.2 Backcasting from Preferred Futures

The Resourced Revolution scenario offers the most aspirational vision: a locally led, well-financed, justice-driven civil society. To move toward this horizon, stakeholders can apply Backcasting, starting with the desired future and working backwards to identify today's priorities. Key milestones include: (a) expanding flexible funding ecosystems within the next 5 years; (b) embedding community governance and accountability by mid-decade; and (c) ensuring regional solidarity networks and South–South flows become institutionalised by the 2030s. Alongside this, ICSOs must transform internal structures to act as lightweight conveners, while donors shift accountability from compliance to community outcomes. Backcasting emphasises that achieving transformative futures requires deliberate, staged action— not waiting for organic change.

9.3 Foresight Practices to Institutionalise

Civil society actors must embed foresight as a practice, not a one-off exercise. In the Centre's Scanning the Horizon Meeting (June 2025), the majority of participants disagreed that they were aware of futures thinking tools and their organizations dedicated sufficient resources and time to think about long term scenarios and futures. This means institutionalising tools such as horizon scanning, scenario planning, wind-tunnelling into strategy cycles, board discussions, and donor dialogues is not optional but a must. Regular signal-tracking systems can help identify early warnings of restrictive futures

(like *The Desert*) or opportunities pointing toward transformation. Embedding foresight also involves capacity building: training leaders, staff, and partners to apply futures thinking in decision-making. For donors, this could mean funding anticipatory governance and resilience planning, while ICSOs can establish futures units to keep scenarios alive in organisational learning. By making foresight routine, civil society can move from reacting to crises toward anticipatory, adaptive, and transformative action. This is essential if the sector is to navigate uncertainty and proactively shape the futures it wants to see.

Risks and Mitigation



10.0 Risks and Mitigation

10.1 Shrinking Civic Space and Authoritarian Pushback

One of the poignant risks identified across the foresight dialogues and survey responses is the tightening of civic space under authoritarian regimes. As one respondent put it, there is a “two-fold hostile environment: 1) geopolitical shift and increasing authoritarianism globally; 2) increasing polarization and populism locally”. In many contexts, governments are capturing civil society through surveillance, restrictive legislation, and harassment, making advocacy “nearly impossible”. Mitigating this requires civil society to act proactively, building transnational solidarity networks, investing in digital security, and supporting advocacy coalitions that can defend freedoms even in repressive environments. The ability to mobilise international allies and strengthen protective infrastructures will determine whether CSOs can continue to operate in hostile contexts.

10.2 Funding Volatility and Donor Dependence

Financial fragility remains one of the most pressing risks. Participants warned of the *“potential collapse of traditional funding models leading to reduced or discontinued funding and the closure of many CSOs”*. Over-reliance on external and public donors was described as deeply precarious: *“Relying on donor funding is very risky because repercussions have already been noticed”*. If diversification is not achieved, many organisations may simply disappear. The pathway forward lies in building community philanthropy ecosystems, experimenting with hybrid, private- public models financing models, and strengthening South-South flows of resources. By creating more resilient financial foundations, and mechanisms civil society can move beyond survival mode and build the autonomy needed to set its own agendas.

10.3 Competition and Institutional Inertia

Survey participants expressed strong concerns about the role of ICSOs in perpetuating inequities. “Many ICSOs are competing with Global South CSOs for limited resources. This undermines both, and risks collapsing the very ecosystem localisation aims to strengthen”. Others reflected that when localisation is reduced to rhetoric, “power never truly shifted, resources kept flowing through intermediaries, and communities were sidelined in decision-making”. The inertia of large organisations, reluctant to let go of control, risks stalling transformation. To counter this, ICSOs must reimagine themselves as facilitators rather than implementers, reform governance structures to share power, and work alongside local partners in co-creating transition pathways. Without these shifts, localisation risks becoming cosmetic rather than systemic.

10.4 Technological Disruption and Misinformation

Another layer of risk comes from the digital domain. One respondent identified *"the volatile intersection of political shifts and technological disruption"* as a critical uncertainty, warning that rapid advances in AI, data use, and surveillance could *"either empower civil society or undermine trust"*. Misinformation campaigns and authoritarian techno-governance threaten to discredit civil society, polarise communities, and suppress activism. To mitigate this, CSOs must strengthen digital literacy, invest in cybersecurity, and create collaborative platforms for countering disinformation. Moreover, civil society actors must engage actively in shaping the ethical governance of new technologies, ensuring that innovation does not become another instrument of control.

10.5 Loss of Grassroots Relevance

Finally, there is the danger of civil society drifting away from the communities it claims to serve. Participants warned against a "growing irrelevance and lack of grassroots touch", pointing to the risks of externally driven agendas overshadowing local priorities. The sustainability of civil society will depend on its ability to rebuild trust by centring communities in decision-making. Strengthening participatory and inclusive governance, reinvesting in grassroots leadership pipelines, and prioritising youth and women as agents of change are essential steps to maintain relevance. By reorienting accountability downward, civil society can ensure that its legitimacy is anchored in the people it serves, rather than in the requirements of donors.

Conclusion



11.0 Conclusion

This report has traced the pathways of change in international civil society through horizon mapping, RSAT analysis, scenarios, future wheels, and foresight frameworks. Together, these tools paint a picture of a sector at historic crossroads: still weighed down by donor-driven legacies (H1), experimenting with transitional innovations (H2), yet pulled toward transformative futures of local leadership, regenerative finance, and justice-based governance (H3). The scenarios explored, *The Desert*, *Scarce Horizon*, *Community Capital*, and *Resourced Revolution*, highlight both the dangers of inertia and the opportunities of bold reimagination. Wind-tunnelling shows that no-regrets strategies exist: shifting INGOs to facilitation roles, expanding trust-based funding, and strengthening South–South solidarity. Backcasting confirms that transformation requires deliberate, staged action, not incremental reforms alone. The conclusion is clear: civil society cannot afford business as usual. ICSOs, donors, and local actors must collaborate to dismantle outdated systems, invest in new financial ecosystems, and integrate foresight into their decision-making processes. Global ICSOs must transition from reaction to anticipation, from fragmentation to collective action, and from precarity to sustainability to be able to consolidate their relevance, resilience, and transformative capacity in the years ahead. By doing so, the sector can move beyond localisation as a technical quick fix and toward a Resourced Revolution: a future where power, trust, and resources are truly redistributed, and civil society thrives as a force for justice, resilience, and solidarity.

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Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Manase Kudzai Chiweshe and Sandra Bhatasara, Independent Consultants and drafted on behalf of and in collaboration with the International Civil Society Centre. The final version of the report was edited by the Centre. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) and Red Argentina para la Cooperación Internacional (RACI) for facilitating the workshops and to the workshop participants and survey respondents for their contribution. This publication is kindly supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

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