

The Futures of Localisation: Scenarios for Civil Society in 2046

Brief report



About this Report

The International Civil Society Centre (Centre) presents this brief of the scenarios developed in **The Futures of Localisation: Scenarios for Civil Society in 2046 report**. Against a challenging and volatile civil society landscape, the Centre produced the report to explore the futures of localisation, gathering insights from across civil society organisations and scanning trends. This includes the seismic changes we have seen recently in socio-economic and political contexts. The aim of presenting possible futures of localisation is to spark ideas and motivate intentional action towards localisation and locally led development. Without anticipating how localisation might unfold, civil society risks being reactive rather than proactive, limiting its ability to shape more just and resilient futures. This guide provides an overview of the insights and findings of the report to enhance futures knowledge across the sector and promote peer-to-peer learning.

About the International Civil Society Centre

The International Civil Society Centre is owned and supported by 16 international civil society organisations. We bring these organisations together to share knowledge, strengthen collaboration, and tackle the significant challenges facing civil society today. Through hosting events, facilitating joint learning, and analysing future trends, we help organisations explore new ideas, respond to emerging risks, and shape the future of civil society. Together, we strive to ensure that civil society remains strong, connected, and capable of advancing justice and dignity for individuals and communities worldwide.



Introduction

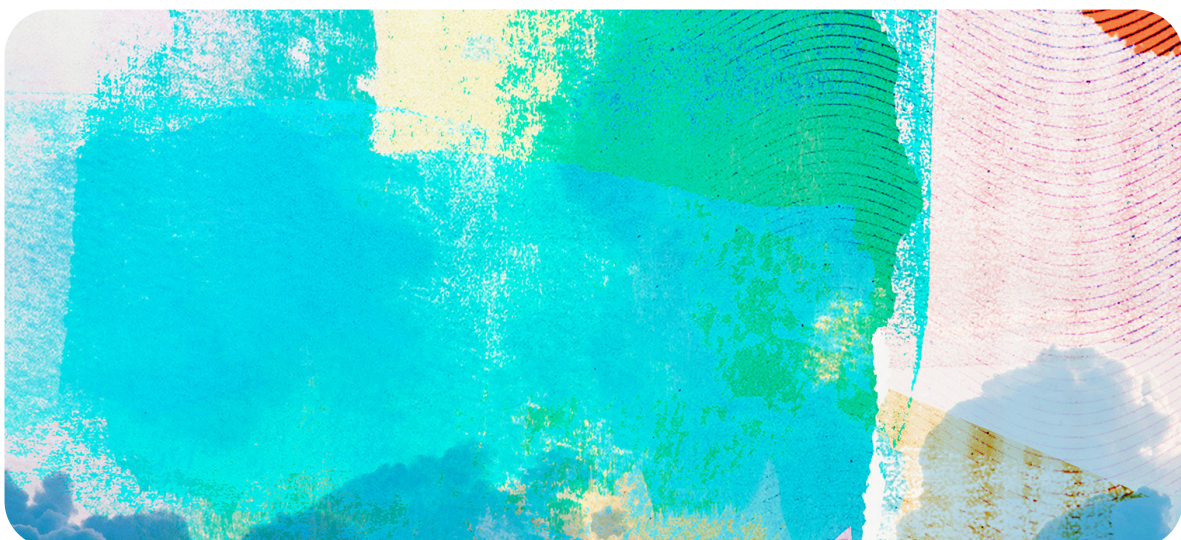
Civil society stands at a crossroads. Traditional, donor-driven models of international cooperation are under unprecedented pressure, while demands for localisation*, power shift and wider systemic transformation are growing louder. This report examines the potential futures of civil society through a strategic foresight-driven approach, combining horizon mapping, scenario analysis, community and 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.

We produced these four scenarios through mapping trends and signals, taking a participatory approach including insights from international and local civil society organisations as well as analysing global trends and uncertainties.

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.

*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.



Our approach to the scenarios

This work directly builds on the Centre's strategic foresight and futures thinking work, including [the Scanning the Horizon community](#). The community convenes foresight practitioners, strategists and civil society leaders to explore emerging trends and signals. Taking trends and signals from the Scanning the Horizon Community along with participatory workshops in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, the approach combined structured foresight tools with participatory workshops to ensure a diverse and grounded analysis. By taking a participatory approach, the idea is to engage a diverse set of voices to explore alternative pathways and roles for ICSOs in the future international civil society constellation. An envisioning process was also conducted to understand participants' visions for a more equitable and localised civil society.

The process involved four core elements:

- **Trend Analysis:** This was the first step in the Scanning the Horizon community's methodology. The idea was to assess the current state of civil society and workshop participants were asked to provide the current context of the civil society landscape and identify trends or developments that will shape its future. The objective 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 the Centre. 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.
- **Back-casting 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.

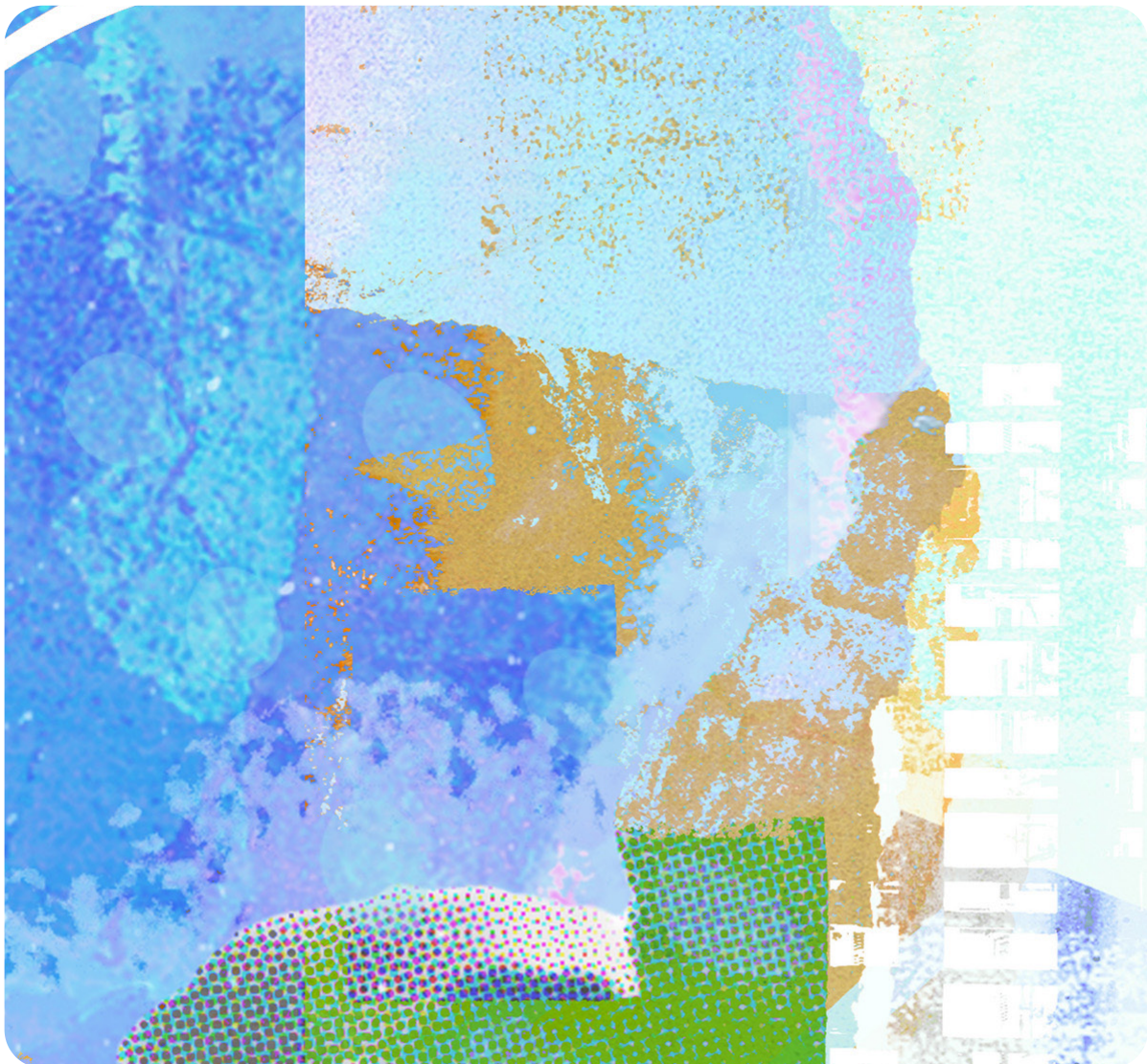
Throughout discussions there was an emphasis on shared principles and exploring how international civil society organisations (ICSOs), local actors, and communities might uphold these principles in different futures. This inclusive lens ensured the analysis went beyond ICSOs alone, capturing the roles of other actors in shaping the civic space landscape.

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 conditions of 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 risk of inertia but also the opportunities of bold re-imagination.



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.

Looking Forward

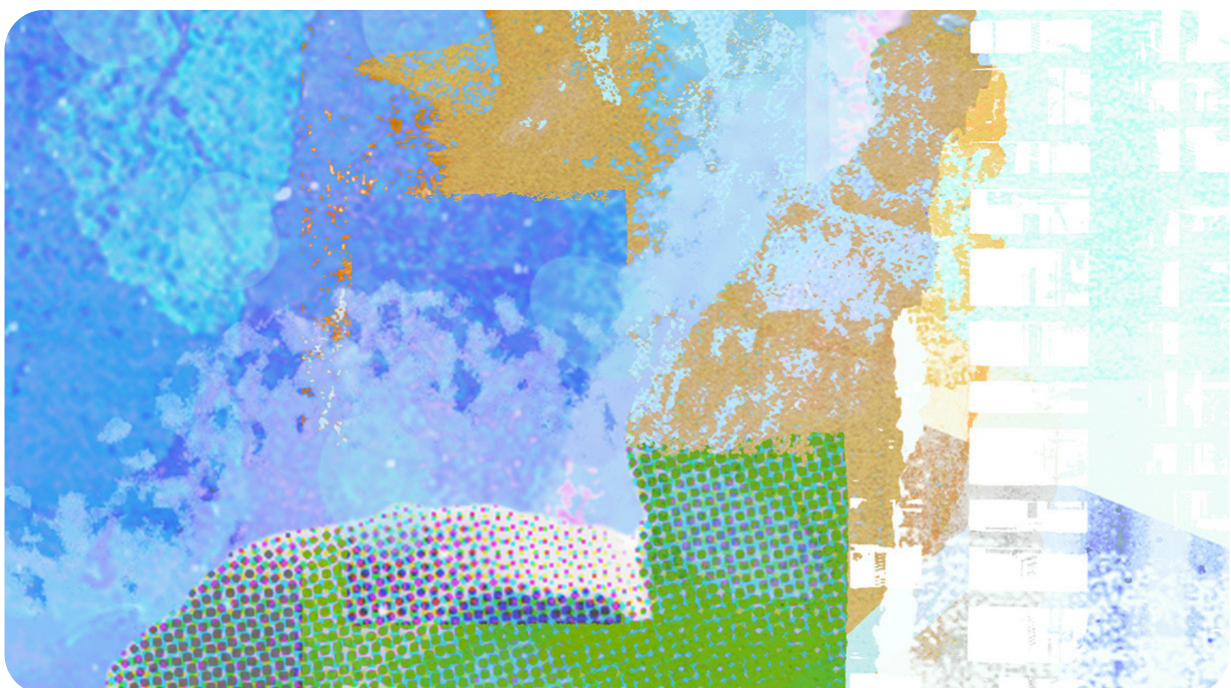
The four scenarios outlined here offer more than a set of possible futures but serve as mirrors reflecting the choices that international civil society organisations and local civil society organisations face today. Whether the path ahead leads to scarcity or abundance, centralisation or shared power, the determining factor will be how courageously organisations confront entrenched systems and reimagine their roles.

Preparing for uncertainty requires not only foresight but also willingness to share power, build trust, and invest in local resilience. The future of civil society will not be decided by donors or institutions alone, but through the collective decisions made now to enable fairness, autonomy, and solidarity.

By embracing this complexity, civil society can transform uncertainty into preferable futures.

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