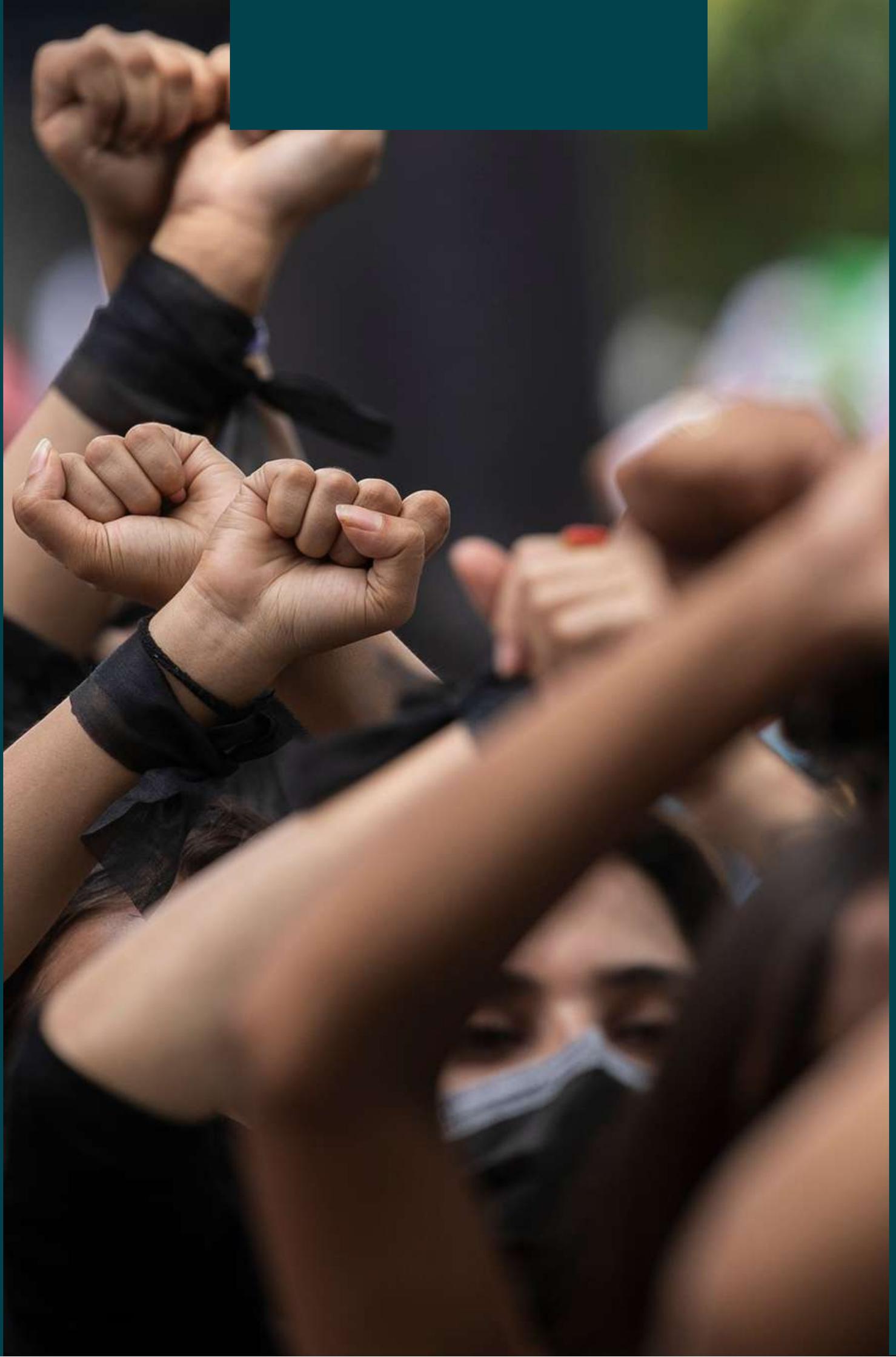# ENABLING STORIES

HOW CIVIL SOCIETY CAN BUILD NEW NARRATIVES IN A WORLD TRANSFORMED BY DIGITALIZATION AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

forus

INTRODUCTION

Forus is a dynamic and growing global civil society network comprising 66 National Development Platforms and 7 Regional Coalitions, in total representing over 22,00 NGOs. Forus and its members believe that a robust and protected civic space forms the cornerstone of accountable, responsive democratic governance and stable societies.

We understand the term 'civic space' to mean the space required for people to exercise their basic civil and political rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. **Forus members are very concerned about the negative trend of shrinking civic space and the damaging narratives** about the work of civil society, so evident in different parts of the world over the past decade.

The aim of the "Enabling Stories" report is to examine two key factors which have been rapidly transforming civic space across the world in recent years, often negatively impacting the rights and freedoms of activists and civil society practitioners and their operating environments. These factors are, firstly, the COVID-19 global health pandemic and secondly, the accelerating global process of digitization.

This executive summary gives an overview of the longer report's main findings and recommendations.

FULL REPORT

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Civic Space

- Around the globe, freedoms of speech, assembly, and association are shrinking and increased restrictions are transforming the space for civil society organizations[1]
- Changes to, and transformations of civic space in different countries have extremely important ramifications for societies everywhere. Shrinking civic spaces and curtailed civil society influence have serious consequences for effective governance.[2]
- Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) of the 2030 Agenda commits governments to the protection of the fundamental rights and freedoms linked to civic space. However, research to date has demonstrated that the vast majority of governments avoid reporting on civic space in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted to the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) every year [3]
- In recent years, several key issues have further impacted civic space across different regions and countries of the world and are likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future. These issues include the COVID 19 global pandemic and the accelerating global process of digitalization, both of which have rapidly transformed civic space.[4]

COVID 19

- The COVID 19 pandemic changed the way many civil society organisations operate, causing many to shift part of their activities online.[5]
- In order to protect the health and wellbeing of their citizens and residents, many governments took extraordinary steps to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. The International Centre for Not-for-profit Law COVID 19 Tracker revealed that at least 80 countries adopted emergency measures, and many more invoked pre-existing disaster and emergency measures in response to the disease.[6] Some governments incorporated surveillance technology into their measures to halt the spread of COVID-19.
- In response to the COVID pandemic, many governments also introduced measures which restricted fundamental rights - above all, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. They sought to silence critical voices, particularly those from journalists and civil society activists. Several governments also lowered standards for civil society engagement in policy- and law-making. [7]
- While the use of the widest range of tools available by governments during a public health pandemic was understandable, emergencies – even COVID-19 – should not obviate the obligations of states to consider the broader societal and human rights effects of these emergency measure.
- The COVID 19 pandemic has also had a very negative impact on the financial situation of many civil society organisations around the world. The situation of CSOs working in the sectors most affected by the pandemic, particularly in countries where there was a lack of adequate forms of support guaranteed by the state, was also very difficult. [8]

Digitalization

- Digital space can be an important catalyst for wider civil political participation in physical spaces. When digital spaces are attacked, subjected to surveillance, restricted or shrunk, this has negative repercussions for civic participation in general.[9]
- Despite the importance of digital technology for the enjoyment and exercise human rights, the 2019 report of UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association in the digital era found that many states increasingly restrict fundamental freedoms by controlling access to, and use of internet and other digital tools.[10]
- Over the years, government requests for data from, and about social media users have increased, and so have arrests and the criminalisation of organisations and activists based on their social media behaviour.[11]
- Methods used to subject CSOs to online surveillance tend to be opaque or covert, without the knowledge of the target organisations, the general public, and, more often than not, without the knowledge of a judge or a monitoring authority. Even when a country has a judicial procedure to wiretap an organisation, cyber surveillance either lacks the necessary laws or is framed within a wider scope of "intelligence" and "counter-terrorism".[12]
- Social media platforms and tech companies tend to be inactive in relation to shrinking civic space concerns and accusations, especially when a government or a powerful political party is involved. The dependence of tech platforms (for example social media platforms) on government authorisations to operate, is a powerful negotiation card in the hands of unscrupulous regimes. This gives rise to an unhealthy degree of cooperation between certain platforms and governments, resulting in the policing of platforms in the best interests of a government against critical voices, and against civil society organisations which do not follow the political interests of the ruling party or press freedom.[13]
- State and non-state actors have also curtailed the work of CSOs by permanently or temporarily shutting down internet-enabled services. In 2021, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition documented 182 internet shutdowns across 34 countries. Their research showed a dramatic resurgence of this oppressive form of control compared to 159 shutdowns recorded in 29 countries in 2020.[14]
- More is known about the openings and closings of online civic space in the global North than in the global South. However, a number of studies make possible a comparative analysis of openings and closings of online civic space in Africa, including the findings of ten digital rights landscape country reports. The study identified that the five tactics used most often to close online civic space in Africa are digital surveillance, disinformation, internet shutdowns, legislation, and arrests for online speech.[15]
- A lack of digital access for 50% of the world's population also remains a significant challenge for civil society in accessing digital spaces and extending civic participation. The ability to engage fully in opportunities for online civic participation online requires a combination of access to the internet, appropriate digital tools, and supportive learning communities.[16]
- In order to accelerate progress across all 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, from eradicating hunger, creating sustainable cities, to boosting economic and gender equality, the international community must fulfil Goal 9C, which would deliver universal internet access by 2030.[17]

Alternative narrative-building to strengthen civic space

- The widespread dissemination by authoritarian and illiberal governments of damaging narratives which target civil society often results in less public support and protection for CSOs when they are subject to attacks, or when efforts are made to undermine or restrict their public interest work.[18]

- An increasing number of civil society organisations believe that they can promote enhanced levels of public understanding of their work through building their own alternative narratives. This work can contribute to creating a stronger societal foundation for the public interest work of CSOs and should also ensure greater public protection for activists and campaigners when dealing with unwarranted attacks by the authorities, or by other powerful interests.[19]

- Existing practice and research linked to alternative narrative-building suggest that instead of continually rejecting the negative messaging being promoted by dominant narratives, CSOs should instead engage with building their own positive public narratives.[20]

- Narrative knowledge and framing know-how can help CSOs to open civic space, collaborate better, and amplify other voices. This work is beyond the scope of one organisation or sector. To shift or change dominant narratives that keep the status quo in place will require an unprecedented level of collaboration and creative collective action by civil society organisations from around the world.[21]

- Changing public perceptions and attitudes takes time. It is important that initiatives aimed at building alternative initiatives adopt a long-term approach, and that regular opportunities are built into the processes involved for feedback, reflection, innovation, and experimentation. Unfortunately, current CSO funding mechanisms do not encourage innovation and experimentation but rather promote shorter-term project work with predetermined outcomes.[22]

Civic Space

Governments should:

- Protect, in national legislation and policies, the international human rights commitments they have assumed by ratifying various international human rights treaties and conventions, with a particular focus on protecting rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.
- Report regularly on national progress with the strengthening of civic space and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms (SDG Goal 16.10) in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted to the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF).
- Agree to establish open, regular and structured dialogue with civil society at the national level through which key policy-related and civic space issues can be discussed.

Donors should:

- Fund the capacity development of CSOs linked to the defence and strengthening of civic space in countries around the world, as part of long-term efforts to support and strengthen civic space globally.
- Support CSOs, particularly in Global South countries, to develop and use local and national indicators for civic space monitoring, and to act to defend and promote civic space.
- Fund the development or consolidation of comprehensive civil society monitoring mechanisms, indexes, and early warning systems.
- Collaborate to support the strengthening, or establishment where necessary, of civil society-led mechanisms at global, regional, sub-regional and national levels to collect, monitor, analyse and make publicly available, verifiable and up-to-date, country-by- country data and information on civic space issues.
- Review their funding models to better support civil society's role in strengthening civic space. Alternative models of funding that offer longer-term investment and more flexible allocations of funding, attuned to changing civic space contexts, should be developed.

Civil Society should:

- Advocate for adequate civic space at local, national, regional and global levels and link their advocacy to SDG 16 to allow it to play its part in realising the 2030 Agenda's positive vision
- Mobilise to have SDG 16 reviewed on an annual basis by the UN HLPF. This would mean that governments would have to report on national progress with the protection of civic space and human rights in different countries around the world each year, and would keep the issue of civic space high on the UN HLPF's political agenda.
- Work to ensure that the VNRs prepared by governments for the UN HLPF include a progress report on the implementation of SDG 16 , and, in particular, progress on upholding commitments to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms (Target 16.10) which are essential to a healthy civic space.
- Advocate for the adoption by UN Member States of an expanded range of civic space indicators as part of the global follow up and review framework for monitoring the implementation of SDG 16.
- Seek support for the establishment of new or the strengthening of existing civic space monitoring mechanisms at national, sub-regional, regional and global levels, with significant civil society participation, and for the development or consolidation of comprehensive civil society indexes and early warning systems.
- Continue to push for and engage in open, regular and structured civil dialogue with government and other stakeholders on key policy and civic space issues.

COVID 19 & Civic Space

Governments should:

- Establish official multi-stakeholder and expert committees to reflect on the use of emergency powers by the state during the COVID 19 pandemic, make recommendations for the lifting of these restrictions as the pandemic eases, and oversee that process.
- Develop much stronger policy and regulatory frameworks, in consultation with the broadest range of stakeholders, including specific oversight mechanisms linked to the use of surveillance technology, and ensure that citizen's privacy and human rights are protected, even in times of emergency.
- Enable citizens and CSOs to access digital tools and training to develop their digital literacy and help them to hold governments, state institutions and private companies to account to a greater extent by upholding civic freedoms and rights in the digital space at all times.

Donors should:

- Support CSOs, particularly those in the Global South, to develop greater resilience and ensure that they can respond more effectively in future when crises, including pandemics, occur.
- Support civil society organisations to identify the obstacles and challenges they faced when attempting to respond to the COVID 19 context, including dealing with civic space restrictions.
- Support research which examines how the COVID 19 pandemic impacted on CSO funding. Donors should review how the way in which they provide funding to CSOs can become sufficiently flexible and sustainable to allow them to continue to function effectively during times of crises.

Civil Society should:

- Advocate for governments to establish official multi-stakeholder and expert committees to reflect on the state's use of emergency powers during the COVID 19 pandemic, make recommendations for the lifting of these restrictions, and be part of overseeing that process.
- Continue, post- pandemic, with the creation of new digital tools and platforms and crowdsourced mapping projects to coordinate assistance and share information with the aim of holding governments and private companies to account
- Call on donors for support to build greater CSO resiliency and preparedness for future crises, emergencies and pandemics through specific capacity development, and through the provision of core funding, as opposed to project-based funding.

Digitalization

Governments should:

- Act to ensure safe civic participation online, and that the proliferation of new digital spaces serves to expand civic space for citizens and guarantees the protection of human rights online.
- Support civil society to develop safe digital tools and make the most of the freedoms of the digital space, while mitigating and addressing the risks they face online including surveillance, cyberbullying and harassment, misinformation and disinformation.
- Actively involve civil society organisations, and other key stakeholders, in national digital policymaking, design, implementation and monitoring of related initiatives; and ensure that these are in line with international conventions and commitments.
- Facilitate new forms of governance of online spaces and social media allowing for greater public input, including multi-stakeholder forums, which will allow citizens and interest groups to participate directly in digital policymaking and the provision of digital services.
- Refrain from, and cease, measures such as cutting off access to the internet and telecommunications services. Access to internet and mobile services should be maintained at all times, including during times of civil unrest.
- Ensure that the existing framework of international human rights norms and principles guides the design and governance of digital technologies.
- Collectively adopt a Universal Declaration of Digital Rights, which could also act as a reference for digital and technical experts, so that technology is designed and implemented in a way that proactively protects citizens and human rights everywhere and leads to a people-centred and value-based digital transformation on the global scene.
- Enable the UN to oversee the production of a regular report on the state of Digital Rights globally, including an assessment of how the digital rights are being aligned with human rights and be upheld in different countries around the world. This assessment should be based on key indicators developed with civil society and other stakeholders, and could be guided by existing reporting frameworks on digital rights.
- Ensure access to affordable internet for the 50% of the global population that is not currently connected and/or those that are unable to connect due to costs, and digital skill-building for those with access but currently unable to make meaningful use of the internet.
- Ensure that the empowerment of underserved and underrepresented communities via digital inclusion (women/girls, youth, people with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, elderly populations, etc.) is a central focus of national digital policies.

- Focus on digital equity and take a holistic approach to the issues of internet access, ensuring that all communities have affordable access, tools, and skills so they can navigate and participate fully in societies undergoing digitalization.
- Support and incentivise investment in community-based networks in order to ensure that remote and marginalised communities who have been underserved by traditional operators are connected and so that the 2030 SDG 9 C on universal internet access is reached. This can be achieved through giving specific institutions the responsibility to promote community-based models and to provide the financing mechanisms that can enable community based digital models to grow at scale.

Donors should:

- Make financing opportunities and resources available for the digital capacity development of CSOs.
- Support projects which map the digital competences of civil society (particularly in the Global South) through surveys and other tools which investigate the digital perceptions, capacities and needs.
- Ensure that technical support is provided to southern CSOs for the utilisation of digital technologies.
- Fund applied research to build CSO capacity in different countries to effectively monitor, analyse, and counter the impact of surveillance and disinformation.
- Provide funding to support CSO programmes which raise awareness and mobilise opinion in favour of open civic and digital space, and to improve citizens' ability to exercise, defend, and expand their digital rights.
- Support innovation and the development of new digital/online civic spaces supported by transparent open-source databases, including accountability mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, monitoring of public service delivery, public commissions and citizen advisory boards, all of which will contribute to the overall strengthening of civic space. [90]

Civil Society should:

- Prioritise establishing a basic understanding of new and emerging technological developments, the impacts of these technologies on the work of CSOs, and the implications of these technologies for digital rights and equity more generally. Civil society should identify the ways in which digital technologies pose restrictions to its operating environment and to the safety and wellbeing of its members.
- Build stronger networks and work closely with expert tech/digital rights CSOs, academia and researchers to develop a greater understanding of digital issues and laws.
- Advocate for international digital treaties which protect human rights online, establish norms and standards of digital behaviour and ensure law enforcement in online environments.
- Advocate for the building of online spaces that will empower people to exercise democratic freedoms.
- Advocate for an inclusive people-centred digital agenda in an interconnected digital world, where no one is left behind.
- Support the inclusion of women and girls, and of communities that are marginalised, in all their diversity, in the digital transformation, as users and creators of technology.
- Build digital skills and security in their organisations, and champion data privacy and equity in their advocacy and programming work.
- Challenge big tech narratives about the risks linked to unproven technologies, and promote and develop more local or regionalised research and bodies of knowledge on digital developments.

Alternative Narrative Building

Donors should:

- Focus on the process not the product when funding CSO alternative narrative-building work.
- Understand that the objective of financing CSO narrative building work should be to 'accompany a learning journey and the building of narrative power 'and translate this directly into an accountability framework focusing on changes and learning, instead of impact.
- Prioritise the resourcing of local narrative change-makers and foster connections for mutual support, learning and collaboration.
- Support an infrastructure of narrative work with the means to widely disperse, and deeply immerse, narratives over time that shape how societal norms are set.

Civil society should:

- Engage with building their own alternative, positive, public narratives, and not only focus on challenging the negative messaging being promoted by authoritarian and illiberal regimes about civil society and its work.
- Pursue alternative narrative-building as part of a broader sectoral strategy, supported by donors, progressive governments, and international institutions, to create stronger societal foundations for civil society's public interest work, to strengthen civic space everywhere, and to encourage enhanced public protection for activists and campaigners who are subject to unwarranted attacks by the authorities, or by other powerful interests.
- Not "impose" new narratives built on different groups and constituencies but co-construct narratives with these groups in order to build new and different relationships and understanding.
- Use narrative-building as an opportunity to strengthen relationships with local partners and with citizens
- Not just speak about their values, or what they stand for as part of the alternative narratives it builds but should do things differently also. CSOs need to act in such a way as to bring their values to life in their everyday actions and work, if it is to avoid being called out for it. It is important for CSOs to do what they say (ie 'practice what they preach') as this builds public trust.

- Ensure that the building of alternative narratives by civil society, aimed at strengthening civic space, is informed by the experiences and insights of other CSOs who have been in the vanguard of piloting new, experimental and effective approaches to alternative narrative building.
- Advocate for and engage in collaborative multi-level initiatives (eg global, regional, national, local) to be established to support CSOs interested in developing their narrative-building skills, to gather good practices, and to allow narrative-building resources and relevant capacity development opportunities to be made available for civil society everywhere.
- Advocate towards donors, to encourage them to provide flexible and long-term funding to CSOs to support their engagement in effective, alternative narrative-building.
- Advocate for reliable access to the internet, appropriate digital tools, and digital learning communities for all as part tackling the 'digital divide' and ensuring greater digital equity for all.

REFERENCES
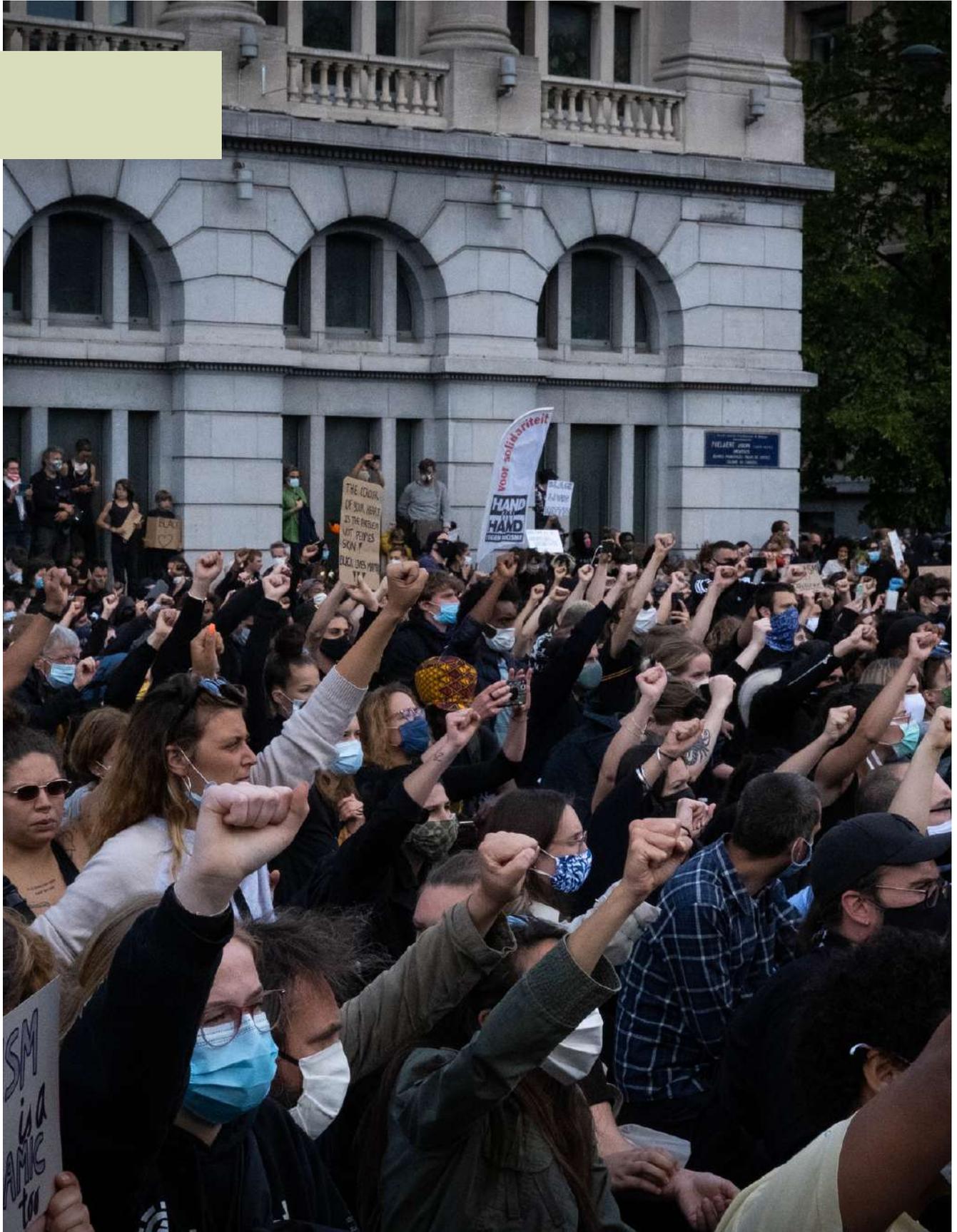
1 https://findings2021.monitor.civicus.org/
2 See https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2021/03/09/digitizing-civic-spaces-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-beyond/; Also Connie Roggeband and Andrea Kriszan, "The Selective Closure of Civic Space" https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1758-5899.12973; and https://www.wfd.org/commentary/4-things-parliaments-can-do-protect-citizens-democratic-freedoms

3 See https://cooperation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Policy-brief-Civic-space-Final.pdf and https://cooperation.ca/sixth-edition-of-progressing-national-sdgs-implementation/

4 See "Secondary impacts of COVID-19: Closing civic space in fragile contexts" (2021) https://www.undp.org/library/dfs-secondary-impacts-covid-19-closing-civic-space-fragile-contexts; Also "The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space" (2022) https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/implications-covid-19-pandemic-fundamental-rights-and-civic-space; and "Sustaining Civic Space in Times of Covid-19: Global Trends" https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/sustaining-civic-space-in-times-of-covid-19-global-trends.

5 See the report prepared for the European Economic and Social Committee, The response of civil society organisations to face the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictive measures adopted in Europe, https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/files/qe-02-21-011-en-n.pdf; Also Maya Gros and Norman Eisen, "Digitizing Civic Spaces amid the Covid-19 Pandemic", https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2021/03/09/digitizing-civic-spaces-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-beyond/

6 See ICNL's Covid-19 Civic Freedom Tracker, https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/

7 See e.g. "Human Rights Dimensions of Covid-19 Response" (2020) https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response; "Vaccine Pass and Human Rights Challenges (2021) https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-rule-of-law/covid19: and "Human Rights in a Pandemic" (2021) https://www.iccl.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Human-Rights-in-a-Pandemic.pdf

8 https://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2020/11/22/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-african-civil-society-organisations/ & https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2021/pandemic-exacerbates-challenges-civil-society-faces

9 See https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-perspective/ and https://africaninternetrights.org/sites/default/files/Sodfa_Daaji.pdf

10 A/HRC/41/41, https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/reports/2019/report-rights-freedom-peaceful-assembly-and-association-digital-age

11 See https://mashable.com/article/google-facebook-government-user-data-study, and https://transparency.fb.com/data/government-data-requests/

12 https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-perspective/

13 See "The misuse of social media platforms and other communication channels by authoritarian regimes" "https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_IDA(2021)653658

14 https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton/ https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/3/mapping-internet-shutdowns-around-the-world

15 https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/digital-rights-in-closing-civic-space-lessons-from-ten-african-countries/

16 See the report by Forus, Towards and Enabling Digital Environment for Civil Society, https://www.forus-international.org/en/extra/hub/resources-publications?modal_page=pdf-detail&modal_detail_id=77151-towards-an-enabling-digital-environment-for-civil-society-full-report&tab=list

17 https://www.accessnow.org/internet-access/

18 https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/civic-space-guide/43904

19 See https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/, Also Thomas Coombes, How to Change Narratives with Hope, https://medium.com/@the_hope_guy/how-to-change-narratives-with-hope-52f8a15a3b02; and MobLab, "Building muscle: How positive narratives can beat fake news" https://mobilisationlab.org/stories/moblab-live-how-positive-narratives-beat-fake-news/

20 See, https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/civic-space-guide/43904 and the series of articles from Open Global Rights on Positive Narratives to Mobilise for Change, https://www.openglobalrights.org/positive-narratives/

21 See Oxfam's work, https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/ and https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621085/; Also Isabel Crabtree-Condor, "Exploring the power of narrative & collective action: Panel Narratives x Civic Space Oxfam Convening" (2020) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38vKpCvpzBo

22 See https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/be-the-narrative-revolutionising-human-rights/ and . https://www.openglobalrights.org/putting-words-into-action-personal-reflections-on-supporting-narrative-change/
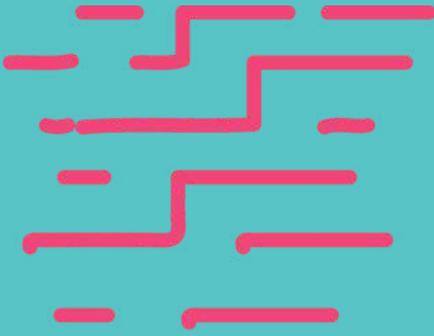
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

http://forus-international.org/
contact @forus-international.org
@Forus_int
Forus International
Instagram - forusinternational/

Forus is a member-driven network of 66 national NGO platforms and 7 regional coalitions from all continents, representing more than 22,000 NGOs active locally and internationally on development, human rights and environmental issues.