

# International Civic Forum

## Anticipating Futures for Civil Society Operating Space

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With the support of



## Outcome

The International Civic Forum (ICF) 2022 focused on the topic of **“Anticipating Futures for Civil Society Operating Space”** and brought together 60 civil society representatives. The ICF 2022 kicked off a three-year initiative of the [International Civil Society Centre \(ICSCentre\)](#) to strengthen anticipatory capacities and future readiness of civil society professionals who are working to defend civic and civil society operating space. The initiative aims to increase awareness and readiness of (international) civil society organisations – CSOs – to address current and future challenges at the intersection of civic space and crises, develop future scenarios, and translate them into concrete strategies to become more futures-ready. A starting point of this initiative was a [landscape mapping](#) conducted by Heather Hutchings and Danny Vannucchi that compiled existing research, initiatives and resources on the future of civic space and CSOs’ preparedness; analysed what CSOs have been learning from past and present crises that can inform future scenarios for civil society operating space; and identified gaps that require collective sector approaches. The mapping – also presented at the event – informed the ICF agenda. The objectives of the ICF were to raise awareness why CSOs need to move beyond reactive responses to shrinking space for civil society and become more anticipatory; discuss and show examples of how futures thinking and foresight can be useful; and generate ideas on building collective cross-sector anticipatory capacities and actions.

In this outcome document you will find the following chapters:

- 1) [Setting the scene: Why should civil society actively shape the future?](#)
- 2) [Identifying trends impacting civic and civil society operating space](#)
- 3) [Building future preparedness and anticipatory capacity](#)
- 4) [Forecasting vs. foresight and putting them into action](#)
- 5) [Building collective capacities and cross-sector infrastructure for anticipatory action](#)
- 6) [Moving forward](#)



## Summary of sessions

### Setting the scene: Why should civil society actively shape the future?

Future is often viewed as something that happens to us, rather than something we actively shape. People working in civil society tend to have a relatively pessimistic – or maybe realistic – view of the future but feel they can make a difference. But not everyone feels like that because some feel disempowered and excluded from the future they will have to live in. Civil society can give people a path to feel they can make a difference and imagine a world that has place and protection for them. Therefore, CSOs should **navigate and shape the future** – weathering shocks and anticipating trends.

However, there is no one single future, but multiple futures that need to be woven together. A duty of the civil society sector is to find ways to weave together the best, most just, positive futures, and support transition to those futures without harm. To imagine and anticipate futures, **strategic foresight** can be applied. Strategic foresight can help us deal with uncertainty and complexity, assess (current) decisions and innovations if they are fit for future, and become better at anticipation of new opportunities and future challenges. It needs to be made clear that strategic foresight is not about predicting the future; it's about avoiding surprises and shocks, and actively working towards a better future. If CSOs don't do that, we're carrying the inequities of the past into the future and accepting that the injustices and inequalities that we've inherited from the past will inevitably be part of the future. Civil society can imagine and champion different futures and offer alternatives to current powers shaping the future such as governments, military or corporations.

**Being more anticipatory requires being more participatory.** Good futures should challenge the world to consider different perspectives, impacts, needs, and hopes so we can create futures with new power structures, representation and inclusion, and new ways to deliver powerful change. Read more about this in the blog [“Whose future is it anyway? Civil society and strategic foresight”](#).

### Identifying trends impacting civic and civil society operating space

It is necessary to differentiate between a “**crisis**”, a high impact turning point or time of intense danger, and a “**trend**”, a general direction of development over time with the potential to become a powerful change-maker. As highlighted in the [landscape mapping](#), CSOs are good at responding to sudden crises with their crisis response mechanisms but **there is a gap in understanding and acting on longer-term trends that are underlying crises** and impacting civic space and civil society operating conditions. Crises are often symptoms of trends and the following trends – often intersecting – were identified in the group discussions:

- Increasing polarization in the world and in the civil society sector
- Rising authoritarianism and populism
- Securitisation



- VUCA<sup>1</sup> world (disruption at intersections of different issues, rapid and accelerating pace of change, etc.)
- Changed world order (e.g., corporate power, role of big tech)
- Interconnectedness (of trends, crises and responses)
- Climate change
- Demand for decolonisation and localisation
- Challenge to legitimacy and relevance of CSOs
- Crisis mindset in the civil society sector

The listed trends impacting civic and civil society operating space matched with the key trends outlined in the [mapping](#) which further explored what lessons CSOs have learned when responding to them.

A “futures storming” workshop provided a space to brainstorm about the emergence, direction and future interactions of the trends that impact civic space futures. The participants looked at the trend of shrinking space for civil society intersecting with another trend such as digital transformation, upended global power dynamics, climate change or demographic shifts, and imagined possible future states arising from the fused trends. The likelihood and impact (positive or negative) of futures states that came out of the group discussions were assessed, actions were discussed that need to be taken towards selected future states, and allies (especially outside of civil society) were identified that are needed to move forward.

### **Building future preparedness and anticipatory capacity**

As pointed out in the [landscape mapping](#), **future preparedness** is more than trying to predict and mitigate imminent risks. It is the **practice of articulating alternative futures and taking them from imagination to action**. Skills, systems and mindsets that enable practice of futures thinking and development of strategies to shape the future constitute “**anticipatory capacity**”. The anticipatory capacity is complementary to crisis response mechanisms. The sector needs both – reactive strategies to respond quickly to the sudden crises, and anticipatory strategies to engage with and shape emerging and ongoing trends that change society over time. “**Anticipatory action**” is about putting these strategies into practice.

Anticipatory capacity can be built on five pillars:

#### **1) Foresight in practice**

- Foresight can equip CSOs to imagine possible and alternative futures. However, foresight is only as strong as the action taken upon it.

#### **2) Developing narratives**

- Narratives can help CSOs articulate the value of civic space for all people, in response to their needs and concerns, and reaffirm the role of CSOs in holding and growing that space for them.

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<sup>1</sup> Short for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity



### 3) Building competence

- It is necessary to build CSOs' capability and confidence to engage with emerging trends impacting civic space. Collaboration with existing communities of expertise within the sector and non-traditional partners can inspire new thinking and inform innovative action.

### 4) Decolonisation & diversity

- Anticipatory strategies have the potential to re-imagine relationships and re-build systems that support redistributing resources and power from global to local. In turn, anticipatory action is strengthened by genuine diversity, representation and equality.

### 5) Sector-wide infrastructure

- The proposed infrastructure for anticipation to strengthen the sector as a whole includes: a) collective foresight; b) resource hubs to support CSOs with key competence areas and foster collaboration; c) local solidarity networks on anticipatory action; d) futures funding.

These pillars represent the different capabilities that CSOs and the sector can build to strengthen anticipatory capacity. More details about them can be found in the [landscape mapping](#). Some of them were discussed in more detail during the ICF 2022 as described below.

## Forecasting vs. foresight and putting them into action

Forecasting and foresight seem to be often confused in the civil society sector and the tools of long-term foresight such as signal scanning or scenario planning are being used to predict imminent risks, whereas short-term forecasting data are applied to inform CSOs' future thinking and priorities. **Forecasting** aims to predict future risks and prepare organisations to avoid, manage or reduce such risks. It can help with crisis responses, for example informing CSOs' risk strategies and plans or building early warning mechanisms. **Foresight** is distinct from forecast as it equips CSOs to imagine possible and alternative futures. It enables CSOs to articulate a better future and develop strategies to realise that vision.

A good example of a **forecasting** tool for improved crisis response is the [Machine Learning for Peace Project](#) that seeks to understand how civic space is changing in countries around the world. Working with partners in the [INSPIRES consortium](#), the project uses cutting-edge research methods to accelerate the provision of data to practitioners and policymakers who need to make timely and evidence-based decisions to counter attacks. The tool is scraping more than 100 sources of online news published by international, regional and domestic resources to find reporting on civic space events, and using this information to generate monthly forecasts on trends in civic space. The mass scraping of online news is currently happening in 43 countries, in 20+ languages, and more than 70 million articles have already been processed. 20 event types were identified as key components of civic space such as protests, censorship or legal changes and tracking these events helps to understand how shifts in civic space are happening over time. This in turn enables to forecast how civic space might change in coming months. The Machine Learning for Peace is an online tool that can be used by civil society actors to get informed about and better prepared for future developments.



On the other hand, **foresight** can be used to envision the future we want and strategize to shape that ideal future. It gives us an ability to look at many things at once as it constantly explores multiple possible futures. Foresight can help CSOs to get over hopelessness and bring back the ambition and sense of purpose. It enables us to deal with discomfort and reality of the world, rather than neat and known plans and methodologies. Uncertainty cannot be fully taught but we can learn to cope with it with the help of foresight. Most importantly, we don't need to be trained foresight experts as everyone has capability and capacity to do futures thinking. **Key is embedding foresight in our daily work and behaviours.**

Furthermore, **foresight analysis needs to be put into practice and acted upon.** A good practice was shared by [Forum for the Future](#) that facilitated [a participatory process for climate-focused CSOs in India](#) to explore different possible trajectories they could take out of COVID-19, strengthen their resilience and amplify collective impact given the trends impacting civil society space. The outcome of the process was a shared vision that aligned shared goals of climate organisations in India. [Careful Industries](#) explored how civil society can play a role in shaping decision-making and policies, not only responding to them. They took a journey with CSOs to [come up with possible futures](#) to express a complex inter-related world. This exploration resulted in several scenarios that each could be turned into a policy. A key learning was that rather than expecting individual CSOs to figure it all out on their own, building an infrastructure to support civil society on foresight can be useful.

### **Building collective capacities and cross-sector infrastructure for anticipatory action**

Strengthening collective anticipatory capacity in the sector is as important as building internal competence. For example, the [International Center for Not-for-Profit Law \(ICNL\)](#) established a **Tech Camp** that focuses on addressing digital authoritarianism, and brings together civil society practitioners with tech experts to strengthen CSO capacities on tech and digital rights issues such as artificial intelligence, internet shutdowns, digital surveillance, data protection or disinformation. Besides, the funding is made available for participants through the ICNL's Innovation Fund to proactively tackle issues with acquired skills and knowledge. Another example is [Future Dialogues](#) introduced by [Bond](#) which aim to create an alternative to the status quo and respond to the demand for decolonisation. The project creates a safe space to talk about the future we want and build the momentum behind progressive narratives. The following discussion underlined that **decolonisation & localisation** as well as **narrative change** will be key when shaping civil society futures. Future is and should be an uncomfortable place and we need to become comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations to change the architecture of the system.

As we are living in a time of polycrisis (multiple overlapping crises which are exacerbating each other), we need to embrace **interdisciplinary approaches** when looking to the future. Different elements of interdisciplinary thinking can be used for it such as paying a close attention to global politics, confronting the legacies of colonialism, focusing on climate and biodiversity, and developing a holistic agenda among others (read the full [article on seven areas for interdisciplinary thinking](#)). Some organisations are already experimenting with the cross-sector approaches, for example [ResiliencyPlus Framework](#) created by [PartnersGlobal](#) helps to develop scenarios in different geographies and degrees of closing civic space to build the organisational and the sector alertness to what is over the horizon and the readiness to withstand shocks. **Civic Futures**, co-founded by the



[Funders Initiative for Civil Society](#) and the [Fund for Global Human Rights](#), looks at the trend of securitisation and aims to seed a strategic, global, cross-sectoral response to the ‘security playbook’ by disrupting, reforming and transforming the systems that uphold security-led restrictions on civic space.

In the final group discussions, we scrutinized four components of the “anticipatory infrastructure” that were introduced in the [landscape mapping](#):

- 1) Engaging in **collective foresight** with representatives from different CSOs, different disciplines, different regions and with non-traditional partners
- 2) Building **resource hubs** to support CSOs with key competence areas and foster collaboration
- 3) Strengthening **local solidarity networks**, not only to bolster resilience at times of crisis but also to create the space and connections between CSOs **to seed local anticipatory action**
- 4) **Funding futures** and setting up the sector to anticipate and influence futures

The discussions brought up the following suggestions for the “Anticipating futures” initiative to move forward:

- **Extend mapping of existing futures work; make existing initiatives more visible and accessible**
- **Connect existing and emerging work on futures with funding**
- **Create inclusive spaces; democratize foresight work and question who leads and frames futures work**
- **Create a common and clear language on civic futures**
- **Ask local organisations what their needs and interests with regard to civic futures are**
- Take a closer look at CSO networks to understand what they do and how to connect (with) them
- Build collective agenda to bring together (networks of) academics, practitioners and activists
- Create (positive) feedback loops in the sector and demonstrate where it leads to transformation

## Moving forward

The ideas listed above will be further explored with interested ICF participants in 2023. The particular focus will be given to elaborate on (some of) the bold-marked suggestions that received the most votes in the round of prioritization.

Additionally, in the first half of 2023 the ICSCentre will invite civil society strategists and civic space experts to **jointly develop future scenarios for civil society operating space** in an online, collaborative, narrative, scenario-writing and signals-scanning exercise called [ParEvo](#). ParEvo is a method of exploring alternative futures (or histories), using a participatory evolutionary process (hence ParEvo). The exercise will involve a core writing group (15 people) and will be regularly opened to contacts from demographics and backgrounds missing from the writing group to further bolster the critical diversity of perspectives. In the next phase, the outcomes of ParEvo will be used to develop concrete strategies and anticipatory actions.



**“Anticipating Futures for Civil Society Operating Space”** is a multi-year initiative (2022 – 2025) aimed to increase the signal-scanning and future-facing capacities of CSOs. Hosted by the ICSCentre, it creates synergies between its [Scanning the Horizon](#) community of civil society futures thinkers and strategists and its [Solidarity Action Network \(SANE\)](#) community of civic space-focused professionals. [Watch a short video](#) introducing this initiative.

The project’s objectives are:

- Increase awareness of CSOs on future trends impacting civil society operating space and their readiness to actively shape civic space future(s);
- Offer a convening and collaborative space for civil society professionals to develop future scenarios for civil society operating space;
- Translate developed scenarios into concrete strategies and strengthen capacities at the individual, organisational and sector level to be more futures-ready.

Find more information about the initiative and its phases in [this concept note](#). If you want to learn more about this initiative or get involved in further steps, please contact Eva Gondor, Senior Project Manager: [egondor@icscentre.org](mailto:egondor@icscentre.org).