International Civil Society Centre

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International Civic Forum 2026

Shaping the Story: Building Stronger Narratives for Civil Society

18–19 November 2026, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Concept Note



Overview

The International Civic Forum (ICF) is the International Civil Society Centre's flagship civic space event. Convened annually, it provides a trusted platform for civil society leaders to address pressing civic space challenges, strengthen connections, and explore opportunities for collaboration.

The ICF 2026 will focus on strengthening civil society's collective narrative power. The two-day, in-person workshop will combine practical capacity-building in narrative development with collaborative exploration of shared foundations for more compelling, aligned, and adaptable narratives about civil society's role and value.



Context

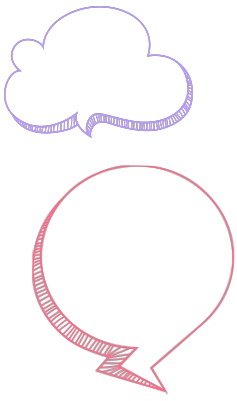
Civil society plays an essential role in supporting communities, advancing rights, holding institutions accountable, and amplifying diverse voices. Yet its contribution is increasingly contested, misunderstood or taken for granted.

Civil society organisations increasingly face narratives portraying them as elitist, politically motivated, foreign-controlled or disconnected from ordinary people. At the same time, organisations tend to communicate primarily about their own mandates, programmes, and achievements. This can leave a gap in the broader public narrative about why civil society matters and how the work of individual organisations contributes to a wider role and purpose. Additionally, responses to harmful narratives are often fragmented and reactive, making it harder for civil society to build public understanding, demonstrate its collective value and connect with audiences beyond existing supporters.

A rapidly changing digital environment adds another layer of complexity. Platforms and algorithms increasingly shape which stories are seen and heard, while disinformation, synthetic media and AI-generated content can amplify harmful narratives and undermine trust. Civil society therefore needs to think not only about what it communicates, but how narratives spread, who shapes them and how organisations can work together to build and amplify stronger narratives.

The ICF 2026 will create a space to strengthen practical skills and explore shared foundations for stronger and more aligned narratives about civil society that can be adapted across organisations, audiences, and contexts.

Objectives

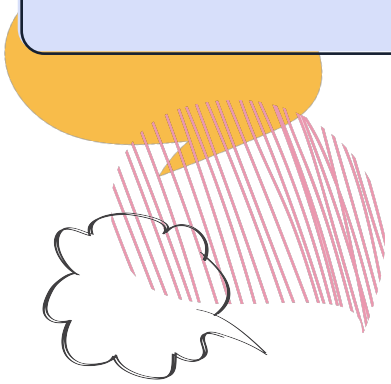


- ✓ **Strengthen participants' skills in values-based narrative-building, strategic messaging, audience engagement and how to navigate effectively around harmful narratives.**
- ✓ **Explore shared values, principles and areas of alignment that could provide the foundations for stronger collective narratives about civil society.**
- ✓ **Consider how emerging narrative approaches can be adapted to different contexts, while identifying opportunities for continued learning, testing and collaboration beyond the ICF.**

Draft Agenda Outline

DAY 1
Wednesday
18 November

Full day:
9:30 – 17:30
+ Dinner



Strengthening narrative capacities

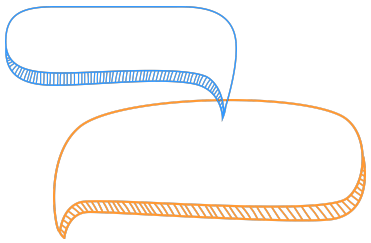
Day 1 will build a shared understanding of the current narrative environment and how civil society can navigate it more effectively.

Sessions will include:

- **Understanding the narrative environment**, including how digital technologies shape the visibility and spread of narratives, and how hostile narratives influence public perceptions
- **Building stronger narratives**, examining positive, values-based, and future-oriented approaches as well as ways to navigate hostile narratives without reinforcing them
- **Connecting with audiences**, exploring how civil society can communicate its relevance through stories and evidence, and reach beyond existing supporters

DAY 2
Thursday
19 November

Full day:
9:30 – 17:00



Developing shared foundations for collective narrative work

Building on Day 1, Day 2 will shift the focus from organisational practice to what greater narrative coherence and collaboration across civil society could look like.

Sessions will include:

- **Exploring shared foundations and areas of alignment**, including common values, principles and areas where greater narrative coherence may be possible
- **Developing initial collective narrative elements** and hypotheses for testing and further refinement
- **Exploring adaptation across contexts,** identifying principles for applying shared narrative elements in different national, cultural and political settings
- **Identifying pathways for continued learning and collaboration,** including opportunities to test, adapt and further develop emerging narrative approaches after the ICF

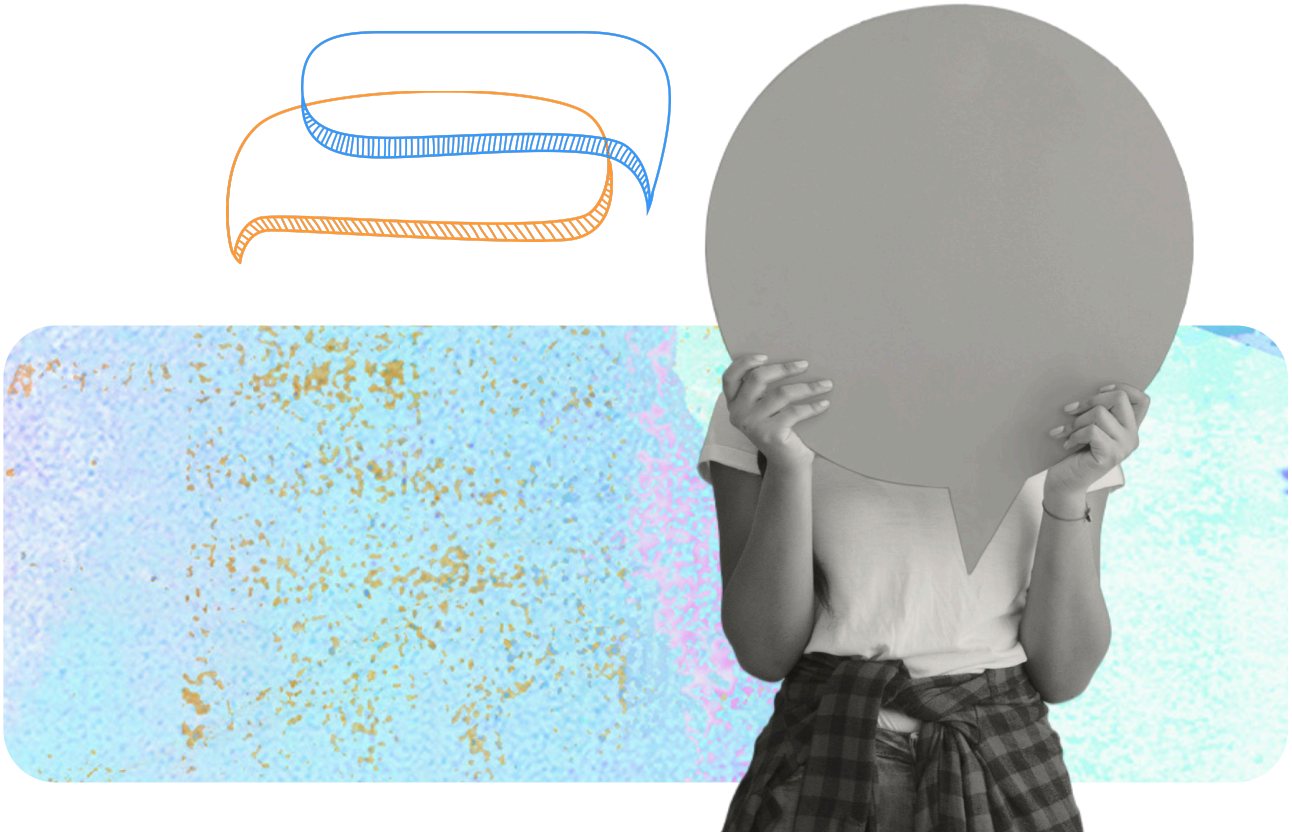
The format will combine expert inputs and discussion, concrete narrative examples, practical exercises, and facilitated group work.

Outcomes and Next Steps

The ICF is expected to produce:

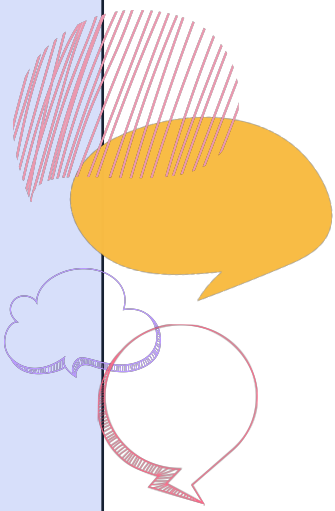
- A shared understanding of the narrative environment in which civil society operates
- Stronger practical narrative capacities among participants
- Initial values, principles and areas of alignment that could inform stronger shared narratives, without requiring uniform messaging across organisations and contexts
- Narrative elements and hypotheses for further development and testing
- Initial principles for contextualising and applying shared narrative elements at national and local levels
- Concrete priorities for follow-up and next steps

The learnings and collective ideas emerging from the ICF will inform and further develop the Centre's work on strengthening civil society's collective voice. Following the workshop, the Centre and interested partners will consolidate the outputs into a narrative framework and identify priorities for further refinement, testing, and application through the "Collective Voice" initiative. Participants will have opportunities to contribute to this work through follow-up activities, for example, developing a shared story collection, conducting audience research and message testing, and piloting narrative approaches in selected contexts. Learning and exchange will also continue through the Solidarity Action Network (SANE), which ICF participants are invited to join.



Why Participate in the ICF 2026?

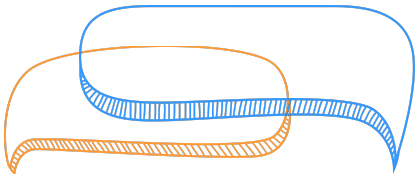
- **Strengthen your practical skills** in narrative-building, strategic messaging, and audience engagement
- **Learn from** international narrative practitioners and civil society peers, and **share your own experiences** and perspectives
- **Help shape shared foundations** for stronger narratives about civil society's role and value, while connecting with others committed to strengthening its collective voice
- **Explore how narrative approaches** can be adapted to different national and local contexts and audiences
- **Identify opportunities** for continued learning and collaboration through SANE and the Collective Voice initiative



Participation

The ICF 2026 is a closed, invitation-only event bringing together approximately 40 participants from:

- international and national civil society organisations
- civil society networks and alliances
- philanthropic organisations and funders
- narrative change experts and practitioners



Participants will be invited to bring diverse perspectives across geography, sector, organisational size and role, combining strategic leadership with practical narrative expertise. Participants may therefore include senior civil society leaders responsible for organisational direction, advocacy or partnerships, as well as communications and narrative practitioners directly involved in developing and applying messages and campaigns.

The closed format will support a safe and trusted environment for open and constructive exchange as well as the exploration of areas of alignment.

A participation fee applies to help cover organisational and event costs:

300 EUR – National civil society organisations and networks from the Global South

500 EUR – Centre's shareholder organisations

640 EUR – Centre's core supporters

800 EUR – International civil society organisations, national and international networks from the Global North

1,000 EUR – Philanthropic organisations and funders

In addition to the participation fee, participants are kindly asked to cover their own travel, accommodation, and related expenses. The Centre will cover the workshop venue, catering during the event, and dinner on Day 1

Invited participants will receive a registration link by email. Places are limited to approximately 40 participants, and early registration is encouraged.

Logistics

The ICF will take place at the Social Impact Factory Kauwgomballenfabriek (Willem Fenengastraat 2, 1096 BN Amsterdam), the Netherlands.

If you need hotel recommendations for your stay in Amsterdam or any additional logistical information to help plan your trip, please contact Mageda Esolyo, Community Manager, at mesolyo@icscentre.org. Further logistical information will be shared closer to the event.

Contact

For further information on the content or ideas for the ICF 2026, please contact Eva Gondor, Senior Programme Manager, at egondor@icscentre.org.

International
Civil Society Centre

Join us for the International Civic Forum 2026 in Amsterdam!



About the 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.

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