ENABLING STORIES

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

forus

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by James Savage - The Fund for Global Human Rights

As director of the Enabling Environment for Human Rights Defenders program at the Fund for Global Human Rights, I've been privileged to support—and learn from— civil society activists, groups, and movements doing incredible work to advance the causes of equality, justice, and rights. But I've also witnessed how, in response, the vested interests of governments, corporations, and private actors alike have turned to increasingly sinister and sophisticated means of repression. From El Salvador to the Philippines, would-be autocrats are pushing a false narrative that casts protest and dissent as threats to public order—rather than as keystones of any healthy, functioning society—and endangering the physical and digital safety of activists.

As many of us feared in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, those same bad actors were among the first to abuse the spectre of the coronavirus. By framing the global health emergency as a domestic security threat, government authorities adopted sweeping new powers, passed restrictive laws, and embraced far-reaching digital surveillance technologies—encouraged and enabled by multinational corporations that saw the crisis as an opportunity for profit. Now, as the pandemic slowly subsides, we're confronted with a world transformed. The laws, technologies, and narratives that would-be authoritarians have used to stifle dissent and consolidate control have become the go-to playbook for everything from climate change to terrorism.

Thankfully, innovative thinkers and doers—like the networks of activists supported by Forus—have already begun to reimagine human rights narratives in the post-COVID context of securitized civic space. For human rights funders, the research and recommendations in this report will be critical as we provide the flexible, long-term support that grassroots groups need. By fostering their narrative competencies and building a collective vision for human rights, we can disrupt the securitization of civic space—and shape a new narrative in which civil society is able to thrive, free from undue restrictions, around the world.

INTRODUCTION
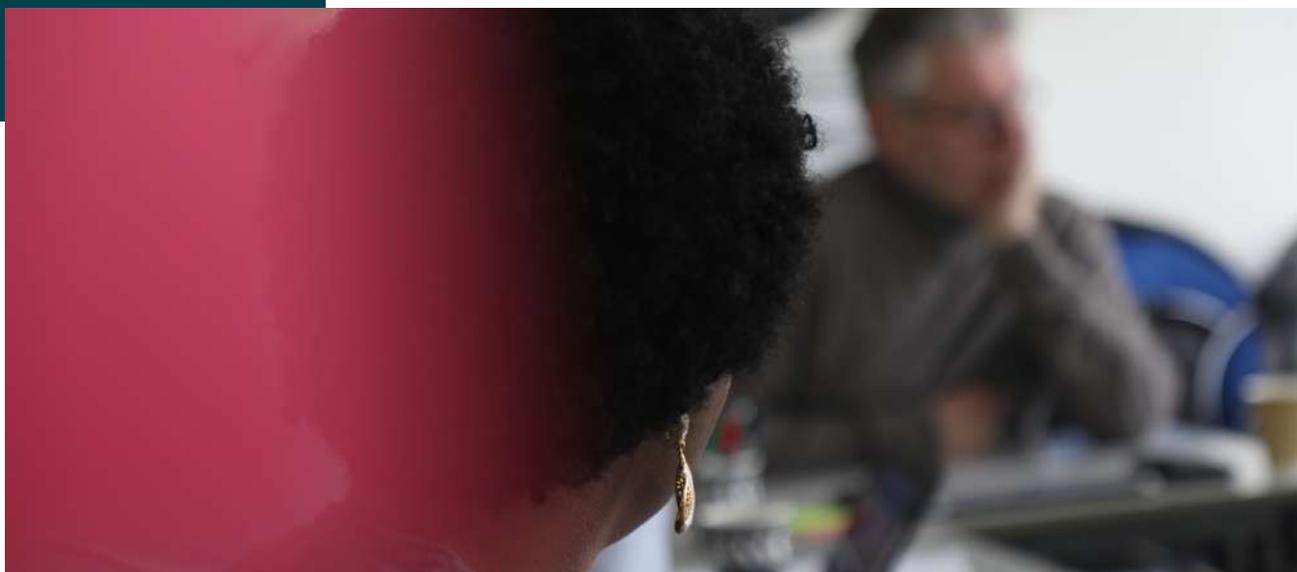
Forus is a growing and dynamic global network, founded as an informal alliance of national NGO platforms and regional coalitions in 2008.

Today, Forus represents 66 National Platforms (NPFs) and 7 Regional Coalitions (RCs). The national platforms are mandated by their diverse memberships to represent them, and to act as key interlocutors with national governments. The regional coalitions cover West Africa, Southern Africa, Central Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe and the Pacific, and provide national platforms with a space to collaborate at regional and international levels. **Through working together, Forus members, partners and allies have enabled the network to become recognized and influential internationally in promoting inclusive governance and championing sustainable development policies to benefit the planet and its people.**

We believe that a robust and protected civic space forms the cornerstone of accountable, responsive democratic governance and stable societies. The term 'civic space' refers to 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 this 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 digitalization.**

The COVID-19 global pandemic rapidly transformed civic space across diverse national and regional contexts. Some governments introduced measures which restricted fundamental rights - above all, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, going beyond the scope of necessary actions to ostensibly counteract the effects of the pandemic. Some sought to silence critical voices, particularly those from journalists and civil society. Others lowered the possibilities for CSO participation in civil dialogue related to policy-making. As a result, CSOs were often not consulted on key laws and policies aiming to address the impact of the pandemic. Several governments also incorporated surveillance technology into their efforts to halt the spread of COVID-19.

The accelerating global process of digitalization has also impacted fundamentally on civic space in countries across the world, rapidly transforming the operating space of citizens everywhere. Ensuring that its members and wider civil society have access to digital technologies to exercise their freedom of association, assembly and expression is a growing priority for Forus. Today more than ever, civil society needs to advocate for an inclusive, human-rights based and democratic form of digitalization that will empower and enable activists, rather than restrict and repress them. Forus and its members advocate for the importance of upholding human rights in the digital space. From the Tech for Democracy summit to the Lisbon Forum and the Asia Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum, our network explores the emancipatory potential of digital technology for civil society in different countries around the world. **The #Let's Talk Digital Campaign launched by Forus and its members aims to generate important debate linked to digitalization.**

The growing number of autocratic and illiberal political leaders who outbid themselves in calling into question the legitimacy, independence, and credibility of civil society, represent a significant threat for Forus member platforms, and civil society generally. The wider public often has a limited understanding of the role of civil society in governance generally, or of its essential role in holding governments publicly accountable for their actions and decisions. For this reason, Forus and its members have begun to engage with an exciting body of work on alternative narrative building. This work is aimed in part at better explaining the role of CSOs in society, and the public value of their work. Like others who are engaging with this narrative building work, Forus and its members believe that it will help to promote higher levels of public confidence in, and engagement with civil society and its work, and will ultimately strengthen civic space, and bolster democracy around the world.

Forus would like to thank its partner, Connect Humanity, for contributing a chapter to this report entitled "We won't wait: Communities are taking control of their digital futures". We share Connect Humanity's vision of a future where digital poverty and digital divides have been solved everywhere, universal digital access has become the norm, and people around the world can use digital technologies in ways that empower them and enhance the quality of their lives.

Finally, we would like to thank various Forus platforms and external partners The Fund for Global Human Rights and Futurevox for contributing their ideas, experiences, and recommendations to this report. We hope that the donor community, in particular, will hear the urgent call of our members for the kind of flexible funding mechanisms that will be essential for the innovative, experimental and process-oriented work of alternative narrative-building to take place. While civil society organisations like Forus are committed to defending and expanding civic space, we are aware that without the support of progressive governments and donors we will not succeed in achieving this objective. We hope that networks, social movements, policy-makers and the donor community will partner with this work as civil society embarks on a creative and collective journey of alternative narrative -building with the aim of defending and expanding civic space and helping to strengthen democracy around the world.

1.

CHANGES TO CIVIC SPACE - IMPACTS OF COVID 19 & DIGITALISATION

Shifts in civic space

Changes to, and transformations of civic space in different countries around the world have extremely important ramifications for societies everywhere. Shrinking civic spaces and curtailed civil society influence have severe consequences for effective governance. Oversight of governmental and corporate proceedings becomes weakened, paving the way for inadequate transparency and accountability, which negatively impacts on official accountability processes, including political checks and balances, accounting and auditing systems, administrative rules and legal procedures, amongst other things. CSOs are important agents in the creation, protection, and expansion of civic space, although they cannot achieve this on their own.

Civic Space

"Civic space is the structures, institutions and enabling conditions that support people to be active citizens, where people can come together, organise, speak out and act individually and collectively. It's the freedom (and right) to assemble, associate and speak out, which some of us are able to enjoy more than others. Civic space is expressed in the streets, in neighbourhood groups and community spaces, formal organisations, and grassroots or global movements." [1]

This report explores the emerging and innovative body of work on alternative narrative- building by CSOs, aimed at communicating their core values and their work to the public at large. These narrative building activities have the potential to promote a much deeper popular understanding of the work of CSOs, and to highlight its undeniable public interest value. Alternative narrative-building can play an important role in countering negative propaganda about CSOs. If done effectively, it can play a role in ensuring that public support for CSOs and their work is forthcoming when attempts are made to delegitimize, attack or shut down particular civil society organisations on spurious grounds. In other words, alternative narrative-building by CSOs could contribute to the strengthening of civic space in different national contexts by positively influencing the attitudes and world views of the public where organised civil society and its public interest work are concerned.

Impacts of Covid 19 on Civic Space

Increased online activity

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a boom in online activity and the desire to participate, with the creation of hundreds of social media accounts and crowdsourced mapping projects which coordinated assistance and shared information.[2] CSOs used digital tools to hold governments and private companies accountable during the COVID-19 crisis. Ukrainian civil society used ProZorro—an open-data platform created in 2016 to closely monitor public spending and government procurement—to keep in check government procurement of essential COVID-19 resources, such as surgical masks. This process was essential to maintaining transparent prices and warding off "manipulation by procuring entities and speculation by suppliers".[3] The Mexican CSO Project on Organizing, Development, Education, and Research (PODER) used the hashtag #EmpresasConTache on social media to "identify companies who defied labour regulations to reduce salaries and benefits of workers, force them to request unpaid leave, or force them to work in high-risk working conditions with the threat of dismissal." [4]

Digital surveillance

Supposedly informed by the objective of protecting the health and wellbeing of their citizens and residents, many governments took extraordinary steps to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. At least 80 countries adopted emergency measures, and many more invoked pre-existing disaster and emergency measures in response to the disease. Some governments incorporated surveillance technology into their efforts to halt the spread of COVID-19. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law's COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker[5] and other trackers provide additional examples of the epidemic of new surveillance powers and methods governments around the world are deploying, often with little consideration for the impact on the right to privacy and other human rights.[6] While the use of all the available tools 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 measures. Unfortunately, in many cases, governments failed to consider the privacy and human rights implications of using surveillance technology to fight COVID-19.

Limits on freedoms of assembly & expression

The European Economic and Social Committee produced a report at the request of the Diversity Europe Group and involving a consortium of four partners – the European Civic Forum, Civil Society Europe, the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law and the Institute of Public Affairs.[7] The report examines how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the work of civil society organisations across Europe. It also focuses on how solutions implemented in individual EU Member States impacted on the ability of CSOs to exercise their fundamental rights and freedoms. The report is based on in-depth analysis of existing studies and reports, a survey, expert interviews and focus groups. It highlights a range of different ways in which the pandemic affected the functioning of civil society organisations in the European Union.

On the positive side, the report concluded that civil society organisations have proved to be extremely flexible during the pandemic. Many of them were the first to be able to reorganise their activities to respond to local communities' needs. CSOs were found to have done this much faster than public administration or the private sector. Moreover, the pandemic changed the way many civil society organisations operated, such as moving their activities online. This led to an acceleration of the digitalisation of the sector. All of this allowed many CSOs to reach out to new audiences, or to carry out their work more effectively on a wider scale. It also became easier to build coalitions of organisations, to exchange experiences, and develop common positions on the measures taken by the authorities. Moreover, all this has increased the visibility of civil society organisations in society and understanding of the role they play on a daily basis. This was viewed as a very important asset on which CSOs could build their position in the future.

However, the pandemic was also seen to have had serious negative consequences for the functioning of civil society organisations. 82% of those surveyed for the report saw a negative impact of the pandemic on the entire CSO sector in their country. The COVID 19 pandemic was also found to have hit many civil society organisations financially. Foundations and associations were found to have been most affected, as the solutions proposed by individual governments to mitigate the impact of the pandemic were usually not tailored to their needs. 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 decidedly poor.

Government Emergency Measures during COVID 19:
Case Studies

Some examples are provided in the case studies below of surveillance overreach by governments and of new surveillance powers and methods governments around the world deployed during the COVID 19 pandemic, often with little consideration for the impact on CSOs or on ordinary people, and on their right to privacy and other human rights.[8]

In Poland

Those required to quarantine were given a choice: either receive unexpected visits from the police or download the "home quarantine app.[9] The app requires users to first register with a "selfie." The app then sends randomly scheduled requests to upload selfies from their homes within 20 minutes. The selfies are processed through facial recognition software, and the location is checked against the existing GPS information from the user's phone. This data is shared with government agencies and the police. If the selfies are not uploaded in time or do not confirm the user is at home, police will be dispatched and might fine an individual with 1.5 times his or her monthly salary.

In South Korea

The government used smartphone location history, credit card transactions, immigration records, and CCTV footage to create detailed accounts of an individual's whereabouts. This information was combined with data from South Korea's existing surveillance system and network of CCTV cameras to produce detailed accounts of individuals' lives, including buses they took and even whether they were wearing masks when around other people. This information has been published, resulting in online harassment.[10] This has led the country's National Human Rights Commission to express concerns about the excessive exposure of private information of patients and call for new guidelines on pandemic surveillance. [11]

Hong Kong

Has implemented mandatory self-isolation for all inbound travelers. To monitor their movements, individuals are required to download the "StayHomeSafe" app and wear an electronic wristband connected to that app. Individuals are instructed to walk along the perimeter of their homes, which provides authorities with a blueprint of their private spaces.[12] The app requires users to take and upload photos of themselves wearing the wristbands at random times. Personal surveillance devices of this kind allow states to access the personal details and whereabouts of citizens and residents at any time.

In Armenia

Telecommunications companies are required to provide authorities with their customers' phone records, including phone numbers and the location, time, and date of their calls and text messages.[13] It is not clear how knowing who someone calls or messages will help authorities identify people with COVID-19. While the epidemiological uses of this data are not immediately apparent, the privacy implications of such a sweeping measure are.
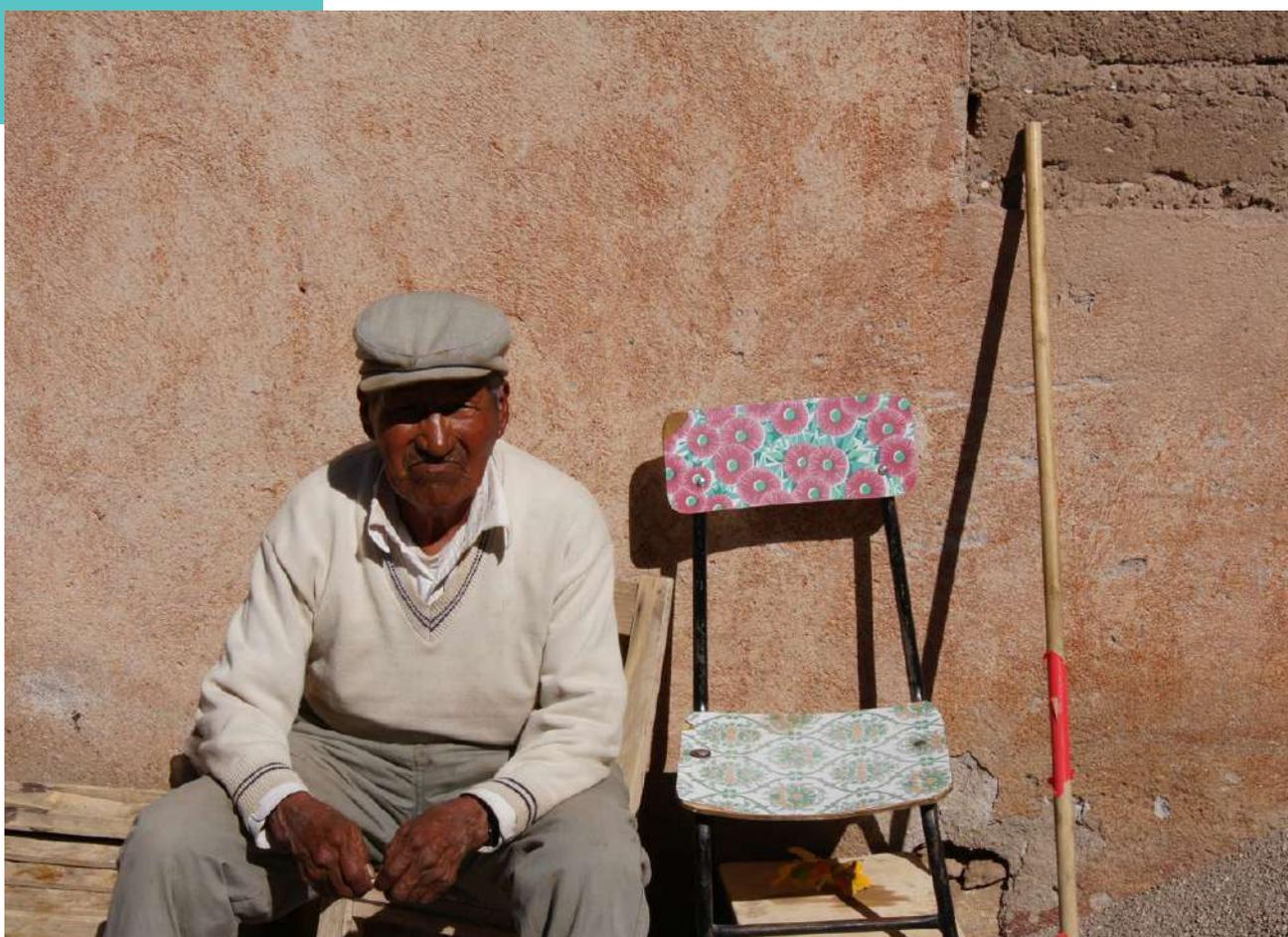
Impacts of Digitalization on Civic Space

Civic space is not only a space to assemble, express oneself and associate; online space has also become a modern agora where people practice direct democracy - at national, regional and global levels - ushering in a new age of democratic renewal.[14]

Digital technologies have become a fundamental part of CSOs' ability to collaborate, raise awareness and mobilise their constituents. Core functions of the activities of CSOs, such as travel, organising events, collaborating with other actors, and conducting outreach are enabled and mediated through centralised, free or low-cost digital tools that not only create data traces but also operate on a data-based business model. Mechanisms to receive funds and garner support, from financial transactions and donations to membership and participation, all leave online traces in a networked environment which can be monitored, exposed or appropriated. In an unstable and shifting political environment, understanding how this data is collected and utilised is essential for making informed decisions and weighing up potential risks for the future.[15]

Digital space can be an important catalyst for wider civil political participation in physical spaces. When the space for such work is attacked, surveilled, restricted or shrunk, it has repercussions for civic participation in general. The digitalization of civic space is ultimately invaluable to improving governance by holding public officials and private companies to the highest standards. Accountability mechanisms like "participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, monitoring of public service delivery, investigative journalism, public commissions and citizen advisory boards" can be better wielded by CSOs through digitalized civic spaces by being accessible to a wider range of people and supported by transparent open-source databases.

Online threats and challenges facing CSOs

Over the years, government requests for data from and about social media users have increased, and so have arrests and criminalisation of organisations and activists based on their social media behaviour. So again, what happens online does not stay online – in fact, it sometimes has serious physical repercussions on the safety and well-being of activists and CSO staff. Digital attacks and restrictions affect individuals and their families, and may play a role in decisions on whether to continue to do their work, change tactics, or quit. Online restrictions can also cause a chilling effect on the civil society that is at the forefront of the promotion of human rights and liberties.[16]

A growing body of research is now available which investigates the key impacts and challenges for civil society related to the interplay between technology and civic space. For example, ICNL is an organisation that conducts research to collect best practices and identify challenges related to technology and civic space.[17] It works closely with a global network of partners to develop international, regional, and national norms and standards so that new technologies protect basic freedoms and build an enabling environment for civil society. It also aims to enhance the fluency of civil society actors in technology so that they can participate meaningfully in crafting policies that affect civic space.

More is known about the openings and closings of online civic space in the global North than in the global South. However, an emerging number of reports make possible a comparative analysis of openings and closings of online civic space in Africa. One of these introduces findings from ten digital rights landscape country reports on Zimbabwe, Zambia, Uganda, Sudan, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Cameroon.[18] The study analyses how the openings and closings of online civic space in Africa affects citizens' digital rights. It shows that: (1) when civic space closes offline citizens often respond by opening civic space online; (2) when civic space opens online governments often take measures to close online space; and (3) the resulting reduction in digital rights makes it impossible to achieve the kind of inclusive governance defined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The report documents 65 examples of the use of digital technologies to open online civic space and 115 examples of techniques used to close online civic space. 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.

Digital surveillance & freedom of association and assembly online

Social media platforms have become an integral tool for CSOs who depend on them to share information, communicate and engage with their supporters, organise events, measure impact and response based on the analytics of those platforms, and even collect donations. Though these platforms have proved helpful, they have also raised concerns regarding the harvesting of data, which is analysed and used by the corporations themselves, by third-party companies or by governments.

Government requests for data from and about social media users have increased over the years. According to Facebook's (Meta's) Transparency Report from 2018,[19] the company received 103,815 requests from governments for data, which can range from an entire history, to the list of IP addresses from which a user connected to Facebook, or personal details behind an account.[20]

Digital technology has become equally integral to the exercise of the rights of peaceful assembly and association. By serving as both a tool and a space, civil society is able to leverage digital technology to advance human rights and innovate for social change. These platforms have become crucial tools for mobilisation and collective action as well as virtual spaces where marginalised groups that face severe restrictions to operating in physical places can form online assemblies and associations. On June 12, 2019, UN Special Rapporteur Clement Voule issued a report on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association in the digital era.[21] The Special Rapporteur found that many governments are not fulfilling their obligations under international law. His report concluded that government measures restricting online space have become all too common. Furthermore, his report highlighted the role of technology companies acting as gatekeepers to people's ability to exercise their rights online, creating a range of new and complex issues. His report addressed some of these challenges, with a focus on developing guidance to preserve and expand digital civic space.

The report found that:

"laws that criminalise online content continue to proliferate, leading to a chilling effect on advocacy and mobilisation. Numerous governments have resorted to shutting down access to communications networks and services during elections and public demonstrations, and blocking websites, including human rights organisations. Demonstrating a sophisticated grasp of emerging technical tools, some States – and malicious third-party actors – have increased the use of digital surveillance and online harassment against civil society actors, human rights defenders, opposition political leaders and those who plan to stage peaceful public assemblies".[22]

These measures clearly risk eliminating the new digital space in which individuals and civil society actors can work together to pursue common goals.

When it comes to digital-based repression and the use of surveillance and data collection to impose restrictions, there is a striking lack of accountability. Some of the main challenges of holding power to account in these instances include: [23]

- Methods used to surveil CSOs 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".

- A lack of clearly defined laws and regulations addressing the procedure for the governmental actor to attain a warrant or permission from an independent judiciary body. There are also few institutions or bodies that organisations or individuals can use to safely denounce surveillance, demand access to legal help via a lawyer, or ask for an investigation in case of suspicion.

- The clandestine nature of many attacks gives the actor the opportunity to pin the accusation on other adversaries, hired actors, or simply the "unknown", making accountability difficult to attain.

- The inaction of platforms and tech companies towards these 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: a powerful negotiation card in the hands of willing regimes.

- Cooperation between certain platforms and governments, which results in policing of the platform for the best interests of a government against critical voices, civil society organisations that don't follow the political interests of the ruling party or press freedom.

Online targeting of vulnerable minorities

Vulnerable minorities are those groups that face greater risks online because of their gender, race or sexual orientation. Women generally are more vulnerable to online harassment, and politically active women even more so. Women journalists, for instance, are subject to more online abuse than male journalists when speaking about controversial issues or voicing opinions. They are targeted because of their gender. This is also the case for CSOs focused on women's rights, which are being targeted both offline and online, including through distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, website hacks, leaks of personal information, fabricated news, direct threats and false reports against Facebook content leading to the suspension of their pages. Digital attacks sometimes translate into physical violence, when actors emboldened by the hate speech promoted on online platforms end up posing serious threats not only to people's voices but also to their lives

For years "doxing" was used against feminist and women's rights activists and organisations; more recently, it has been adopted by far-right extremists to attack those they consider adversaries, including students, journalists and university professors. Doxing is one of many ways of compromising a CSO and thereby shrinking space for their activities. Slander and smear campaigns, intimidation, blackmailing, and threats to both the individuals and the organisation, and in some cases their families and close network, are other means to attack civil society or intimidate activists. [24]

Online extremism & lack of accountability[25]

The internet has become a space for politics and confrontation on a much larger scale than it was five or ten years ago. Revelations coming from whistle-blowers such as Edward Snowden and scandals such as those involving Facebook and Cambridge Analytica have made people much more aware of how online space is changing. It is clear that there are many groups on extreme ends of the political spectrum that have become quite savvy in using and abusing technology.

There has been a general public expectation that tech companies should be accountable and responsible for the problems they create through their online platforms and services, but that won't just happen by itself. When it comes to digital-based repression, and the use of surveillance and data collection to impose restrictions, there is a striking lack of accountability. Tech platforms depend on government authorisation to operate, so online platforms and tech companies are slow to react, if they do at all, in the face of accusations of surveillance, hate speech, online harassment and attacks, especially when powerful governments or other political forces are involved.

Some experts predict that public online spaces will significantly improve by 2035 if reformers, big technology firms, governments and activists tackle the problems created by misinformation, disinformation and toxic discourse.[26]

Others expect continuing troubles as digital tools and forums are used to exploit people's frailties, stoke their anger and drive them apart. Digital activists working to reform digital space want to redesign online spaces in ways that facilitate debate, enhance civility and provide personal security. A selection of such initiatives were described in a 2021 article in The Atlantic magazine by Anne Applebaum and Peter Pomerantsev. [27]

Many institutions are now turning to the use of platforms designed to facilitate more civil and engaged discourse.[28] Brazil has adopted platforms like *Mudamos,* which enables citizens to propose legislation and which is being used systematically and on an ongoing basis for '*crowdlaw,*' namely to enable ordinary citizens to participate in the legislative process. Taiwan has engaged the public in co-creating 26 pieces of national legislation, but perhaps even more exciting is its creation of a 'Participation Officers Network' to train officials to work with the public in a more-conversational form of democratic engagement enabled by technology, on an ongoing basis.[29]

Corporate dominance & extractive business models

> **For most people, including civil society, using the internet means resorting to commercial platforms and systems such as Google and Facebook. The biggest change has been the centralisation of what used to be a distributed system where anybody was able to run their own services. Now we rely on centralised, proprietary and controlled services. And those who initially weren't very prevalent, like state or corporate entities, are now dominating.[30]**

There is increasing public awareness, and a growing critique of the current hyper-corporate, and relatively unregulated model of the internet. A new class of extremely rich individuals and corporations have emerged that, in effect, now own the infrastructure of the 'public sphere' and have enormous lobbying power over government. The existence these systems have at the same time fostered the creation of alternative media spheres where extremism and hate discourse continue to proliferate.

Some critics such as Shoshanna Zuboff have convincingly argued that technology is completely entangled with late-stage capitalism at present or that addressing inequality/hate and many other problems (e.g., climate change) will require a radical undoing/redoing of capitalism.[31] Others claim that technology will be leveraged to consolidate capitalism rather than to help undo its most harmful components.

 " A reprioritization of the public interest over private profit requires a change in the broader culture of tech opportunism to a culture of tech in the public interest "

"The entrenched issue here isn't 'human nature' or technology or regulation – it's capitalism. Unless we overthrow it prior to 2035, digital spaces will continue to be owned and controlled by profit-seeking companies who will claim they're legally bound to spend as little as possible on 'serving the public good' – because it detracts from shareholder returns. The growth of Chinese social media companies in Western markets will mean there are firms driven by more than purely for-profit impulses, yes – but the vision of 'good' that they are required to serve is that of the Chinese state. Theirs is not a model of 'public good' that either speaks to Western publics or indeed Western ideas of 'good.'" [32]

Other critics claims that achieving a transformation of digital spaces and improved digital life will require collaboration: private-sector tech, government and social-impact organisations coming together in a combination of regulation and norms. They perceive governments as playing a critical role in the alignment of incentives which will enable for-profit and social impact organisations to come together to help to advance a positive transformation of digital spaces.[33]

Digital Censorship and Internet Shutdowns [34]

In countries where governments hold a tight grip over dissent, technology platforms serve as an important outlet for CSOs for campaigning and solidarity-building. At the same time, though, arbitrary restrictions on such platforms can present a significant barrier to their work.

State and non-state actors have curtailed the work of CSOs by permanently or temporarily shutting down internet-enabled services. Although the United Nations issued a statement in 2015 declaring that internet "kill switches" are a clear violation of international human rights law even in times of conflict, they are still implemented across the globe. Following nationwide protests in 2016, Morocco's three telecommunications companies **barred access** to VoIP on mobile networks, impacting communication on WhatsApp, Viber and Skype. This meant citizens were forced to rely on local services provided by telecommunication companies. The same year, Etisalat **shut down** Egypt's access to Free Basics, Facebook's zero-rated internet services, as part of an attempt by the government to silence dissent in the weeks leading up to the anniversary of the 2011 uprising and fall of the Mubarak regime. The governments in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates also **censored** Signal, which activists heavily rely on to communicate and collaborate. In January 2018, Iranian authorities **disrupted internet access** across the country and blocked Instagram and the encrypted messaging app Telegram, which had been instrumental in allowing activists and opposition figures to reach their constituencies and international partners.

In 2020, India topped the list of 29 countries that blocked access to the internet despite increased demand during COVID-19.[35] Yet over the course of 2020, 29 countries intentionally shut down or slowed their internet communications at least 155 times, according to a new report published by Access Now.[36] In 2021, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition documented 182 internet shutdowns across 34 countries.[37] This showed a dramatic resurgence of this oppressive form of control compared to 159 shutdowns recorded in 29 countries in 2020. Internet shutdowns are always dangerous, and 2021 highlighted just how dangerous they can be. The world witnessed governments implement blackouts throughout protests, civil unrest, wars, and crises. It began with authorities in **Ethiopia, Myanmar**, and **India** shutting down the internet to quell dissent and assert control over populations. Israeli airstrikes in the **Gaza Strip** brought down towers supporting essential communications infrastructure as well as newsrooms for Al Jazeera and the Associated Press, while escalating censorship in **Russia** signalled what was yet to come.[38]

A recent report by Access Now,, The return of digital authoritarianism: internet shutdowns in 2021, sheds light on Russia's further slide into digital authoritarianism over the course of last year, exploring how previous actions have led to today's reality of blocked Facebook, instagram, and Twitter, and, most recently, the removal of references to Ukraine and Kyiv in textbooks.

Watchdog organisations argue that censorship, information regulation, and isolation from the outside world are the basic components of a government's descent into digital authoritarianism — and that an internet shutdown is a proven all-in-one tool that achieves ultimate control in a single, swift action.[39]

The following statistics are drawn from a report by Al Jazeera on internet shutdowns around the world: [40]

Most shutdowns: India

Authorities in India shut down the internet 109 times over the course of 2020, mostly in Indian-administered Kashmir, which accounted for almost 90 percent of all internet shutdowns in India last year. Shutdowns were used to suppress voices of dissent. India's Supreme Court ordered a review into Kashmir's internet shutdowns, stating that they were unconstitutional and violated India's telecoms rules.

"Any government or authority is not doing charity by restoring the 4G services," said Singh. "When the government restored 4G services everyone started celebrating, but the point is this is not charity. This is our right and everyone's right because this is guaranteed by the Indian constitution."

In addition to India, the governments of Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan and Vietnam also blocked access to the internet in 2020.
Myanmar imposed one of the longest shutdowns recorded to date, which continued from 2019 through 2020 and into 2021 in certain states.

Internet shutdown in Europe

During the August 2020 Belarusian election, the government blocked social media channels including WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber and Twitter as well as VPNs and Tor browsers.

Despite this, protesters took to the streets to contest Alexander Lukashenko's presidential victory. As a result, the government imposed a full internet shutdown from the night of August 9 to August 12, 2020.

Telegram channels became very important for citizens because that was the only platform that worked a little. It became the main source of information for many people.

Internet shutdowns in the Middle East

The country with the most internet shutdowns in the Middle East in 2020 was Yemen, a country mired in armed conflict and humanitarian crisis. These shutdowns exacerbated the situation, making access to information and communication by emenis and by international organisations attempting to work in the country very difficult.
Jordan experienced three national shutdowns in 2020. The governmen
t restricted Facebook Live during a teachers' union protest in July and August 2020. The Ministry of Education also blocked communication applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp and Facebook during national exams.

Other Middle Eastern countries that shut down the internet include Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt and Algeria.

Internet shutdowns in Africa

Internet and telecommunication services have been shut down across several African countries including Burundi, Chad, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Mali, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda.

In Ethiopia, 100 million people were plunged into a complete media blackout for two weeks following protests after the killing of Oromo musician, Haacaaluu Hundeessaa.

In Kenya, there were at least two reported internet disruptions in 2020 after two telecommunications towers were destroyed in Mandera County by the Somali armed group, al-Shabab.

Internet shutdowns in Latin America

Internet shutdowns have also occurred in Venezuela, Ecuador and Cuba.

In 2020, the Cuban government blocked access to Telegram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and other social media platforms for three days following rare large public protests decrying curbs to civil liberties.

Governments have justified internet shutdowns citing fake news, precautionary measures, public safety and national security among other reasons.

The actual reasons for shutdowns have stemmed from political instability, elections, protests, communal violence, information control and exam cheating.

In addition, seven countries including India, Guinea, Belarus, Burundi, Kyrgyzstan, Tanzania and Togo shut down the internet during an election period in 2020.

Digital Access & Equity

"Over the past year we have learned how key it is for communication and business continuity in times of global emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first wave, more than 1.5 billion learners who were put out of classrooms due to global lockdowns could not continue their education because they had no connection. Had their homes been connected, the disruption would have been minimal. Being online is vital and good for societies" [41]

The lack of digital access for all remains a significant challenge in terms of the effectiveness of the current global process of digitalisation. A significant body of research exists demonstrating that digital divides in many countries are exacerbating other clear inequities around health, social supports, employment, schooling and much more. Half of the world's population is not yet digitally connected and, as a direct result, many people are likely to experience social and economic exclusion and marginalisation. [42]

Full participation in the processes of digitalisation requires a combination of access to the internet, access to appropriate tools, access to learning communities and the creation of relevant digital policies. This combination – which can be referred to as the 'minimum viable digital infrastructure for inclusive digitalisation' – is both fundamental to being able to deliver inclusive frontier technologies and is achievable through cross-sector collaboration between governments, businesses. [43]

Governments must also enable the digital capacity-development of their populations, with a particular focus on civil society as crucial intermediaries and service-providers. This is a shared development challenge which is particularly acute across less developed countries. The international community must provide financing and public programmes to increase public access to, and knowledge of digital technologies and tools from an early age and from a lifelong learning perspective. Capacity building needs to address the hard skills-gap between older and younger generations and enable older generations to become familiar with new digital technologies. International donors must support civil society everywhere to develop trustworthy digital tools for civic activism and political participation.

How to improve Digital Spaces[44]

Technology is embedded in all aspects of people's lives, including activism and civic participation. It is important for CSOs, activists and their communities to develop an enhanced understanding of the impact of digital technologies on their work and the shrinking civil society trend on a global level.

Information and communications technology has a huge role to play as an empowerment tool in power shift and decolonisation for civil society to generate its own solutions, knowledge and information transfer. Building both grassroots and organisational digital skills and security and championing data privacy and equity in advocacy and programming work is essential. But to do this better CSOs need to establish a basic understanding of emerging technological developments and their implications for digital rights and equity more generally.

Despite a growing body of literature on the impact of technology on civil society, a holistic analysis on a practitioner level about how technology exacerbates restriction on activists, civil society organisations and social movements is still lacking. Broader global trends that restrict the operating space for rights-based groups are closely intertwined with data-driven technologies, which are instrumentalized at the hands of governments and non-state actors to curb opposition and dissent. It is vitally important that civil society organisations prioritise understanding the role of digital technologies in posing restrictions to their operating environment and to the safety and wellbeing of their constituents.

By 2035 what will constitute digital spaces? Today these are sites, streaming services, apps, recognition technologies, and a host of (touch) screen-enabled entertainments. But as we move into mirror worlds, as Things That Think begin to think harder and more seamlessly, as AI and federated learning begin to populate our worlds and thinking and behaviours – digital spaces will transform. It is happening already with remote medical care, robotics and self-driving cars. In the context of accelerating climate change, digital technologies will be useful for organizing humanity's broad retreat from coastal areas, organizing refugee camps for large numbers of people, administrating medical care, administrating mass migrations and resource allocation, and so on, However on the other hand, criminals will continue to use digital tools and networks for human and sex trafficking, for online abuse of the vulnerable, especially children, for fraud, for violence and drug trafficking, for increasing attacks via cyber by both state actors and nonstate actors; and for increasing attempts to shape and manipulate political discourse by cyber means .

CSOs need to build stronger networks and work closely with expert tech/rights CSOs, academia and researchers to understand these issues and laws, and challenge big tech narratives about the magic of emerging technologies, and to promote and develop more local- or regionalised research and bodies of knowledge on digital developments. CSOs also have a collective moral responsibility to understand and to sound the alarm on the adverse social harms and outcomes of unproven technologies.[45] Progress must be made on international agreements establishing norms of civil behaviour, the protection of rights and law enforcement in online environments and the building of online spaces that will empower people to exercise democratic freedoms, and even build democracy from the ground up.

CASE STUDIES

LISTEN TO "A SPACE FOR US PODCAST"

TO ACCESS THE INTERVIEWS

Italy

Campaigning and changing narratives in the digital sphere

FUTUREVOX

The digital gap in Italy is one of the worst in Europe, as it has one of the oldest populations and lowest digital literacy rates. At Futurevox, we divide online digital activism in three categories: (i) one-way communication; (ii) coordinated mobilisation; (iii) decentralised organising. Our perception is that 90% of online activism is in the first category, 10% in the second, and the third is a negligible residual, as very few understand the importance of decentralised organising in Europe, and Italy in particular, compared to other national contexts.

Civil society in the digital space is significantly weak in Italy, as it lacks the resources and technical expertise to reach the playing field of corporate and institutional communication. Therefore, civil society appears fragmented, digitally backwards and with few resources to have a significant impact. Against this background to promote alternative narratives about the work of civil society, we have developed a methodology called the 7-steps activism guide, which includes "The Hero's Journey", an entire session about the storytelling/public narrative element. We ask the participants of our workshops to identify 7 key elements in the narrative: broken world, hero, mentor, gift, shadow and vision. Once a team is aligned on these elements, they are more likely to succeed in their activism work. We believe that any activism campaign must start from listening to local challenges and aspirations, otherwise it is doomed to fail. Therefore, inputs from local grassroots level are the starting point, and from there we develop the persona, a description of the target of our campaign to tailor the message our campaign will carry.

Overall, we can say that the perception of civil society has improved in Italy as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, likely because CSOs have filled a gap where the Italian institutions failed to reach the population. In terms of our work, adapting offline activism actions has been challenging but we succeeded. Now the challenge is to avoid a spiral of slacktivism, excessive use of social media or online petitions, characterised as involving very little effort or commitment. Resources are very limited for mainstream campaigns and almost inexistent for projects to help marginalised groups. However, this is precisely the challenge of Futurevox: we are working with the Movimento Invisibili, a grassroots movement that started from the exploited migrant workers in the agricultural sector and is now expanding to all forms of "invisibility", which in the case of undocumented migrants is even more extreme than marginalisation. We have also recently submitted an application for EU funding for a project for the inclusion of NEETS (not in employment, education or training) into the local decision-making and youth groups usually dominated by university students.

Our main recommendation is to take stock of what is happening in the digital space and to respond with bold actions and adequate resources to support civil society in its key role to defend a pluralistic and democratic society. The challenges are not limited to "fake news" (which have dominated the digital debate since Brexit and the 2017 US elections) but also the digital infrastructure itself and the disproportion of resources available to the private sector compared to civil society

2.

"WE WON'T WAIT: COMMUNITIES ARE TAKING CONTROL OF THEIR DIGITAL FUTURES"

by Chris Worman, Connect Humanity Co-Founder

Introduction

While digital technologies proved to be essential tools during the Covid-19 crisis, the pandemic also revealed the scale and cost of the digital divide, with nearly half of humanity still offline and shut out of a rapidly digitising world. The internet was the foundation for so much of our collective response, aiding everything from contact tracing and remote healthcare to powering a radical shift to working from home. And yet, the huge investments in digital innovations made by the UN, the World Health Organisation, and national governments during this period can have little relevance to the three billion people who still have no internet access or the billions more who lack the affordable, reliable connectivity to really benefit.

When the pandemic broke, TechSoup — a technology provider to civil society groups — surveyed its membership about how they were being affected by Covid-19. Of the nearly 12,000 organisations who responded, four in five said their services were disrupted because their communities didn't have internet access. That means millions of the world's most marginalised people were left without vital support at their moment of greatest need because, as a society, we've allowed a wide and deep divide to open between who has internet access and who does not.

Digital technology is at the same time one of the most powerful tools we have to solve the great global challenges we face, and yet out of reach for half of humanity. Those most likely to be offline are the marginalised voices that most need to be heard. This access gap limits our society's pursuit of progress and justice.

The pandemic has made clear that whether we primarily work on emergency disaster relief, children's literacy, reproductive healthcare, or climate change, we must all be advocates for digital equity. The collective work of global civil society depends on our constituencies being able to access the full benefits of connectivity, and our organisations being able to fully leverage the foundational information architecture and organising tools the internet provides.

In order to accelerate progress across all 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, from eradicating hunger and creating sustainable cities, to boosting economic and gender equality, we must fulfil 9C, the goal that would deliver universal internet access by 2030. Covid-19 crisis has underlined the cost of the digital divide — it must also be a rallying point for closing it and achieving digital equity.

Digital Equity

Having a fast, reliable internet connection is fundamental, but true digital equity has to be holistic so that everyone has the tools to participate fully in our society, democracy, and economy.
At a minimum this means:

Infrastructure

Having reliable access to a fast, stable connection and the right devices is the foundational step on the path to digital equity.

Digital Skills

In order to get the most benefit from being online, people must have the skills to use digital tools and navigate the internet safely.

Affordability

Even where the internet is available, cost remains a huge barrier to access. Reducing the cost to connect is critical to enabling everyone to access the internet's benefits.

Content

The internet is only as useful as the content on it. Locally-relevant content is essential to encourage people to use and benefit from the internet. This in turn grows the user-base and encourages investment in networks.

Policy

A healthy policy environment is needed to encourage efficient, competitive, and responsive markets for broadband, whereas bad policy can lock-out operators and allow incumbent service providers to over-charge and provide poor service to customers.

Internet access — a high-value investment

Reaching universal internet access by 2030 will require a significant spending commitment, coming from a range of private, public, and philanthropic bodies. Estimates to connect the unconnected range from a low $428 billion (Alliance for Affordable Internet), to a figure north of $2 trillion (Boston Consulting Group). Whichever number you take, the financial and societal returns of investing in internet access will deliver on the initial investment many times over. The World Bank estimates that raising internet penetration from 35% to 75% in developing countries alone would add as much as US$2 trillion to GDP and create more than 140 million jobs. The projected economic benefits of expanding connectivity in developed countries are similar. And beyond the headline GDP numbers there is a wide set of socioeconomic benefits including everything from improved health outcomes and educational opportunities, to new avenues for civic engagement and government accountability.

Despite the tremendous opportunity, there is currently insufficient commercial and government capital being directed to achieve universal access. Democratic countries risk ceding this space to China which is the only country investing seriously in expanding internet infrastructure overseas. While the US-led Build Back Better World (B3W) G7 initiative and the EU's Global Gateway have both promised to channel public and private sector investment towards digital development, the commitments have so far been vague and not at the level of ambition needed to sufficiently accelerate progress to reach universal access by 2030.

One challenge is generating sufficient capital, another is making sure it is invested in the projects that can make the biggest difference. The money that is currently made available to fund internet infrastructure typically flows to traditional operators, perpetuating a system that has failed to connect those who are hardest to reach. These operators tend to be most effective at connecting higher-income concentrated populations in urban centres that deliver the largest returns on investment. Yet, when it comes to people who live in sparsely populated areas, hard-to-reach locations, or lower-income communities, time and again incumbent operators have made a calculation that they are too remote or too poor to provide for.

Three decades and billions of dollars in subsidies is enough to show us that traditional internet service providers alone are not going to reach everyone. Most of the easy-to-reach populations that our current market can provide for have already been connected. Now we are now in a phase where different approaches are needed to connect everyone. Investment needs to fund the models that can fill the gaps that traditional operators have left. These solutions already exist and they lie within communities themselves.

For communities, by communities

Around the world there are community-based networks successfully connecting some of the most hard to reach populations. They range from co-operatives and community-run networks in remote areas with small numbers of customers to municipal broadband owned and operated by cities, delivering fast fibre to tens of thousands of residents.

These models are grounded in the communities they serve and they understand and design for people's needs. Their primary objective is to get people the reliable, affordable internet they need to participate in digital life, rather than maximise returns for shareholders. There are hundreds of successful models already in operation, where underserved communities have taken their digital needs into their own hands, often delivering some of the best service at the lowests costs anywhere.

Ammon, Idaho

Today the 17,000 residents in the small midwestern US city of Ammon, Idaho have access to some of the fastest broadband and lowest prices in the country. Previously the city's residents and businesses were underserved by traditional broadband operators who, because of its geography and low population-density, saw the community as an unattractive investment. Recognising the market alone would not provide adequate access, the City Council built an open access fiber network to lower the up-front infrastructure investment required by operators and encourage a competitive local market. Today customers login to gigabit speeds on plans at as little as $9.99 a month.

Acre, Brazil

Acre, a state in the Amazon rainforest in northwestern Brazil, is home to some of the world's most isolated communities. Until recent years, they had no internet connectivity. It is here that the non-profit group Rhizomatica worked with communities to develop HERMES, a system that uses high-frequency radio networks — a technology already used in the region — to deliver internet functionality allowing people to exchange emails and voice messages, transfer data and video files, and explore the global internet. The introduction of internet access has helped improve commerce, powered the region's response to Covid-19, and tackle illicit logging. HERMES has now been deployed in remote locations across Brazil and the Ecuadorian Amazon.

"Technology created in cities in the Global North has failed to address the connectivity challenges people in rural areas around the world face. In places without viable connectivity options, it is crucial to design alternatives together with communities to ensure their needs are met." - **Peter Bloom, Rhizomatica Founder**

Mankosi, South Africa

This remote village in South Africa's Western Cape is home to the county's first community-owned internet service provider. Zenzeleni (translated as 'do it yourself' in isiXhosa) started in 2012 and was initially a local wireless intranet providing free voice services to the village's almost 6,000 residents. Owned, operated and governed entirely by the local community, Zenzeleni added an external internet connection and has since grown into a successful community network providing residents in Mankosi and beyond with affordable, reliable internet access at the same speeds as those in the country's urban centres.

Community-based models such as these have the flexibility and incentive structures that are best placed to connect the communities that traditional operators have underserved. To reach the 2030 SDG, we need to reimagine how the internet is built, transform the market, and invest in these community-based networks getting the job done. But a transformation like this does not happen alone. We need institutions that promote these models and that can provide the financing mechanisms that can enable them to grow and scale.

Financing community-based networks

The tools and the models to accelerate digital equity exist. But the enabling environment that will scale these community-based networks is lacking, from appropriate finance mechanisms to right policies.

Communities who want to build their own networks are typically inhibited by a lack of enough capital and the right capital. Established operators who want to build a new fibre grid or a subsea cable are able to access hundreds of millions of dollars at competitive rates because they have established collateral and financiers are used to their way of working. At the other end, there is some philanthropic funding, but the ceiling for grants is typically six figures. Between these poles is a 'missing middle' of the kinds of finance needed to build community-based networks. A project that needs $10 million to fund last-mile infrastructure to bring fast, reliable, affordable internet to people's homes is unlikely to find a lender, leaving residents with no option but to live with inadequate service, or no access at all. Building the financing mechanisms to support these models could transform the way that the internet is built, operated, and owned across the world.

This financing problem is not unique to broadband and neither are the solutions. Across many sectors are models that, because they are new, do not promise high returns, or simply do not fit a mold financiers are familiar with, need alternative financing to work. Green Banks are a good example. Established with a mission to accelerate a transition to clean energy, Green Banks invest in projects in technologies, markets, and geographies that would otherwise not be funded. While investing in projects that will deliver a return, these banks consider impact beyond interest, pursuing a core mission to mitigate climate change and, usually, secondary goals like serving low-income communities.

Connect Humanity serves to do for digital equity what Green Banks do for renewable energy. We provide sustainable digital finance to fund the community-based broadband networks that can help connect the next billion and last billion. As previously described, we take a holistic approach to digital equity because this challenge is about real equity and not just inclusion, ensuring that all individuals and communities have the information technology they need for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.
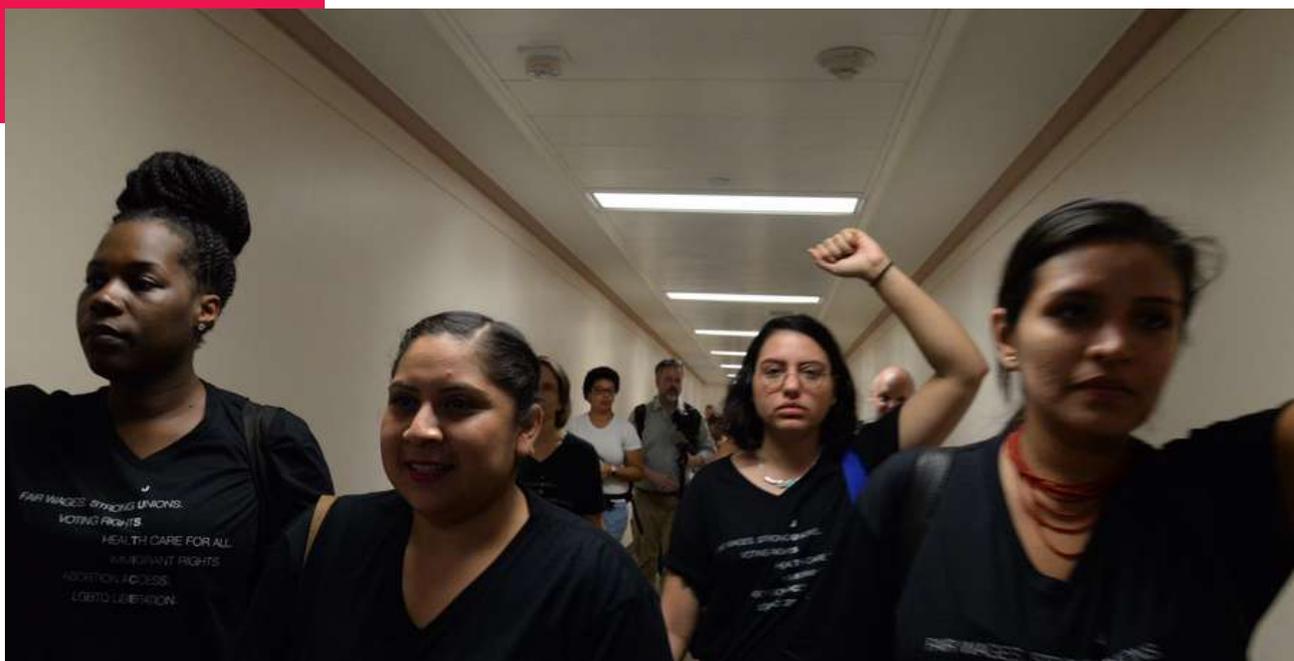
We identify opportunities that have promising foundations and we work with, not for, local communities to realise them. If a community needs it, we work with projects end-to-end, from discovery through planning, build and implementation.

At the centre of our model are two financial tools: a philanthropic fund and a loan fund. Our philanthropy is typically used to fund planning grants, enabling a community to scope the local need and market opportunity, to design the network, and to analyse what capital is needed to complete the project. This process is a critical opportunity for community engagement, to find out what people want, to identify what local workforce capacity and digital literacy activities are needed, and to build local support (and future customers).

The planning stage paves the way for accessing the funds needed to build a network, de-risking future capital by establishing a strong business case and showing that a project is financially and operationally sustainable. This is a form of due diligence for our loan fund where we make low-interest investments of anywhere from $300,000 to $50 million, tailored to meet the needs of a project. In many cases, we'll bring along other sources of capital from public bodies like development banks and from private impact investors. This blended finance approach is the key to raising the right sizes and structures of capital needed to accelerate digital equity.

Communities can solve this problem, but governments, multilateral financial institutions, impact investors, and philanthropic bodies need to commit the funds to make it possible. Many financial institutions are comfortable issuing capital in large amounts but are less able to work directly with the projects that need funding. Organisations like Connect Humanity can play an intermediary role, making sure large investments are distributed responsibly and sustainably to the projects that can make the most difference. This is a well-established model in other sectors. For example, Root Capital is a non-profit lender that funds rural agricultural businesses and cooperatives in poor, environmentally vulnerable regions of Africa, Latin America, and Indonesia. Channelling funds from large investment institutions, Root Capital has issued $1.6 billion in loans to over 750 businesses, helping to improve the lives of nearly 10 million people in farming families. We need these innovative financing models if we are to change how broadband is built and achieve digital equity.

Digital poverty is a solvable problem

For too long, too many people have assumed that connectivity is ubiquitous, and have overlooked the digital divides that exist between and within countries. Others understood the need, but saw it as a problem that the market would solve, given enough time. It is clear now that neither of these are true. Billions of people remain underserved and the dominant model for building broadband is not going to connect them. To accelerate digital equity, the model needs to change.

We need communities to understand that they can build, own, and operate broadband networks that meet their digital needs. We need the internet community — including philanthropy — to understand that this is a viable, successful approach. And we need investors to understand that funding these initiatives is neither as risky nor as complicated as they think — and that organisations like Connect Humanity are ready to help them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus on digital equity:

Take a holistic approach to internet access, working to ensure that all communities have affordable access, tools, and skills so they can navigate and participate fully in digitising societies. Full digital equity is critical to address historical inequalities and enable the internet to be an equalising force.

Pursue effective policy and regulation:

Work in partnership to advocate for policies that encourage a market that supports a variety of internet providers and models, and challenge rules that stifle competition and lead to communities being overcharged and underserved.

Deploy universal service and access funds in communities:

USAFs are funds intended to expand internet access to underserved areas. They should be invested to encourage diversity of operators, with emphasis on community-based networks delivering last-mile connectivity.

Partner on innovative funding mechanisms:

Community based-networks require a blend of finance that traditional funding mechanisms do not support. Investors and funders can work with specialised intermediaries who can tailor the right size and types of funding to support sustainable community-based networks.

CASE STUDIES

LISTEN TO "A SPACE FOR US PODCAST"

TO ACCESS THE INTERVIEWS
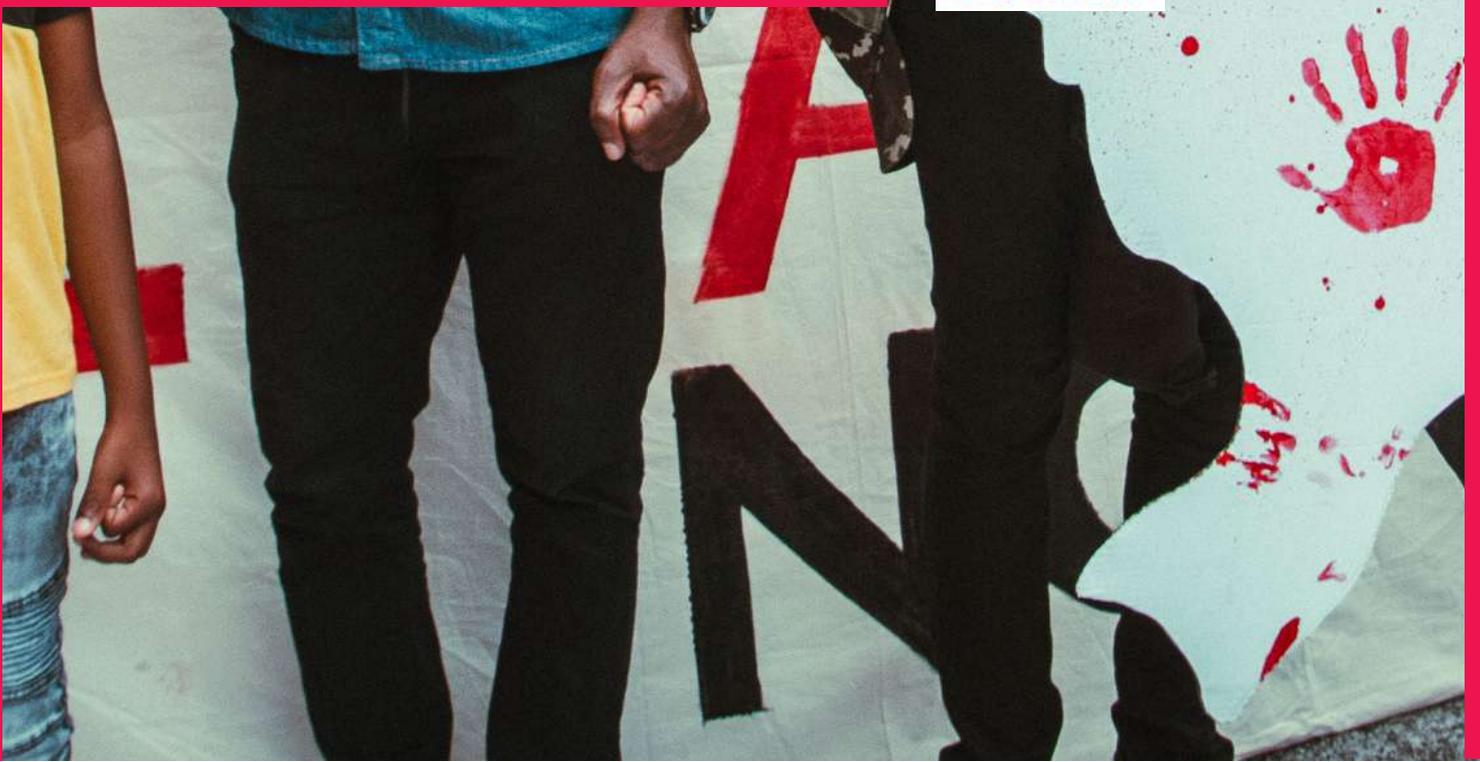
West African Region

The need for a bottom-up digital transformation

REPAOC

"The most important service we can give to members right now is the capacity to work online to increase both internal communication in the network and externally with partners and allies."
- Julien Comlan Agbessi

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The international community should reinforce collaboration with the Global South in terms of technical support for the utilisation of digital technologies.
- Financing opportunities and resources should be made available for the digital capacity development of CSOs.
- The digital competences of African CSOs should be mapped, and surveys administered about their perceptions and capacities in terms of their use of digital tools.

West Africa is making impressive progress in regional cooperation. While the recent rise in violence and conflict as well as extremism and other emerging threats have sparked concerns over its future dynamics, efforts to prevent conflicts have also improved, especially from civil society organisations. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, field visits in territories and international meetings became impossible, impacting the work of civil society and of humanitarian assistance. For the sector to function and continue providing support to communities, it becomes necessary to heavily shift to online communications. In line with principles of self and collective learning, REPAOC, the regional coalition in West Africa, developed a series of trainings of its member national platforms on the optimal use of ICTs in the restrictive context of physical meetings. This capacity building activity for members provided by the Dakar-based partner iT4Life, has a clear impact on the quality of virtual interactions with other regional coalitions, international networks and partners. The approach is bottom-up with the work structured around the real need of members.

There are several challenges that persist in the region to make the best out of the digitalization process. Just before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic struck, over half of the world's population (51%) had access to the internet compared with just 30% in Western and Central Africa. With the strict lockdown, many key services were only available to people across the region through the internet. Ever since, the need for universal, affordable, and safe connectivity has increased exponentially.

Yet, challenges persist. The first challenge is in terms of electricity, essential for the digital process but still a challenge for 48% of West Africans. The second challenge is in terms of access to a safe internet, an aspect that needs both investment and regulation from public powers in the region. In West Africa, less than 5% of households own a computer, while only 41.5% of the population has access to a mobile network.

Overall, civil society in the region also faces several obstacles in terms of their functioning and freedom of expression. REPAOC identified the need not only to strengthen national narratives about civil society's work, but also to create healthier international narratives about the work of African civil society and to place a significant effort on improving partnerships. Where the possibility of mobility is concerned, the unfair treatment of African CSOs in terms of travel visas need increased attention and solidarity from international civil society organisations and institutions – especially in the global North. Civil society organisations in West Africa are aware of the stakes and challenges and of the need for a paradigm shift for win-win relationships in terms of international relations. The Global North cannot put its interests first by imposing its vision of the world on Africa, or by implementing restrictive measures and policies. A more equal and horizontal partnership is what we should be working towards together.

South Korea

Advancing the use of Digital Technologies in South Korea

KCOC

"Another method we tried is using the metaverse. This method is different from zoom in that two-way communication can occur simultaneously. In our institution, the youngest generation generally learns, applies, and utilises this method." - Jaeun SHIN

According to Freedom House, South Korea saw an improvement in internet freedom, attributed to the dismantling of real name registration requirements for online comments during election periods. However, the Constitutional Court reaffirmed that online defamation was a criminal offense and online harassment, particularly newer, digitally mediated forms of violence against women continue. There has been a proliferation of policy and regulatory models in recent years, with South Korea experimenting, innovating, and sharing their policy experiences and practices in e-governance, with a distinctive national approach.

As a result of the implementation of the South Korean e-government master plan 2021-2025, service delivery has improved, reliability and transparency have increased; citizens can access data from the government and can raise their issues and share complaints easily. The Korean Government's virtual assistant service for instance, provides communities with tailored administrative information closely related to their daily lives.

COVID-19, however, has led to the emergence of "conflicts" due to a widening digital gap. Civil society organisations are increasingly active in supporting communities with access to digital tools and are advocating for transparency when it comes to privacy rights and the use of data. KCOC, as the network of civil society organisations in South Korea, set up a Special Committee to respond to COVID-19 and increasingly uses digitalization to communicate about its activities, for instance about the impact of civil society on international development cooperation, during the election process in the country.

At the start of the Pandemic, member organisations needed to acquire basic knowledge of COVID-19. To address this, KCOC conducted three webinars with infectious disease experts. The webinar was released on YouTube so that anyone could watch at any time. The platform's online communication has become a strategic tool to advance clear narratives about civil society in the country. It is not interested in "the number of clicks" but rather in developing multiple channels for different age groups in order for information to be accessible to all generations. For World Humanitarian Day, KCOC has blended the online and offline dimensions to develop a campaign close to the interests of citizens.

Even though in Korea, digitalization had already progressed considerably before COVID-19, the pandemic has made digital space as important as physical space. However, alongside positive outcomes, the conflict caused by digitalization is also intensifying. Conflicts include a widening gap in information acquisition and access through digital media, which in turn widens the gap of opportunities for social activities and economic benefits. Differences in digital equipment and utilisation capabilities lead to significant divides in terms of income, competitiveness, and financial power. Similarly, the conflict between industries that have easily embraced digitalization versus those that did not, and the conflict between those who are employed and others who are unemployed due to the digital divide is of concern to civil society organisations.

Guatemala

Indigenous youth & digitalisation "on their own terms"

CONGCOOP

The Coordination of NGOs and Cooperatives of Guatemala (CONGCOOP) has launched a Virtual Training Centre to offer its members, and young indigenous people in particular, the expertise that will support new leadership development in the country. Guatemala has a population of approximately 16 million people, of whom 43.8% are of indigenous Mayan origin, and more than half are young people. Education has been one of the country's greatest shortcomings. The quality of education is poor and fails to reach a big slice of the population. In addition to this, infrastructures are insufficient and internet access is limited.

Young people often go to school in early childhood but are forced to abandon their studies to earn money. For many of them, schooling does not necessarily lead to learning. Guatemala has 22 Mayan languages, yet indigenous young people in particular cannot find educational resources in their native language. With support from Forus, CONGOCOOP developed a digital learning platform and implemented a leadership programme for young people. The platform additionally developed TV and radio programmes helping youth with limited literacy skills to express themselves, share their views and alternative narratives without the need of written media. In particular when it comes to indigenous youth, their full and effective participation in the "Information Age" has to happen on their own terms.

Much progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go before this call is fully achieved. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the urgency of accelerating progress towards digital inclusion, but it also highlighted the startling digital inequalities between and within countries, especially for indigenous communities who remain underserved, and often lack equal opportunities to acquire digital skills needed to make the most of emerging technologies. Despite limited access to the internet, most indigenous young people in Guatemala have a mobile phone and a deep interest in the virtual world, which they generally use to communicate with each other on social media, explore the world, receive training, continue their studies and share their culture. Virtual spaces have enabled young people to develop initiatives and boost their creativity. In the digital era, the virtual world can be an excellent space to share the customs, needs, culture assertions and world views of indigenous peoples. Likewise, digital opportunities can also be a great tool for young people to strengthen their fight in demanding many of the rights that they have been denied as youths, as indigenous people and as dignified human beings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Indigenous youth should be given opportunities to share the culture, customs, needs, and world views of indigenous peoples using digital means
- Indigenous youth should be given opportunities to access training and continue their studies online

Taiwan

Six ways in which civil society can shape digitalisation

TAIWANAID

"The real question is, are we ready to step out of our comfort zone to learn and adapt for a new digital environment? For me, the most important issue is trust. And Taiwan's CSOs are gaining people's trust in cyberspace." Jay Hung

With a total population of 23 million, the number of digital technology users in Taiwan is more than 20 million. Internet penetration is 91% and social media penetration stands at 89.4 percent. Taiwan Aid believes that there are six different roles that civil society plays in relation to digitalisation in Taiwan.

The first rôle is as "educators" as some CSOs chose to invest in digital capacity building for civil society and disadvantaged groups.

Secondly, by setting up a website, using social media and producing multimedia content, civil society has turned into a sort of "self-media", disseminating information and narratives independently.

Thirdly, CSOs serve as advocates for open government and open data.

Fourth, CSOs play the role of "guardians" protecting children against cyber porn or harassment, tackling fake news and online rumours.

Fifth, CSOs are analysts. For example, « Data for Social Good » , is a fellowship program, generating data from various users that has attracted hundreds of voluntary data scientists to help over 40 NGOs and the government to develop tools to make data- driven decisions for better social services.

Sixth, we can all play the role of digital citizens. For example, Taiwan G0V is the third largest online open collaboration community in the world, whose contributors include software developers, designers, activists, educators, writers, citizens and netizens of every profession gathering in the cyberspace with the hope to improve Taiwan's civil society through technology and collaboration. Covid19 accelerated digital transformation. A better use of digital technology should bring more control to the citizens instead of more control being assumed by the government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Move towards open data and open government
- Construct a better national legal framework for digitalization
- Create participatory and democratic digital decision-making mechanisms
- Enhance digital literacy at all levels of Taiwanese society

Latvia

The role of digital technologies in supporting solidarity actions for Ukraine

LAPAS

"I just couldn't sit at home when 1,000 kilometres from Latvia, women and children are living without a roof over their heads. So I decided to help." - Extract from a Facebook post written by a Latvian person one week after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began.

Since the beginning of the war, 21,981 Ukrainian civilians have been registered in Latvia, according to the latest information from the Ministry of Interior. The small Baltic state, which borders both Russia and Belarus, has sprung into action to support Ukraine. Overall, Latvia's societal response to the Russian aggression has been marked by outpouring support and solidarity toward Ukraine. Since the invasion, the public has donated almost 6 million EUR and several companies have contributed with both funds and goods. Private citizens and civil society organisations have engaged in a wide range of support activities, including making caltrops that Ukrainian forces can use to slow down the advance of the Russian army and funding the work of Latvian doctors in Ukraine.

As reported by LAPAS, Leva Adamsone, a Latvian fashion designer, co-developed, along with civil society organisations, the project "Eliza", an initiative which began after the beginning of conflict. The project, which is currently being replicated in other countries such as Estonia, Denmark, Germany, and the US, consists of creating camouflage nets to deliver humanitarian aid and to cover the windows of buildings in order not to be detected. The project is completely based on donations and the voluntary work of the Latvian civil society. Not only volunteers but also schools, collectives, and day centres are involved in the initiative that also serves as a unifying space for families and community members.

Social media platforms have been used to coordinate activities and to show life in Ukraine since the Russian invasion, thus becoming "powerful ammunition in an information war" with people from around the globe experiencing war viscerally through social media feeds. Hashtag activism triggered by the conflict is influencing mainstream media coverage, representing a "transformative opportunity to inject new narratives or to change the narratives and the way we talk about what is happening in the context of this war." However, the war in Ukraine is accompanied by an ever-present threat of cyber catastrophe, and while a big hack has yet to come, the battle online continues to escalate, with citizens in increasingly vulnerable positions, both online and offline.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase support and resourcing for CSOs involved in aid and other initiatives aimed at supporting the Ukrainian people
- Ensure that CSOs can acquire the digital skills required to deter and detect serious cyber-attacks, and access to appropriate digital security software to protect themselves online

3.

BUILDING ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES TO STRENGTHEN CIVIC SPACE
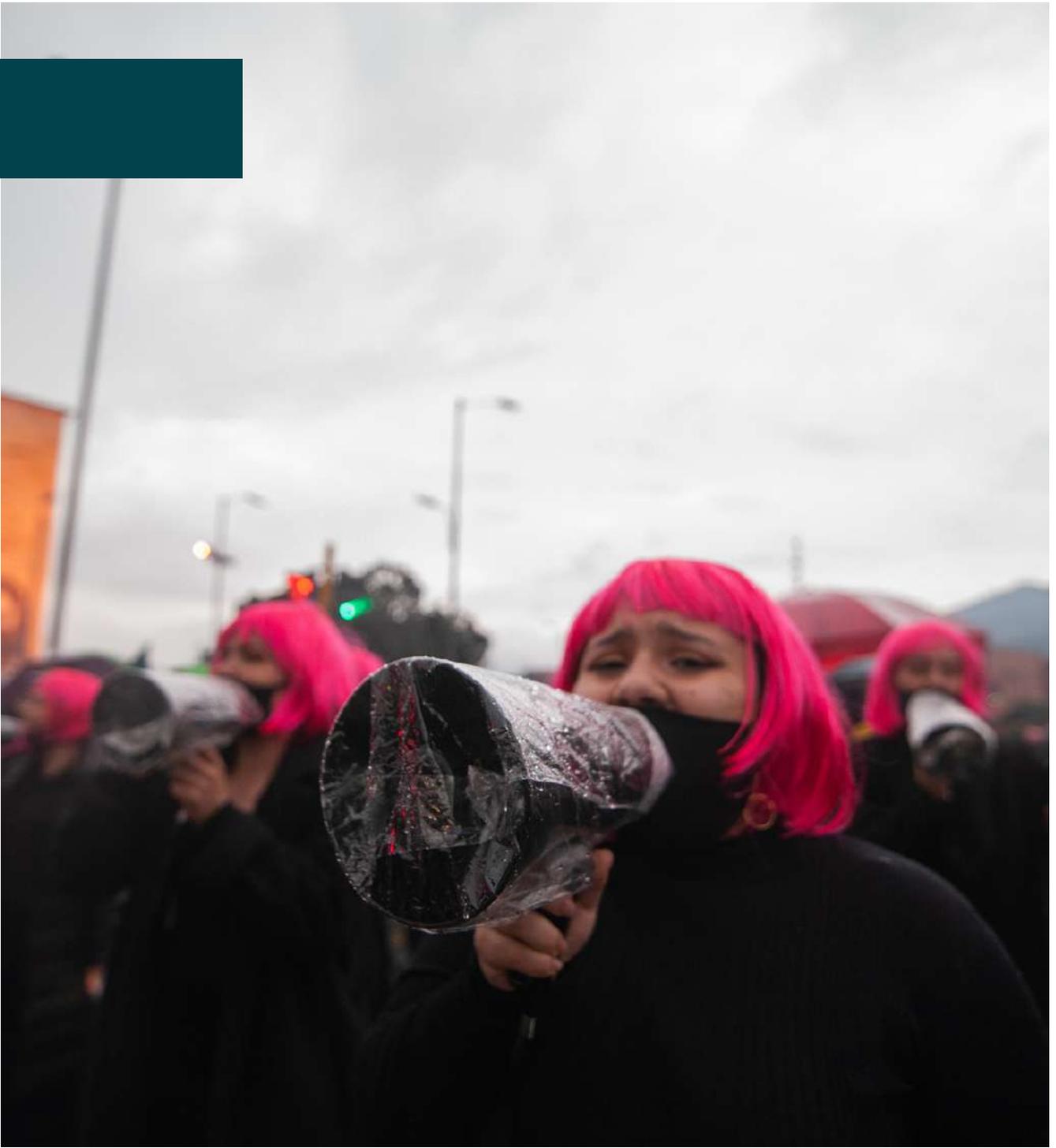
The power of narratives[46]

In the context of the growing global trend towards shrinking civic space in many countries across the world, leading civil society organisations are increasingly focusing their attention on using the power of narratives to inspire collective action for positive change and to explore how to be more effective in understanding and responding to changes in civic space in different contexts. [47]

Why are narratives important? In the book "Narrative power and collective action" which was published as part of a collaboration between Oxfam and On Think Tanks, Isabel Crabtree Condor interviewed over 20 people about their role in shaping narratives, as part of Oxfam's work on protecting and opening civic space.[48] Various activists who contributed to the publication provided the following explanations about the importance of narratives:

"Narratives are a form of power that can mobilise and connect, as well as divide and isolate. Social, public, or dominant narratives help to legitimise existing power relationships, prop them up or make them seem natural."

"Narratives are made up of many stories, tweets, online content, offline conversations. They keep deeply held ideas about society and people in place, for good and bad"

"Narrative knowledge and framing "know-how" can help us to open civic space, collaborate better and amplify others, helping us to be part of the biggest 'us' we can be."

"Narratives are an interpretation of reality that serves the interests of the group that constructs them. And they can have a very direct impact on the action and behaviour of people."

"Narratives are about invisible power: how perceptions, belief systems and ideology shape the way people define what is "right" and what is "wrong". "Social, public or dominant narratives help to legitimise existing power relationships, prop them up, and make them seem natural. It's useful to think of narratives in terms of power, because then collective action and creative collaboration are clearly the only way to go if we want to reroute or disrupt these power dynamics".

Dominant Narratives & Shrinking Civic Space

One of the main reasons why civil society activists are starting to build" alternative narratives" is because of the growing realisation that the dominant narratives being promoted are undermining activism. The dissemination of these increasingly dominant and negative narratives, targeted especially at human rights and gender activists, as well as environmental defenders, is used by different groups to keep certain ideas or sets of existing power relations in place.[49]

"Smear campaigns tend to portray CSOs as threatening, either because of the causes they promote or the groups they protect. They are portrayed as a threat to security, culture and religion, the economy and the 'natural' social order. These narratives are likely to dominate public discourse during smear campaigns. Prevailing narratives form the 'common sense' that your audience reverts to make sense of facts. When campaigners respond to smear campaigns, they often present bare facts and expect their audience to share the same understanding as they do. For example, CSOs may point out that the government has launched x number of administrative investigations into CSOs this year. CSOs may expect their audience to instinctively recognise that a) this is a problem and b) the authorities are harassing campaigners in an effort to silence criticism. But if the dominant narrative in the media or social media has been that CSOs are corrupt, the audience may simply decide that there is good reason to investigate CSOs and that the number of investigations reflects the scale of the problem"

The popularisation of these negative narratives often results in less public support and protection being available for campaigners and activists when they are subjected to attacks, or where efforts are made to undermine or to restrict their public interest work.

An increasing number of civil society organisations believe that they can encourage much greater levels of public understanding of, and support for their work through building their own alternative and positive narratives. This will contribute to creating a stronger societal foundation for the public interest work of CSOs and ensure greater public protection for activists and campaigners from unwarranted attacks by the authorities, or by other powerful interests.
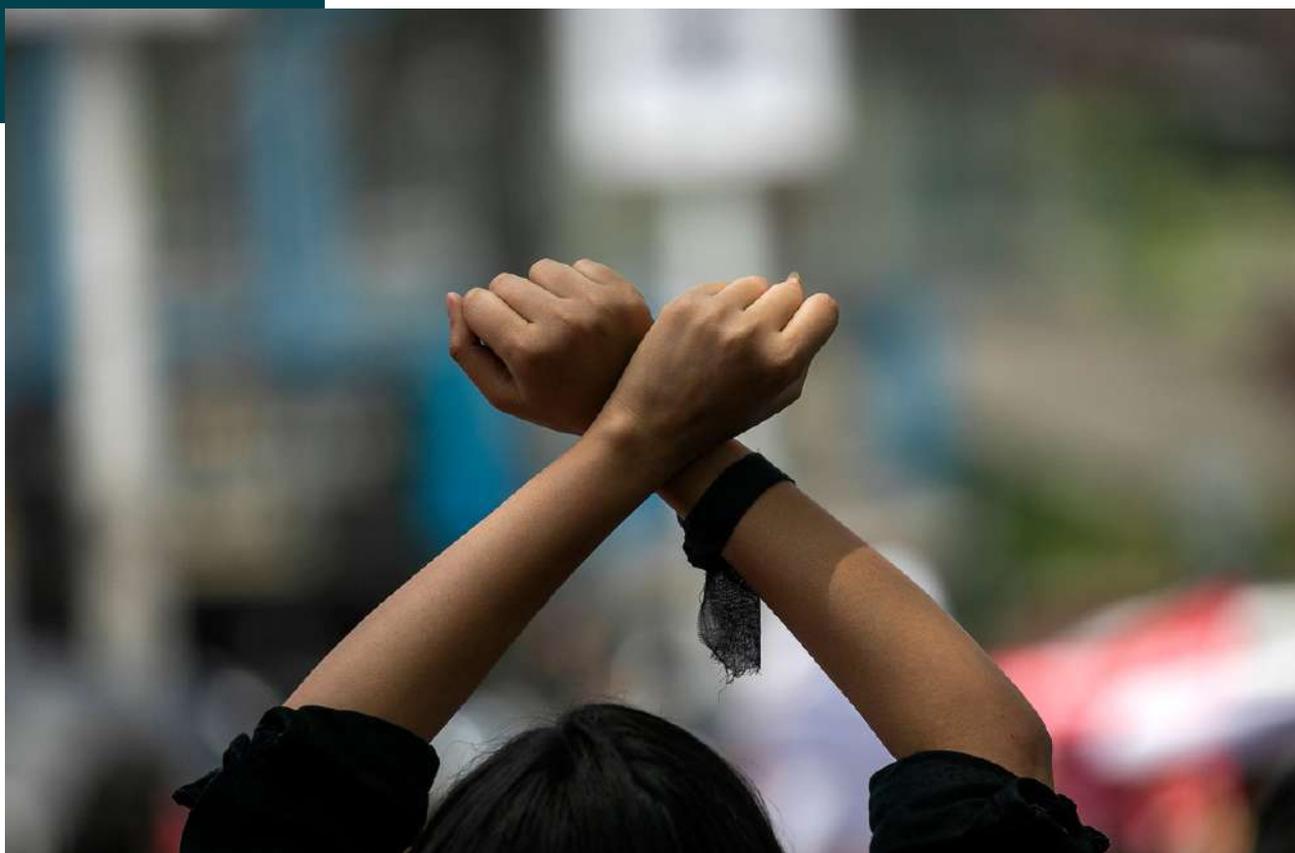
"One of the drivers of closing civic space is linked to the power of certain narratives"

"We see compelling narratives that connect to old and deep forms of power, prejudice, and fear. These are being used to undermine civil society work, and to attack activists and people claiming their human rights. They are also being used to persuade people that the status quo is inevitable, change is not possible, and participation or activism is pointless. They keep ideas that don't serve the majority in place. Populist rhetoric is increasingly visible. It taps into people's emotions and values, sometimes even using human rights language. This hurts solidarity, peace and social justice efforts."

"In many countries across the continent, we see the religious Right pushing their antiabortion, anti-LGBTI, anti-sex-work rhetoric, and governments are buying into it. That is causing people to die or to be stigmatised, marginalised, and be seen as second-class citizens, or worse, sub-human".

"In JASS, we work to understand the role of power in deepening the persecution of female human rights defenders and how narratives shape those power dynamics".[50]

"Part of the role of a narrative is to change problematic ways of thinking that prevail among your audience, or what your audience takes to be 'common sense'. Instead of presenting naked facts, a narrative explains the facts you want to highlight in such a way that the audience recognises them as problematic. It does this by reminding the audience of deeply held values and stimulating empathy. This encourages the audience to recognise that they share your values and vision of the world. The narrative then shows that there is dissonance between the audience's values and the situation." [51]

Building Alternative Narratives

Vision of a better world

Existing practice and research linked to alternative narrative-building suggests that instead of constantly rejecting or countering the negative messaging being promoted by dominant narratives, CSOs should engage with building their own alternative and positive public narratives.

> **"Narratives are a contested space – or at least it should be – for social movements and organisations that want to see change in the world. Social movements must also have their own narratives if they want to contest power and shift dominant narratives that shape our societies. Narratives that speak truly and propose our vision for a different world.**[52]

Co-creation of alternative narratives

Civil society organisations who have led the work on alternative narrative- building also emphasise the importance of not "imposing " these narratives on different groups and constituencies but rather co-constructing narratives with them in order to build new and different relationships and understanding.

> **"Narrative work is about changing what is 'known' about a group of people, or about a situation. It is, however, not about 'convincing' people; rather about building new and different relationships and understanding. Co-constructing narratives can be a key way to connect with different constituencies and build solidarity across groups, including those that didn't start out with the same perspective or agreement. It is as much about story-listening as storytelling.**[53]

Movement -Building

Narratives can mobilise and connect, as well as divide and isolate. Social, public or dominant narratives help to legitimise existing power relationships, prop them up, and make them seem natural. It's useful to think of narratives in terms of power, because then collective action and creative collaboration are clearly the only way to go if the aim is to reroute or disrupt these power dynamics.

> **"Narrative knowledge and framing know-how can help us to open civic space, collaborate better, and amplify other voices, helping us to be part of the biggest 'us' we can be. This work is beyond the scope of one organisation or sector. To shift or change sticky narratives that keep the status quo in place is going to require collaboration and creative collective action at a scale not seen before"** [54]

CSOs involved in alternative narrative building are also encouraged to seek to establish more mutually beneficial partnerships with other organisations. The pooling of resources is seen to present greater opportunities to tackle issues and make a collective impact. CSOs are encouraged to make these connections with other local CSOs, and with national, regional and international CSOs. Effective coordination, sharing resources, and transparent communication are seen to be important in building solidarity, which is a key factor in civil society resiliency and a valuable asset in the pursuit of democracy, peace, sustainable development and human rights.

Leaving No One Behind

The power of movements and the transformative potential of collective power are also really important to understand when constructing new narratives. Narrative-building work is about a collective approach and strategies for the common good and therefore can't be done by individuals alone. Collective power means asking: "who was left out before"?. Who was not part of informing the strategies when those rights were won the first time around? As new narratives are being built, attention is therefore paid to how different voices and collective power can contribute to ensuring that no one is left behind.

The importance of Narrative Frames[55]

Activists involved in the building of alternative narratives emphasise the critical role of "narrative frames". For example, a smear campaign may allege that CSOs are foreign agents paid by governments or philanthropists with malign intentions to damage national interests. And in this example, the dominant frame they've been hearing about CSOs through a smear campaign, is that they're foreign agents. Directly contradicting a frame or using a myth-busting format risks making the disinformation stick when it's heard by people outside existing supporters. If CSOs react to this with evidence that they are independent of their donors, or that their donors are supporting causes in line with the country's legal obligations, this messaging does not change the frame that CSOs have foreign connections, which is likely to have negative connotations. Instead, it keeps the frame centred on CSOs with foreign connections and tries to prove that this is nothing to worry about. But people tend to think in frames. Facts that conflict with frames tend to 'bounce off' and are not successful in changing people's attitudes or mind-sets. People are likely to stick with the dominant frame and reject facts that aren't compatible with it. It is important therefore to pay a lot of attention to existing narrative frames when trying to build alternative narratives.

The importance of Experimentation, Innovation & Bottom-Up Approaches

The overall aim of alternative narrative building is to positively influence public perceptions and attitudes, and this takes time. It is important that alternative narrative building initiatives adopt a longer-term approach, and that regular opportunities are built into the process for feedback, reflection, innovation and experimentation.[56]The experimental work carried out by JustLabs on alternative narrative-building is very instructive in this regard.[57]Unfortunately, their findings indicate that current funding mechanisms do not encourage innovation and experimentation as such funding mechanisms tend to support shorter-term project work (2-3 years maximum) with clearly defined objectives to be achieved. Therefore, there is a considerable amount of advocacy to be carried out in this area, to try to influence donors to ensure that the funding provided enables and supports effective narrative building, informed by the experience and insights of organisations such as Just Labs who have led on this kind of work.

FAILing, or a First Attempt In Learning, is something James Savage from the Fund for Global Human Rights encourages funders to not only be excited about, but to incentivize and enable.[58] He suggests some key points for funders who are interested in supporting narrative change work to bear in mind:

- Focus on the process, not product, and fund the process. Work on shifting norms, perceptions and deep currents in society has different timelines and measures of change!
- Embrace risk, unpredictable outcomes and experimentation. 'Success' is redefined by the learning, iterations and 'FAIL'ing forward.
- Understand the objective of a funder as 'accompanying a learning journey and building of narrative power', and translate this directly into an accountability framework focusing on changes and learning instead of impact.
- Resource local narrative change-makers & foster connection for mutual support, learning and collaboration. Lots of small initiatives may be the answer.
- 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.

"Be the Narrative"

A key finding from the narrative-building work of leading CSOs, and from Just Labs in particular, is that in trying to respond effectively to harmful narratives, CSOs are better off focusing their energy on collective action and the creation of new narratives that focus on their values and what they stand for. However, they have also found that it's not enough for CSOs to speak authentically about their values, or what they stand for, but that they need to do things differently too. They point out that CSOs need to act in such a way as to bring those values to life every day, or expect to be called out for it. They highlight the importance of CSOs doing what they say (i.e. "practice what you preach") as it builds public trust.[59]

Strengthening relationships with local communities

Leading CSOs involved in alternative narrative building work point out that the people that CSOs claim to represent are often not at the table or in the conversation when overall priorities are being identified. Some argue that CSOs have been failing to really engage with citizens and to represent their interests.[60] They believe that CSOs must change this dynamic to stay relevant, resilient and attuned to needs on the ground. Others argue that by building alternative narratives and using more compelling and easy-to-understand terms and stories, CSOs can begin to improve the public's perception of them.[61] This in turn can open opportunities to strengthen relationships between CSOs and local partners or citizens. It is claimed that CSOs need to prioritise this connection to build trust and legitimacy among their base, and that if this trust isn't built, it will be very challenging for CSOs to fight against the shrinking civic space they are experiencing. It is also pointed out that local communities have their own knowledge systems and means of culture production that are critical to putting forward new narratives, to claiming space and challenging mainstream conservative narratives that are contributing to oppression and marginalisation.[62]

Finding opportunities to influence those in power

In conversations around shifting or strengthening civic space, those CSOs who have been involved in narrative building work, highlight the fact that the government is often framed as the enemy.[63] But some believe that new mechanisms are needed to encourage the state to recognize that civic space is evolving, and that people need the ability to influence political processes and decision-making. They believe that CSOs should find a way to work with the local governments that will complement their work. Acknowledging the influence that government has on civil society, the importance of building a relationship between civil society and the people in power is often emphasised, where such a relationship is possible. While protest is understood as a legitimate and highly effective approach in many cases, it is claimed that there are other cases where civil society and government, especially on a local level, may have similar goals and opportunities to collaborate, such as around providing education or improving service delivery. Therefore, if CSOs can find small openings to cooperate with those in power on non-sensitive matters that advance development or human capital, for example, this can begin to shift government mind-sets about the value of civil society in general. Over time, this may create openings to influence broader policies that affect human rights, democracy and civic space.

Simplifying & communicating the narrative[64]

A failure by CSOs to communicate the importance of their work in terms that can be understood by those outside of the democracy, human rights and development fields can have serious implications. Whether the audience is at the international, national, or local level, the message of CSOs and their members need to be simplified and more direct.[65] If the term "civic space" doesn't resonate with ordinary people, it should be replaced by real world examples of the ways in which restrictions are impeding people's lives. If the term "human rights" is too abstract, CSOs should talk about the ability for individuals to express their opinions freely without repercussion, or the ability for people to vote for the candidate they prefer. There is also an opportunity to change dominant narratives by documenting success. CSOs can spread a positive narrative by sharing their achievements beyond donors to local government and society. By packaging their work in relevant and engaging messages, these organisations can raise awareness of what they do and why it matters.

Advocating for longer-term, flexible funding for narrative-building work

Traditional models of funding from governments and international foundations often pose problems in relation to alternative narrative building work. The short duration of most international aid funding (3 to 5 years) does not allow for long-term capacity building or ensure the true sustainability of projects. In this changing context, where the narrative-building & dissemination challenges facing civil society require long-term planning and investment, the 'usual" approach will not produce significant results. CSOs will have to fight for longer-term, more flexible options from traditional donors. Meanwhile, alternative models of funding that offer longer-term investment and more flexible allocations of funds attuned to the changing context must be pursued with non-traditional donors. And by working to simplify the narrative and better communicate their stories, values and needs, CSOs should be in a position to make their case to new, non-traditional donors (individuals, companies, impact investors and others).

CASE STUDIES

LISTEN TO "A SPACE FOR US PODCAST"
TO ACCESS THE INTERVIEWS
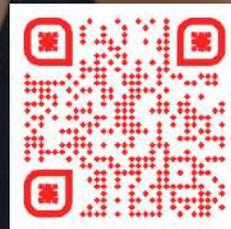
Bolivia

The Observatory of Human Rights Defenders

WATCH THE VIDEO HERE

UNITAS

We hope that whoever leads our countries takes into consideration that civil society is not the enemy because of its watchdog role- it's actually a friend when it comes to supporting democracy, development and rights. - Susana Eróstegui70

Bolivia is undergoing a transition for civil society organisations with the adoption of new forms of communication. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the ways CSOs connect with other groups - such as social movements- in both urban and rural areas. The digital divide makes access to information and the sharing of practices a challenge, and this is coupled with an obstructed civic space, resulting in the country witnessing social and political polarisation that affects the work of civil society organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The international treaties for the effective development of civil society which states and donors have signed up to need to be respected, and the role of civil society is key to development and the defence of democracy.
- Civil society needs funding for its sustainability which is a prerequisite for civil society to fulfil its important public interest role.
- Governments should ensure the legal and political sustainability of civil society organisations and promote the exercise of the freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly.

UNITAS, the national Bolivian platform of NGOs, is working on various digital initiatives aimed at expanding civic space in the country, creating alternative narratives and promoting collective dialogue. The UNITAS Observatory of Human Rights Defenders is part of the information system of the project "Adding Voices, Multiplying Actions: CSOs defending rights and networks for the prevention and protection of specific groups in Bolivia". The Observatory – the first of this kind in the country - collects, receives, and monitors data on violations of rights and fundamental freedoms from a variety of sources. The data is stored and disseminated on the digital platform with a dashboard which is updated "live", but it's also shared in an annual report which is presented publicly, and in the form of stories and articles through information bulletins and alternative news portals.

The Observatory is a virtual space that makes what is happening to CSOs and human rights defenders visible, in order to denounce and prevent restrictions to civil and political rights. With the bulletin "Alerta Común" (Common Alert), UNITAS has created a space for urgent action where specific violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Bolivia are denounced. For instance, in April 2022, the case of journalist Luis Muñoz was shared who was sent to San Pedro de La Paz prison merely for posting a meme on social media.

Additionally, with "Sumando Voces" (Adding Voices), a digital newspaper established by UNITAS with the support of the European Union, the platform addresses issues of collective interest and socio-political relevance complying with the "principles of truthfulness, transparency and inclusion". An emphasis is placed on stories related to the defence of the rights of indigenous peoples, defenders' organisations, journalists, and the environment, the latter as a cross-cutting issue. Through its platforms and content production, UNITAS shapes narratives about the work of civil society organisations, and triggers public debate in order to have an impact on the public agenda.

Paraguay

Developing narratives to fight corruption

POJOAJU

"The form and the content of alternative narratives are extremely important – narratives need both to both inform and to form people, to educate them." - Raúl Monte Domecq 71

The COVID-19 pandemic had huge repercussions on the health system of Paraguay, with a lot of families having to literally camp in front of hospitals. But despite the hardship, "necessity is the mother of creativity," and civil society adjusted to the digital sphere. Still, civic space is increasingly curtailed in Paraguay, notably in the digital sphere. The country is seeing a resurgence of censorship and surveillance reminiscent of the tactics utilised during the dictatorship which ended in 1989.

In Paraguay there is a worrying trend of several politicians creating their own NGOs to transfer funds and carry out illicit activities – notably during the COVID-19 pandemic with misuse of public money. Now the narrative that people receive about civil society is linked to corruption. As a result, POJOAJU is developing "prepositive narratives" to enlarge civic space and deepen the understanding of what civil society does. For instance, they organised a working group with over 35 young people who developed videos on the true role of CSOs by carrying out interviews and sharing individual and collective stories online.

In a recent report, POJOAJU deals with some essential aspects of these new forms of social articulation and digitalization challenges in the country – including the advantages and disadvantages of the use of social networks, as well as the handling of data and the emergence of threats to the privacy and security of users. But the report also illustrates examples of the use of information technologies for social mobilisation and for the benefit of civic space.

For the first time, this year POJOAJU with support from Forus, will collaborate with Red Encuentro in Argentina to reflect on the enabling environment for CSOs by carrying out a diagnosis and formulating advocacy proposals with their members in both countries. The overall objective of the project is for national platforms to improve their capacity to respond to restrictions on their operating environment, influence public debate, and generate new conversations with State bodies for the implementation and co-construction of public policies. At the end of the project, a publication will be produced that could inspire other CSOs in other countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Civil Society Organisations need to develop hopeful "pre-positive" narratives that can serve to strengthen civic space and will act as a means of bringing people together, rather than dividing them.

Pakistan

Changing narratives to strengthen civic space online and offline

AWAZ FOUNDATION PAKISTAN: CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

"13 million women do not have a computerised or digital national identity card. Because of that, they were unable to have their COVID vaccinations at the same time as men. They just couldn't register. This was, in fact, the biggest digital challenge during COVID." 72
- Zia ur Rehman.

There are major challenges to civic rights, democracy, human rights and rule of law in Pakistan, according to a recent survey jointly developed by Awaz Foundation Pakistan: Centre for Development Services, JANIC, PDA, ADA and AND. The survey was circulated among more than 19,000 members of CSOs, NGOs and INGOs working across Pakistan. In Pakistan CSOs face severe challenges and the gradual loss of development gains because of challenges to their own existence, due to a restrictive legal environment, lack of financial viability and a negative public image.

In the digital realm, activists face cyber bullying, online harassment as well as persecution and imprisonment. The Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act 2016, in particular, is being used to criminalise and penalise voices of dissent and to limit freedom of expression. Pakistan is in a transition phase. Both government and CSOs are using digital communication – from the COVID vaccinations certificates to the SDG citizen scorecard. Yet, 52% of people report not being able to express themselves freely. In addition to this, the absence of computerized national identity cards (CNICs) means that a large majority of women in Pakistan may not be able to exercise their right to vote in the local and national elections expected this year.

In Pakistan, there are several challenges that civil society organisations are facing due to the religious and orthodox mindsets of people, with most of the population thinking that NGOs are anti-religion. Others think that NGOs are working to promote a Western agenda. In particular, this perception applies to CSOs working on human rights , wth the transgender community and those demanding the promotion of democratic values, continuing to face lots of challenges. For instance during the Women's March in Pakistan, the public at large criminalized the action as anti-Islam. The slogan "my body, my right" was misunderstood. Digital communication has helped to develop alternative narratives, but many of those narratives are also considered negatively by the public at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- State authorities should abolish all laws criminalising human rights and the voice of communities who have been marginalised.
- Government should review the coercive policies and regulatory frameworks linked to NGOs and create legitimate spaces for them to ensure freedom of expression and association

Cape Verde

Radio Praça- communities become owners of narratives

PLATONG

"One of the things about narratives in countries like Cape Verde where you have different dialects is to make sure that your narratives are used and are made in such a simple way that everybody can understand it." - Dirce Varela

In Africa in general, and in Cape Verde Island in particular, the digitisation process has been a blessing and a curse. It's a curse because in poor countries the process of digitalisation transformation appears to be one more factor causing exclusion. It's often too expensive and as a result, access to the internet is not for everybody. Civil society has been trying to ensure that the digitalisation transformation process becomes an instrument of inclusion instead of exclusion. But digitalisation is also a blessing, an opportunity for civil society to make sure that everybody knows what we do. The whole process of advocacy has been totally transformed.

PLATONG takes advantage of community radio to reach people's houses every day and to take the voices and values of civil society organisations into communities. Despite being regarded as 'old media', community radio is one of the most popular media channels in Cape Verde Island, and plays an important role in society, particularly in rural districts. Such radio gives community members access to information, important local issues are aired, news disseminated and exchanged, opening up a marketplace of ideas and opinions and giving people the opportunity to express themselves socially, politically and culturally.

With Radio Praça, communities become the journalists and owners of narratives. A microphone and a sound system are placed in the middle of the community. Topics are decided within the community and different generations discuss issues together. All voices are documented and then shared across the island - with the government as well. During the pandemic, in particular, it was such an important time to make sure that the values and narratives of CSOs were understood and that communities recognised the power of being together. "Together, we are stronger", was one of the major narratives felt during the pandemic. The importance of using new technology and the digital environment available was also acknowledged, but above all solidarity was the most important factor, and even more so "solidarity in action".

RECOMMENDATIONS

- CSOs need to make sure that digital space is an inclusive space, that everybody has access to it and can take advantage of it in order to enhance democracy and citizenship.
- Civil society needs to be careful and have the time to stop and to analyse narratives. It cannot remain a passive consumer of narratives, or just to react to them. Civil society needs to be active in analysing narratives and ensure that the alternative narratives created are inclusive of the voices of all those left behind – of people with disabilities, victims and minorities whose rights have been violated.

India

Bridging the "information gap" on the work of civil society

VANI

"The language of the sector, the language of civil society, has become so complicated that only we can understand it, not the people in the streets and not even our families can understand what we do!" - Harsh JAITLI

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is a need for CSOs and others to work to reduce the fragmentation of civil society, and to encourage a stronger collective identity, and collective action
- CSOs need to provide information in the public domain, communicated in accessible language, which people can understand, so that the general public can learn about their work, and the challenges they face. This is important because the general public benefits from the good work of civil society, but it has no idea of how civil society works or functions. It is important that the public supports, helps and guides CSOs, and this should help to strengthen civic space.

During COVID, Indian civil society, as in other countries across the world, faced systematic attacks on civic space. One of the major disabling factors was reduced access to resources. Yet, civil society responded to unprecedented humanitarian crisis caused by pandemic by stretching to its limits. As the lockdown was announced in India, there was unpredicted flow of migrant workers, who due to fear of job loss started walking towards their villages. Due to strict lock down norms neither food, shelter nor transport was available. This was first face off of Indian people with COVID wherein a survey found that 23 per cent migrant workers, or one out of four respondents, had to walk back to their villages after coronavirus lockdown threatened their survival in cities and towns. Then came the second wave which took heavy tool of human lives in India. The Indian Civil society, despite the lack of resources, came out into the streets, to support local people with food, shelter, oxygen and medicines.

Interestingly, India is celebrating the 75th year of its independence, but very little information is available in the public domain about the contribution of Indian Civil Society in nation-building efforts. On the contrary, there is ample information propagating myths and negative information about the sector. These dominant negative generalisation leads to more restrictive regulatory environment and mistrust with state, and society. This gap of information is also used by vested interest to tarnish the image of the sector. This is also true at global level. Hence, it is very important for all of us to document and disseminate our achievements and challenges. Unfortunately, as a sector we are entering into a vicious cycle in which our silence if feeding negative narrative. The time has come that we start speaking a language which common people can understand. We need to use digital technology and social media to make this process more inclusive.

With support from Forus, VANI is developing a project based on mutual learning and collective ownership, to document the role of civil society in helping communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic exposed the fault lines in the social, economic, and health systems around the world, complicated by systematic restrictions on the enabling environment of civil society. Despite the challenges, CSOs at every level from the grassroots to the global level, emerged as crucial actors, providing even basic services to affected communities.

VANI's project will document the innovation, collaborations and partnerships set up by CSOs during the pandemic, as well as the response of communities to their work, so that this knowledge is not lost. This will be done through the documentation of success stories with the participation of more than 30 CSOs who are writing and validating the report that will be published in Hindi and in English. The findings will be shared through a social media campaign aiming to reach 6000 people; advocacy meetings with decision-makers and a multi-stakeholder dialogue, providing a joint platform for multiple stakeholders to interact and learn from each other. The report will be a tool in developing a positive narrative for the civil society sector, recognizing the collaboration that took place and promoting the role of CSOs in South Asia and beyond.

Nigeria

Self-regulation, transparency and accountability to change narrative

NNNGO

"We've attempted as much as possible to provide new narratives around the work of NGOs and nonprofits using information education and communication materials such as infographics and also, by developing short videos. We're relying very much on our ability to be able to use digital platforms to expand these narratives." - Oluseyi Babatunde Oyebisi

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The multi stakeholder process between governments, civil society, social media platforms, private sector, and citizens needs to be improved. These stakeholders need to come together to decide how to address the concerns of all citizens around social media, misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and online content. These issues have to be balanced with the need to ensure freedom of expression.
- The donor community needs to support civil society, to be able to address civic space concerns, in ways that ensure the independence of civil society, and that recognises its plurality and its diversity also.
- CSOs need to educate governments on the various typologies of civic space. In Nigeria we see political witch hunting, disappearances, and attacks on politicians. Civic space is not purely a civil society issue- we all need to map its progress, providing solutions for how challenges to civic space can be addressed.

The online civic space in Nigeria, is under increasing attack as a result of activism and advocacy. The online civic space in Nigeria exploded in 2012 with the Occupy Nigeria fuel subsidy protest which is considered one of the earliest major examples of mobilising for civic action using digital media platforms. Since then, other examples of socio-political movements that started online in Nigeria include the EndSARS protests, OpenNASS, Bring Back Our Girls and #NorthIsBleeding.

Civil society organisations increasingly voice their concerns online, and have contributed to the popularisation of the use of hashtags. However, negative narratives, government-sponsored trolling and cyberattacks, such as against Samuel Ogundipe, a Premium Times journalist, as well as the dissemination of doctored images, and the hijacking of hashtags are widespread. In 2021, the Twitter ban and police brutality during the #EndSARS protests contributed to the continuous repression of civic space in Nigeria.

As part of the Nigeria Network of NGOs (NNGO's) strategic work on civic space strengthening, its activities are centred on fostering self-regulation amongst civil society organisations in Nigeria to improve legitimacy, accountability and transparency, based on existing laws. We believe that self-regulation, transparency and accountability will help to improve narratives about CSOs. Nonprofits are coming together in working groups, to show leadership on some issues that citizens have raised, especially in the areas of proactive disclosure and the publishing of audit reports in the hope of building a movement and countering the narrative around the lack of transparency of the sector.

CSOs need to be visibly engaged in shaping the narrative on non-profit regulation, but it can only be achieved if NGOs are legal, transparent and accountable. When a civil society organisation is legitimate, transparent and accountable to stakeholders, it boosts the credibility of the organisation and improves effective engagements with donors, government and the general public. Transparency and accountability help CSOs compliance with stipulated guidelines and change the narrative about CSOs, and the public perception of their activities and their use of funds. Greater transparency means that the public can easily ascertain where the money of NGOs is coming from, and when and how it is spent. It enables CSOs to put in place internal self-regulatory mechanisms and standards that serve as a check to their various activities. This is then reflected in NGO's governance strategies and their activities.

Colombia

Reinforcing positive narratives as a strengthening action

CCONG

"Throughout history there have been narratives and that still prevail and that represent anchors which limit society's full development " - Lina Paola Lara Negrette

In 2021, the Colombian Confederation of NGOs -CCONG- carried out the initiative Narratives to re-present the role of CSOs. The purpose was to identify the expressions that different actors (CSOs, public and private sector) use to refer to what CSOs are, and what they do, in order to prioritise the changes required in the sector, in order to boost its development and stimulate its capacity for innovation. Throughout history there have been narratives that still prevail and that represent anchors which limit society's full development. In order to develop renewed narratives about the purpose and actions of CSOs, CCONG considered it necessary to review and assess the expressions that different stakeholders use to describe role that civil society plays and the development benefits associated with them,

Reinforcing positive narratives is considered a strengthening action that has a real impact on different levels of CSO capacities. By convening actors from the civil society sector, representatives of the public and private sectors, information was gathered on the point of view of each of these groups, about the current role of CSOs, the direction they should take and the different competencies to be developed in order to achieve their objectives. In order to select positive expressions because they inspire action and create a new state of mind, CCONG enquired about the emotions and feelings which various role descriptions evoked. Those expressions that generated emotions of well-being, satisfaction and motivation were selected to describe the fundamental actions that fulfil the role of CSOs. « Killer words '' were also identified, which are expressions that discourage possibilities for action.

The positive role descriptions that were identified included : contributing to sustainable territorial development , peace-building , working in a complementary manner with the state , helping citizens to exercise their rights and fulfil their duties within a democratic framework , and giving voice to other voiceless people

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The particular factors that needed to change in order to facilitate the positive cultural transition of the civil society sector and the transformation of public attitudes towards CSOs are :
- Strengthen & improve democracy as governments have legitimised a weak democracy in Colombia, which maintains inequality
- More human rights, social control and peacebuilding needed
- Avoid CSOs acting as executors or operators of resources because it generates competition, not union or a sense of belonging to a collective.
- More collaborative, judicious and relevant work with public sector entities as the best way for CSOs to make themselves known and be valued by the general public

Uganda

Using language to expand rather than restrict civic space

UNNGOF

"Civil society needs to develop and use language that is fully appreciated by the people" - Moses Isooba

Civic space is being narrowed not only by governments but also paradoxically by some of the vocabulary and language used by civil society itself. The development language being used - which is English and French in the region - often does not reflect the different ethnicities and languages of communities across Africa. In Africa people are still recovering from decolonisation and in the process they are still being affected by the language being used in the development sector. Terms such as "desk officer" or "in the field" are reminiscent of the colonial era. INGOs often refer to their sub offices in the South as 'Country Offices", as many have argued, this country office model is akin to a colonial outpost of some sort and many say the INGO is the remaining rope tying us to the colonial ship. We need to broaden civic space without using language and vocabulary that actually further constricts the space we are trying to expand.

UNNGOF under the RINGO Social Lab is an "idea carrier" for a prototype on language and lexicon. The main thrust of this prototype is to explore the use of technology to enable more inclusive communication that is less (or not) (implicitly) neo-colonial, sexist, racist and made more accessible for global South practitioners. The idea is to explore the application of IT/AI to redress and replace the lexicon of (pejorative) jargon, idioms and terminology 'imposed' on civil society organisations involved in the international aid industrial complex and development. A twin pathway is proposed:

a) draw on and collate existing proposals and, with additional, work, design a 'lexicon' of acceptable terms, words, idioms to be applied through the development of a 'Grammarly' style search and replace function software

b) undertake an online translation trial using Google Translate or other non-proprietary platform development documentation typically relied on by aid NGOs, both domestic and international

Decolonising language is critically important because language sets the terms of engagement between the North and South. In as much as possible language should be depoliticized and decolonized. Development and humanitarian assistance are political. But our language should remain nonpartisan. Political parties will come and go, but inequalities will remain if our language begins to mirror that of the people in power, especially if the intentions behind the rhetoric are disingenuous.

United Kingdom

On "depoliticising and decolonising" the language we use

FIND THE RESOURCE HERE

BOND

Language sets the terms of engagement between the North and South. Over the last years, Bond, the UK network for organisations working in international development, has developed a language guide, to make communication consistent with their values. The platform asked itself: "Does the language Bond uses reinforce colonial or outdated thinking? Has Bond's language evolved to capture our efforts to be more progressive, considered, inclusive and locally- led? Are we reinforcing political language that undermines our remit? Is the language we use both publicly and privately consistent with Bond's values of being "open, dynamic, influential and collaborative?"

Their piece of work sits amongst a suite of work Bond is doing internally to get its house in order and to support the sector on several issues including pay transparency and fairness, inclusive recruitment, gender equality, shifting power, diverse leadership and safeguarding.

4.
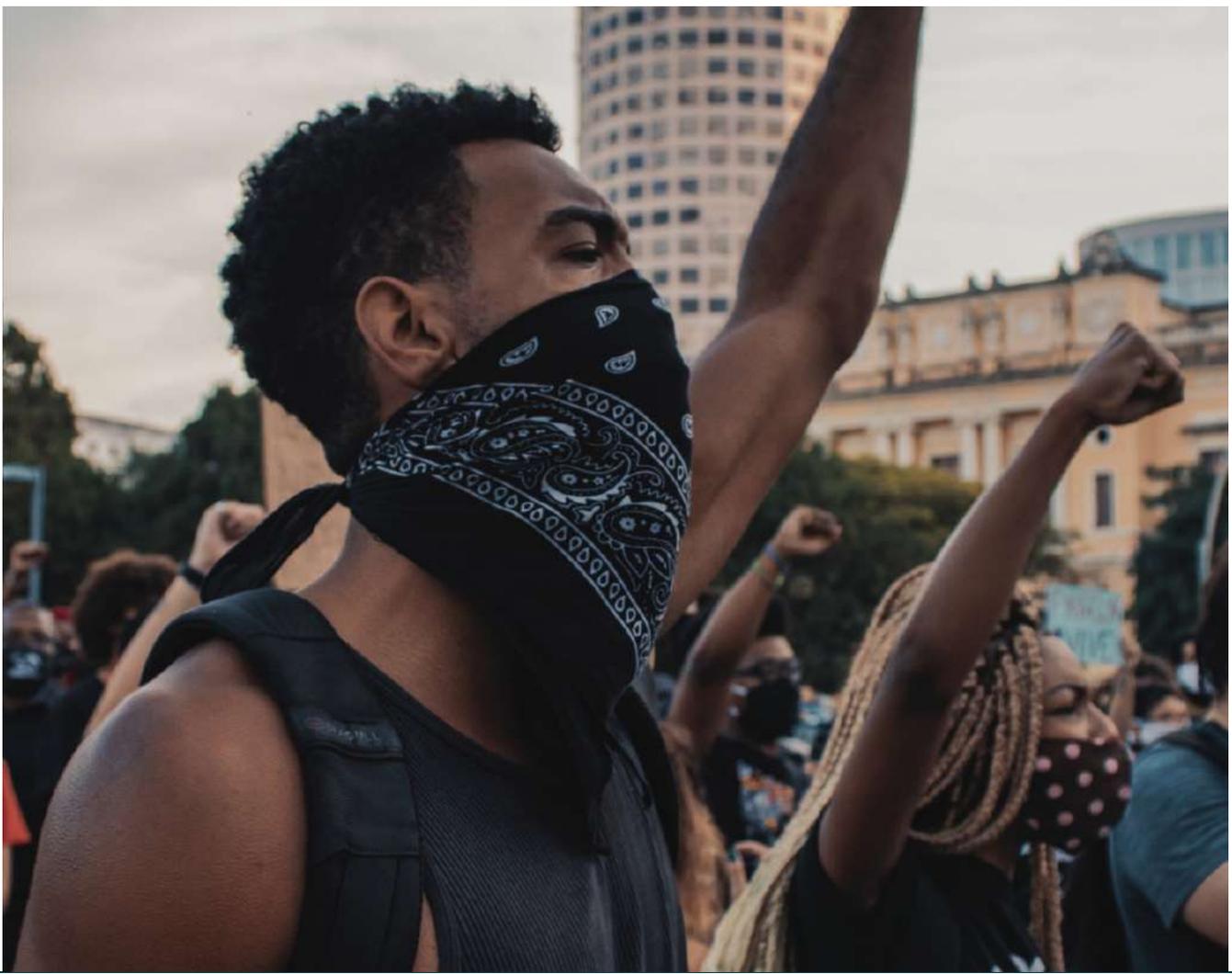
KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

CSOs are often at the forefront of defending basic human rights and liberties such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, holding power to account, raising awareness, promoting participation and affecting change – all of which are fundamental to free and democratic societies.

Unfortunately, around the globe, restrictions on freedoms of speech, assembly, and association are shrinking and transforming the space for civil society organisations to operate.[66] Whether the challenges are linked to government crackdowns on internet access, scrutiny over international funding, or citizen distrust of terms like "human rights," one thing is certain, the operating environment for CSOs has changed for the worse in many parts of the world. This report examines several key issues which have impacted on civic space across different regions and countries of the world over recent years and are likely 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 across diverse national and regional contexts.

To date, there is little evidence on the part of progressive elements of the international community of an overarching, strategic approach to addressing the growing crisis of civic space around the world.[67] Any long-term efforts on the part of concerned governments, donors, and other stakeholders to support and strengthen civic space around the world must focus on developing the capacities of CSOs to advocate for, and to defend civic space in their countries. This should include supporting civil society to build its own alternative, positive, public narratives with the aim of creating stronger societal foundations for civil society's public interest work, of strengthening civic space everywhere, and of encouraging enhanced public protection for activists and campaigners who are subject to unwarranted attacks by the authorities, or by other powerful interests.

Civic Space

- Around the globe, freedoms of speech, assembly, and association are shrinking and increased restrictions are transforming the space for civil society organizations[68]
- 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.[69]
- 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 [70]
- 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.[71]

COVID 19

- The COVID 19 pandemic changed the way many civil society organisations operate, causing many to shift part of their activities online.[72]
- 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.[73] 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. [74]
- 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. [75]

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.[76]
- 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.[77]
- 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.[78]
- 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".[79]
- 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.[80]
- 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. [81]
- 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.[82]
- 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.[83]
- 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.[84]

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.[85]

- 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.[86]

- 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.[87]

- 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.[88]

- 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.[89]

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.

5.

RESOURCES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

The resources in this section are aimed at CSOs who are interested in learning more about Digitalization and Narratives. This does not claim to be an exhaustive list of available resources but provides a representative selection of what is available.

Resources on Digitalization[91]

- Access Now – #WhyID, a global coalition of CSOs, activists, technologists, researchers, lawyers, and other digital identity experts, to fight back against the dangerous wave of centralised digital identity systems appearing around the world, and to advocate for rights-respecting approaches to identity management. Sign the #WhyID open letter.
- <A+> Alliance for Inclusive Algorithms is a global and multidisciplinary feminist coalition of academics, activists and technologists prototyping the future of AI. Call to Action on decolonising tech and creating new models of equality and systems change. Submit your paper.
- Civic Tech Innovation Network (CTIN) is a Community of Practice and action learning network for people with an interest and commitment to leveraging the nexus between technology and civic activism. Learn more about the network.
- CIVICUS Grassroots Revolution and the Shift The Power UK Funders Collective are strategic streams of work aimed at improving funder relations, ways of work and power dynamics with grassroots activists and movements left behind, marginalised and most impacted by structural inequities. Join the grassroots-led movement and learn more about the Youth Action Lab.
- Connect Humanity supports, catalyses, and scales holistic solutions providing people with the internet access and means needed to participate fully in a digital society. Learn more about the support they provide.
- Purposeful is a feminist hub for girls activism, rooted in Africa and working worldwide, calling all girls groups and collectives interested in funding opportunities and connecting with other girl activists in their region. Submit your profile.
- Red S.O.S Aldeas Infantiles: The initiative was created to promote and support spaces for participation, mobilisation and citizenship for young people in Bogota. Learn more.
- Rights CoLab advances human rights by fostering collaboration among experts across the fields of civil society, technology, business, and finance. Fill out the Google form to express interest in engaging with the 'RINGO' project.
- TechSoup's Hive Mind is a cutting-edge online harbour and community of practice gathering activists, journalists, CSOs, teachers, university students, and a wider community interested in learning more about improving media literacy skills online countering disinformation, digital safety and security, and creating positive narratives. Get inspired.

Resources on Building Alternative Narratives

- https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/
- https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621085/
- Exploring the power of narrative & collective action: Panel Narratives x Civic Space Oxfam Convening, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38vKpCvpzBo
- https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/civic-space-guide/43904
- https://narrativeinitiative.org/
- https://digitalgrassroots.org/blog/read-the-report-community-leaders-for-internet-advocacy.html
- https://www.thisisreframe.org/blog-posts/what-the-south-taught-me-about-predicting-narratives?fbclid=IwAR25dBDIcAqe2oEHHX2Os2PqvuXe-qQ7tHcxmPyU83PnNR7FjTH0UnRfSCo
- Training on Narrative Building and Storytelling - European Network of Equality Bodies, https://www.archive.equineteurope.org/IMG/pdf/summary_-_training_on_narrative_building_and_story_telling.pdf
- Varun Gauri, 'Public Narratives are Bad Stories about Fears" https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2021/02/public-narratives-are-bad-stories-about-fears.html
- How to create positive narratives - Let's do it foundation, https://letsdoitfoundation.org/2020/11/19/how-to-create-positive-narratives-1-4/
- A narrative as a mosaic (Thomas Coombes, 2020) , https://medium.com/new-media-advocacy-project/from-megaphone-to-mosaic-five-principles-for-narrative-communications-c5105c91707
- Kori Morgan, What makes an effective narrative? - Pen & Pad, https://penandthepad.com/effective-narrative-22378.html
- Toward New Gravity - Charting a Course for the Narrative Initiative (2017), https://narrativeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/TowardNewGravity-June2017.pdf
- Butler, Israel. "How to talk about civic space: a guide for progressive civil society facing smear campaigns", Liberties, December 2021.
- Crabtree-Condor, Isabel. "Exploring the power of narrative & collective action: Panel Narratives x Civic Space Oxfam Convening", Youtube, January 2020.

- Nicole Walshe and Anne Mai Baan. "Hope, Play, Relate: Changing narratives for greater solidarity and open civic space", Debating Development Research, http://www.developmentresearch.eu/?p=1112
- https://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/2021-narrative-reading-list-to-launch-your-2022/
- https://www.ariadne-network.eu/more-than-words/
- https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/why-human-rights-campaigning-needs-to-change-more-than-just-its-framing/
- La comunicazione positiva. Narrazioni e strumenti per il cambiamento
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kbdYQ3BDY0
- https://www.thegoodlobby.it/wpcontent/uploads/2020/07/Narrative_Lab_Deck_ITA.pdf
- https://hbr.org/2016/03/how-to-build-a-strategic-narrative
- https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621020/bk-narrative-power-collective-action-part1-080720-es.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y (SPANISH)
- https://civicus.org/icsw/media/attachments/2021/05/25/spa-icsw-info-graphic3.pdf
- Thomas Coombes, SEEING HOPE A Visual Communications Guide for Human Rights, https://seeinghope.fineacts.co/
- Thomas Coombes, Hope-based communication, https://www.hope-based.com/about
- Narrative power & collective action: conversations with people working to change narratives for social good, https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/
- Instead of shrinking space, let's talk about humanity's shared future, https://www.openglobalrights.org/instead-of-shrinking-space-lets-talk-about-humanitys-shared-future/
- https://www.techsoupeurope.org/megaphone-webinar-resources-about-hope-based-communication/
- Webinar with Thomas Coombes: Hope based communications, an antidote to NGO apathy?
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_6WFd8L0Ks
- Common Cause Foundation , https://commoncausefoundation.org/
- PIRC , https://publicinterest.org.uk/

Narrative organizing

- Building muscle: How positive narratives can beat fake news - MobLab , https://mobilisationlab.org/stories/moblab-live-how-positive-narratives-beat-fake-news/
- Micheal D. Jones & Deserai Crow , Mastering the Art of the Narrative using Stories to share Public Policy, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2018/07/18/mastering-the-art-of-the-narrative-using-stories-to-shape-public-policy/

Narratives as a tool for influencing policy change

- https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/view/journals/pp/46/2/article-p217.xml
- Thomas Coombes, How to change narratives with hope, https://medium.com/@the_hope_guy/how-to-change-narratives-with-hope-52f8a15a3b02
- Thomas Coombes, A Guide to hope-based Communications & Checklist, https://www.openglobalrights.org/hope-guide/

Developing Your Organizational Voice Worksheet

- Be The Narrative - Krizna Gomez and Thomas Coombes
- 5 ways civil society can build resiliency as civic space changes - Partners Global
- From Megaphone to Mosaic: five principles for narrative communications - Thomas Coombes
- The Narratives We need - Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC)
- Narrative Lab - Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (CILD)

Narrative Spices: an invitational guide for flavorful human rights
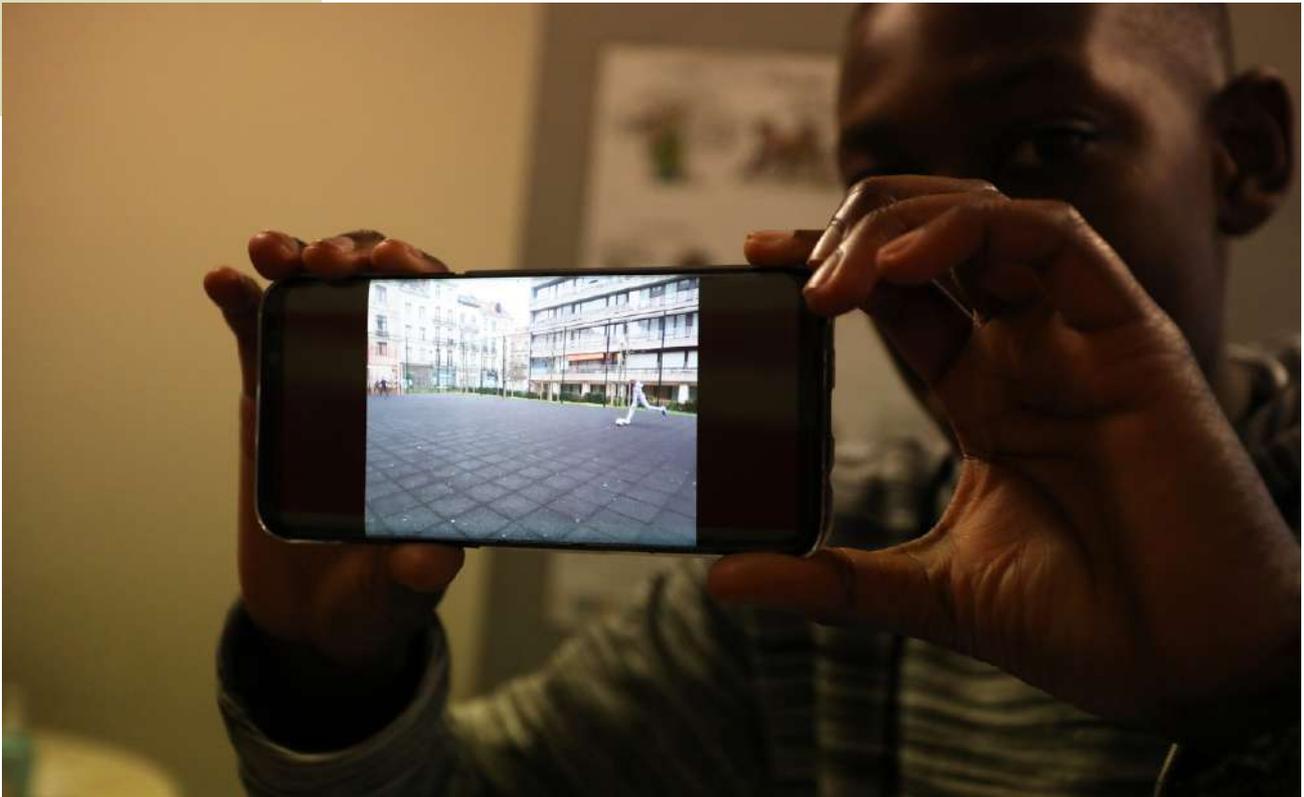
Additional Resources [92]

- Anat Shenker Osorio , A Brilliant Way of Living Our Lives: How to Talk About Human Rights - https://cild.eu/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/06/NL_HowToTalk_HR_EN.pdf
- Winning The Narrative - Re-taking the Space and Building New Narratives, https://cild.eu/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/Winning_The_Narrative_Deck_EN.pdf
- Open Global Rights - Positive Narratives to Mobilise for Change , https://www.openglobalrights.org/positive-narratives/
- James Logan , New Year, New Human Rights Narrative?, https://www.openglobalrights.org/new-year-new-human-rights-narratives/ -
- HYPERLINK "about:blank"Thaler Pekar, The Benefits of Building a Narrative Organization , https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_benefits_of_building_a_narrative_organization
- Oxfam , Narrative Power and Collective Action , https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621020/bk-narrative-power-collective-action-part1-080720-en.pdf?sequence=7

6.

REFERENCES
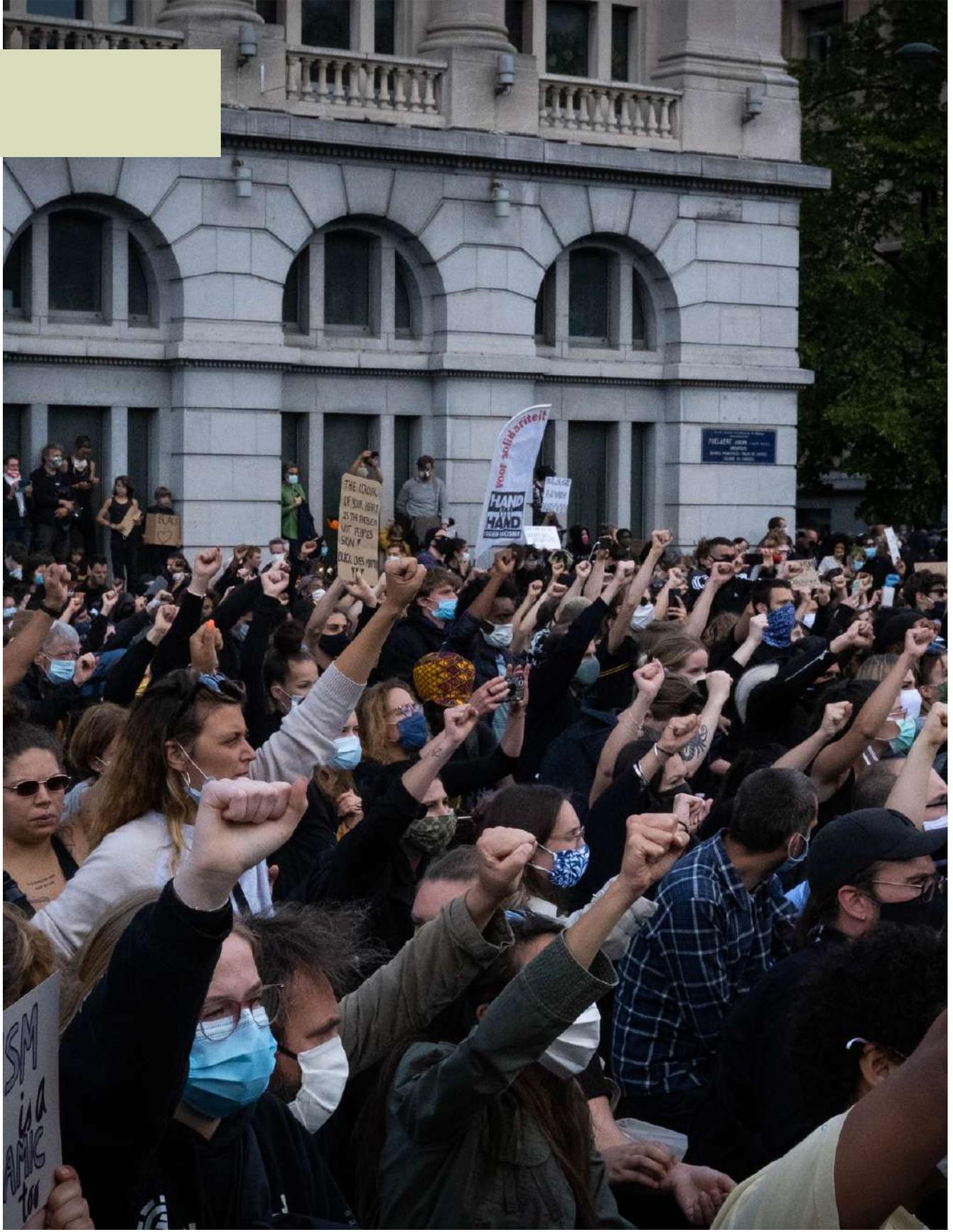
1 The quotation is from Marek Tuszynski, co-founder and creative director of Tactical Tech, a Berlin-based international civil society organisation that engages with citizens and civil society to explore the impacts of technology on society and individual autonomy. See https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3954-online-civic-space-we-shouldn-t-expect-tech-giants-to-solve-the-problems-that-they-have-created.

2 https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2021/03/09/digitizing-civic-spaces-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-beyond/

3 https://www.open-contracting.org/2020/04/07/covid-19-data-driven-monitoring-in-ukraine-how-much-do-masks-cost/

4 https://uncaccoalition.org/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-good-governance-and-anti-corruption-efforts-in-latin-america/

5 https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/. The Tracker describes itself as "monitoring government responses to the pandemic that affects civic freedoms and human rights, focusing on emergency laws. The tracker is a collaborative effort by the ICNL, ECNL, and our global network of partners".

6 https://pandemicbigbrother.online/en/

7 "The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space", https://www.eesc.europa.eu/es/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/implications-covid-19-pandemic-fundamental-rights-and-civic-space

8 https://www.icnl.org/post/analysis/covid-19-the-surveillance-pandemic

9 https://www.privateinternetaccess.com/blog/polands-covid-19-selfie-app-raises-privacy-questions-will-everyone-eventually-be-tracked/

10 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51733145

11 https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/south-koreas-experiment-in-pandemic-surveillance/

12 https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/18/hong-kong-uses-electronic-wristbands-to-enforce-coronavirus-quarantine.html

13 https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/03/armenia-law-restricts-privacy-amid-covid-19-fight

14 https://www.oecd.org/dac/Digital-Transformation-and-the-Futures-of-Civic-Space-to-2030.pdf

15 For a number of accounts of these developments, see Tactical Tech's report, https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-perspective/; Also https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2021/03/09/digitizing-civic-spaces-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-beyond/; the report by the ICNL, at https://www.icnl.org/our-work/technology-civic-space- and the report by Forus on an 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

16 Marek Tuszynski, https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3954-online-civic-space-we-shouldn-t-expect-tech-giants-to-solve-the-problems-that-they-have-created

17 https://www.icnl.org/our-work/technology-civic-space

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

19 https://transparency.fb.com/data/government-data-requests/?
source=https%3A%2F%2Ftransparency.facebook.com%2Fgovernment-data-requests

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

21 UN Report (A/HRC/41/41) Freedom of Association in the Digital Age

22 UN Report (A/HRC/41/41), Paragraph 29, https://documents-dds-
ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/141/02/PDF/G1914102.pdf?OpenElement

23 This section draws extensively on the report by Tactical Tech,
https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-perspective

24 See https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/03/report-online-hate-increasing-against-minorities-says-expert and
https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1087412

25 This section draws extensively on the report, https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-
resources/news/interviews/3954-online-civic-space-we-shouldn-t-expect-tech-giants-to-solve-the-problems-that-they-
have-created

26 https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/11/22/the-future-of-digital-spaces-and-their-role-in-democracy

27 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/the-internet-doesnt-have-to-be-awful/618079/

28 https://www.elon.edu/u/imagining/surveys/xiii-2021/improving-toxic-online-forums-2035/

29 https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/03/12/inside-taiwans-new-digital-democracy

30 Marek Tuszynski, of Tactical Tech, https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-
perspective/

31 Shoshanna Zuboff, Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power (2018)

32 Jay Owens, https://www.elon.edu/u/imagining/surveys/xiii-2021/improving-toxic-online-forums-2035/

33 https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/11/22/public-digital-spaces-will-be-improved-tech-can-be-fixed-
governments-and-corporations-can-reorient-incentives-and-people-can-band-together-to-work-for-reform

34 This section draws extensively on https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-
perspective

35 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/3/mapping-internet-shutdowns-around-the-world

36 https://www.accessnow.org/

37 "The return of digital authoritarianism: internet shutdowns in 2021" -
https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2022/05/2021-KIO-Report-May-24-2022.pdf

38 https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2022/05/2021-KIO-Report-May-24-2022.pdf

39 https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton

40 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/3/mapping-internet-shutdowns-around-the-world

41 Nazar Nicholas Kirama, president and CEO of the Internet Society chapter in Tanzania and founder of the Digital
Africa Forum.

42 https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gaef3523.doc.htm

43 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)

44 This section draws extensively on Janna Anderson and Lee Raini, The Future of Digital Spaces and their Role in Democracy, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2021/11/PI_2021.11.22_2035-Digital-Public-Sphere_FINAL.pdf

45 https://icscentre.org/tag/digitalisation/

46 This section draws extensively on Oxfam's book, Narrative Power and Collective Action: Conversations with people working to change narratives for social good, https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/ and on Liberties Messaging Guide for Civil Society, https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/civic-space-guide/43904 as well as the work of JustLabs, https://www.justlabs.org/home. See also Thomas Coombes, A narrative as a mosaic (2020), https://narrativeinitiative.org/

47 See also *Training on Narrative Building and Storytelling*, the European Network of Equality Bodies*, How to create positive narratives*, https://letsdoitfoundation.org/2020/11/19/how-to-create-positive-narratives-1-4/ Let's do it foundation, Krizna Gomez and Thomas Coombes, "Be The Narrative", https://www.openglobalrights.org/be-the-narrative/, and Kari Morgan, "What makes an effective narrative?" https://penandthepad.com/effective-narrative-22378.html

48 https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/

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

50 https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/

51 Liberties, How to Talk about Civic Space: A Guide for Progressive Civil Society Facing Smear Campaigns, https://dq4n3btxmr8c9.cloudfront.net/files/SyG95z/Liberties_Civic_Space_Framing_Guide.pdf

52 https://onthinktanks.org/articles/elena-mejia-julca-the-creative-activist/

53 https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/

54 https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621020/bk-narrative-power-collective-action-part1-080720-en.pdf

55 This section is drawn from https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/civic-space-guide/43904

56 https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/be-the-narrative-revolutionising-human-rights/

57 https://www.justlabs.org/be-the-narrative

58 https://globalhumanrights.org/

59 See https://www.justlabs.org/publications and https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/be-the-narrative-revolutionising-human-rights/

60 Randall Puljek Shank, "Civic Agency in Governance: The Role of Legitimacy with Citizens vs Donors" (2018) 29 VOLUNTAS, 870, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11266-018-0020-0

61 https://www.partnersglobal.org/newsroom/5-ways-civil-society-can-build-resiliency-as-civic-space-changes/

62 https://onthinktanks.org/articles/phumi-mtetwa-the-black-feminist-queer-internationalist/

63 Saskia Brechenmacher and Thomas Carothers, "Defending Civic Space: Is the International Community Stuck?" https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/22/defending-civic-space-is-international-community-stuck-pub-80110

64 This section draws from https://www.partnersglobal.org/newsroom/5-ways-civil-society-can-build-resiliency-as-civic-space-changes/

65 See https://www.partnersglobal.org/newsroom/5-ways-civil-society-can-build-resiliency-as-civic-space-changes/

66 https://findings2021.monitor.civicus.org/

67 https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/22/defending-civic-space-is-international-community-stuck-pub-80110

68 https://findings2021.monitor.civicus.org/

69 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

70 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/

71 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.

72 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/

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

74 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

75 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

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

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

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

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

80 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

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

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

83 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

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

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

86   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/

87   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/

88   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

89   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/
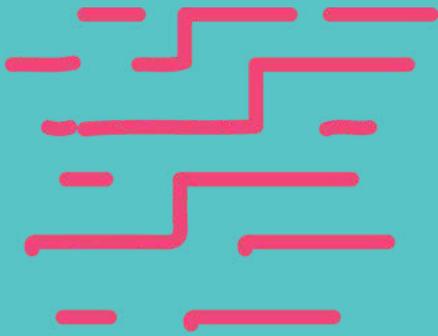
90 On 'social accountability mechanisms' see the World Bank Social Development Paper 76/2004, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/327691468779445304/pdf/310420PAPER0So1ity0SDP0Civic0no1076.pdf

91 These are drawn from Vicky Tongue, Miriam Niehaus, Wolfgang Jamann, Six takeaways for action from Global Perspectives 2021 – Let's Talk About Power! (2021) https://icscentre.org/2021/11/

92 https://cild.eu/en/narrative-lab/#!community