

# International Civic Forum

Anticipating futures: Moving from scenarios to actions

<b>Date</b>	29-30 November 2023
<b>Location</b>	Transforma BXL, Brussels, Belgium

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## Outcome

The International Civic Forum (ICF) 2023 took place in the framework of [“Anticipating futures for civil society operating space”](#), 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 and expand civic and civil society operating space. The initiative was kicked off at the ICF 2022 and led into a collaborative scenario writing exercise [“A history of civic space, 2024–2034” \(ParEvo exercise\)](#) in the first half of 2023, addressing the sector’s appetite for collective foresight. Building on the ParEvo exercise, the ICF focused on operationalising insights from the future scenarios for civic and civil society operating space developed through ParEvo and examining ways of translating them into strategies and practices.

The objectives of the ICF 2023 were:

- Explore sector-wide action areas and identify potential pathways at the individual and the organisational level to strengthen anticipatory capacity.
- Collect feedback from the participants on the applied methodology and process, focusing on how the process can be enhanced to inspire new ways of thinking and acting.
- Prepare the ground for the translation phase of the [“Anticipating futures” initiative](#) in 2024–2025, aimed at developing a robust methodology that can be replicated and adopted widely to strengthen the civil society sector.

The ICF took place in the workshop format and its methodology was developed by the ICSCentre in collaboration with [Forum for the Future](#). 40 civil society experts (from ICSSOs, CSOs, networks and philanthropy) came together at the ICF, engaged with future scenarios, and explored how to build up anticipatory capacities at the sectoral, organisational and the individual level. They first immersed into the present looking at trends, then “travelled” into the future through scenarios and finally discussed actions to bridge the gap between the present and the future.



## Summary of sessions

### Setting the scene: Anticipating futures... But why and how?

The event kicked off with a keynote from Stephen Boucher, Founder and CEO of Dreamocracy and Founder of Smarter Together. Stephen explained key terminology, elaborated on why futures thinking is needed, and showed case studies how foresight had already been applied. Forecast, as the practice of using data to predict what is going to happen, like weather forecast, is very distinct from the practice of foresight, through which one uses different methodologies to envisage possible futures. Foresight is about expanding imagination, preparing for different possibilities, and thereby actively shaping the future. While foresight is not about predicting the future as we don't know exactly what is going to happen, signals as well as past experience can provide us with a rough idea. Especially in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) times as we are currently experiencing with multiple overlapping crises, foresight practice can be helpful.

The participants reflected that they could see foresight as useful with not being caught off guard with certain developments, being effective in proposals and theories of change, shaping the future actively, breaking out of past dependencies, saving lives when disasters happen, and remaining flexible in structure and imagination.

Stephen further summarised the key arguments for foresight, each underlined by an example:

- 1) **Adaptation to change** – allocating resources more effectively and prioritising initiatives that will have the most significant impact in the future (e.g., Rockefeller Foundation's "100 Resilient Cities" initiative helping cities build resilience to physical, social, and economic challenges)
- 2) **Risk mitigation and long-term sustainability** – developing contingency plans and strategies that are resilient and adaptable over the long-term (e.g., World Health Organisation (WHO) and various CSOs used foresight to shift from a reactive to a proactive approach to pandemic preparedness)
- 3) **Crisis preparedness** – developing robust crisis response plans to minimise negative consequences of unforeseen events (e.g., World Economic Forum's (WEF) regular global risks report that highlights emerging global risks, helping leaders and organisations make more informed decisions)
- 4) **Innovation and creativity** – identifying innovative solutions to emerging problems, also creating a competitive advantage in addressing societal issues (e.g., Confederation of European Paper Industries developed an innovative roadmap thanks to backcasting approach and gamification)
- 5) **Stakeholder engagement** – building stronger relationships with constituents, donors and partners, ensuring continued support and collaboration (e.g., Alerta Democratica involved a broad range of stakeholders to develop futures scenarios for Latin America)

Finally, Stephen emphasised that the core elements for foresight practice are collaboration and tapping into collective intelligence.



## Mapping the present context: Trends

In the first workshop session of the day, participants reflected on and discussed trends that affect civic space. The ICSCentre presented twelve trends from its previous [landscape mapping of the “Anticipating futures” initiative](#), and what they might mean for the civil society sector. These were:

External trends		
Backsliding of liberal democracy	Disinformation	Digital authoritarianism
Climate crisis	‘Tech solutionism’	Global economic downturn
Securitisation	Corporations supporting states with crackdowns	Anti-rights groups
Internal trends		
Internal division within civil society and polarisation between certain groups	Demand for decolonisation and redistribution of power across the civil society sector	New generation of social movements

The participants reviewed these trends and suggested the following expansions:

- Anti-gender rhetoric *within* anti-rights groups
- Climate crisis *and* climate injustice as some groups are hit harder and some have more power to address the climate crisis
- Global economic downturn is also linked with growing inequality and exclusion of marginalised groups
- Disinformation is also connected with loss of trust and loss of diversity of voices in conversations

They further fed back a number of trends that they felt were missing on the list:

- Global disruptions, conflicts and wars impacting CSO priorities
- Shifting power in multi-polar world and new ways of colonising
- Weakening global consensus
- Rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and increasing tech development that changes society; also linked with growing digital divide
- Protectionism and measures in the name of national sovereignty (and against “foreign influence”)
- Shrinking civic space due to less funding, increasing administrative and legal burdens on CSOs (e.g., foreign funding laws), criminalisation and stigmatisation of protest movements

## Travelling to the future: Futures wheel and scenario immersion

### Futures wheel

In the next step, the participants engaged with three key trends from the list through the futures wheel method. This foresight method looks at what could happen in the future as a result of today’s events and helps explore the *potential* direct and indirect impacts and implications. The exercise took the participants from the present to a 10-year time horizon, exploring first order (direct) as well as second and third order (indirect) consequences of the following three trends:

- 1) AI tools are used by authoritarian governments to monitor civil society actors and undermine their actions.



- 2) State and non-state actors spread disinformation to discredit civil society organisations.
- 3) Internal divisions within civil society and polarisation between certain groups cause a lack of unity in the civil society sector.

These trends were discussed by two groups each which later came together to compare and contrast what they had come up with. It was interesting to see that concepts and notions over consequences were often very similar between the groups, indicating a similar interpretation of trends and worldviews among the participants.

### Immersing into scenarios

In the following session, the participants immersed into future scenarios that were a shortened version of storylines developed through a scenario-writing exercise [“A history of civic space, 2024-2034”](#) conducted by the ICSCentre in the first half of 2023. The exercise used a method called ParEvo to collaboratively create stories of the future. The scenarios used in the workshop depicted different possible futures in the year 2034 based on ParEvo participants’ imagination and how those stories developed over 10 years from 2024 to 2034. The scenarios the groups were presented with interlinked with the trends they had examined in the previous sessions.

In the subsequent discussion, the participants explored what signs of this future we already see today (present trends) and what is different. They further focused on discussing what risks or opportunities the given scenario holds for civic space, which are roughly summarised below:

Risks	Opportunities
<p><b>Populist/authoritarian governments,</b> increased repressions, polarisation, fragmentation</p> <p><b>Voices of many people are not included.</b> Most affected people are not at the table.</p> <p>Young people are <b>'controlled' and not empowered</b> to take hold of their future.</p> <p><b>Use of tech/AI to close civic space</b></p> <p><b>Disinformation</b></p> <p><b>Threats to CSOs</b> (e.g., shrinking resources, repressions, questioning their credibility and legitimacy)</p>	<p><b>New forms of democracy and organising emerge</b> with 'new' stakeholders who are encouraged and heard in decision-making (e.g., local communities, young people)</p> <p>The <b>'green' narrative</b> becomes a priority</p> <p><b>Maximising the benefits</b> (and reducing the risks) <b>of tech and AI</b></p> <p><b>Collaboration and reinvention</b> within civil society</p> <p>Fragmentation of civil society leads to <b>innovation and specialisation, coalitions with unlikely allies</b></p>

A final exercise beautifully displayed the creativity of the groups who were asked to develop an asset summarising key risks and opportunities. The group shared a poem (done in collaboration with ChatGPT), a collective drawing, punching headlines, tweets, and creative hashtags.



## Networking cocktail hour with Philea

At the end of the first day, the participants set out to meet with policymakers and representatives of philanthropy who participated in the EuroPhilantopics conference of Philanthropy Europe Association (Philea), which was happening on the same day in the centre of Brussels. The participants of that event had equally explored futures, albeit with a philanthropic and European focus. For one hour participants engaged in facilitated and free networking over drinks and snacks.

## Food-for-thought conversation: How is philanthropy getting ready for the future?

At the start of the second workshop day, the participants heard from and engaged in a conversation with Hanna Stähle, Head of Foresight and Innovation at Philea. Philea is an umbrella organisation that brings together individual philanthropies and national-level infrastructure organisations to galvanise collective action and amplify the voice of European philanthropy. Hanna shared that the philanthropy sector is at the beginning of using foresight more strategically. Examples of good practice are the foresight unit of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) as well as the Gulbenkian Foundation's intergenerational fairness work. The Philea's EuroPhilantopics event on the previous day also looked at different future scenarios such as a collapse of societies inspired by their speaker Peter Turchin and his book *“End Times: Elites, counter-elites and the path of political disintegration.”*

Philea is further leading an “anticipation cluster” for their members to drive forward foresight practice in the sector. For more details, have a look at Philea's [“Futures Philanthropy”](#) stream of work. Members of the Philea network are challenged in their work by world events and the shrinking of civic space and there are many questions and much humility about moving forward in such a troubling context. Civil society is needed for this, and it is in Hanna's view very important to strengthen the role of civil society in the processes and decision-making of the EU, especially as corporates and billionaires have an extraordinary influence on policy-making, as does the tech and the military sector.

In a discussion with the participants, it was raised that sometimes foundations have come into their wealth through unethical or at least unsustainable means. Hanna shared that there is growing recognition and self-reflection about it. It was pointed out that in the context of decolonisation there is a lot of readiness by the professional staff of foundations but resistance at the board level, not unlike in large ICSSOs. It was further raised that there is insufficient data to prove that futures work actually works and that work on trends is often based on perceptions. However, it is balanced by foresight being a highly collaborative exercise. This further sparked reflections about foresight being originally a Northern-dominated set of methodologies and as CSOs intent to drive decolonisation, we should be sensitive and open to different approaches of futures work.



## Bridging present and future: Sectoral actions

### Brainstorming and synthesising sector-wide actions

The workshop part of the second day started with group discussions on how the civil society sector can enable opportunities or avoid risks that were identified in the futures scenarios on the first day. The participants further brainstormed what resources, collaborations and actions are needed to enable the opportunities or minimise the risks from these scenarios and if there are any emerging ideas or opportunities to draw on. Each group then identified key high-level action areas that had the most potential to transform the civil society sector. They came up with these high-level actions:

- Keep this community activated through the ICSCentre – pilot a replication of this process per region, involving CSOs, donors and other stakeholders
- Invest in healthy information ecosystems and media literacy
- Influence regulatory framework around AI; build a consortium around AI usage
- Develop new standards around funding (flexible funding, core funding)
- Empower local communities in resource mobilisation – break current funding dependencies, localise resources, and build authentic connections with local communities
- Advocacy and better involvement of local communities at international fora
- Reverse approach to due diligence and apply a localisation approach – e.g., national CSOs select ICSSOs they want to work with based on their purpose so reversing the way how the partnership is organised
- Collaborate on dealing with intersectional problems (along the lines of a “whole child approach” – recognising intersectional identities, needs, and experience)
- Develop a new CSO charter, new social contract at the high level (e.g., UN, EU) – civil society has changed and we need a new definition of civil society for the current context and how governments and corporations can work with civil society
- Invest in impact analysis to highlight added value of civil society
- Use PR as a tool and invest in communication – showcase work and impact of civil society, which might also help to shift the narrative around civic space

### Synthesising and prioritising sector-wide action areas

The participants further voted on the above sectoral actions and six themes were prioritised for subsequent in-depth group discussions. In the group on the theme of their interest, they discussed how this action area can be activated and how people that they want to create positive change for already are or can be engaged. See below the key points from these group discussions:

*Theme A: Facilitate access of local/affected communities to global fora & Advocacy to create meaningful participation mechanisms for the communities concerned*

1) What can you do to activate this action area and how?	2) How are you engaging the people that you want to create positive change for?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage partners from the start of processes (communities are often involved at the later stage)</li> <li>• Apply innovative tools to engage with youth; include youth in policy reviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affected people are prepared (by sharing knowledge, trainings) and participate in the events</li> <li>• Including communities from the initial phase (e.g., ideation, design)</li> </ul>





<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider language barriers (use of local languages for communities to take part in the processes)</li> <li>• Identify focal points/ambassadors to attend meetings and share knowledge</li> <li>• Influence national governments</li> <li>• Work with neutral allies (e.g., OECD) to influence governments; collaborate with other sectors (e.g., private sector)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting up steering groups (to draft common recommendations, participate in events, etc.; more weight vis-à-vis decision-makers)</li> </ul>
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*Theme B: Empower local communities in resource mobilisation (break dependencies on big funders and Global North funding), localise resources, build authentic connections with local communities*

1) What can you do to activate this action area and how?	2) How are you engaging the people that you want to create positive change for?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen capacities to mobilise local resources</li> <li>• Decolonise philanthropy</li> <li>• Look for new ways of resource mobilisation (e.g., community foundations)</li> <li>• Create local endowment funds</li> <li>• Encourage social enterprises</li> <li>• Advocate for tax breaks</li> <li>• Revise fundraising laws</li> <li>• Target young generations who have inherited wealth for giving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating a community of practice among grantees to learn from each other</li> <li>• Integrating communities and partners in strategy planning, also in grant committees and project co-creation</li> <li>• Advocating for enabling laws to promote financial sustainability</li> </ul>

*Theme C: Revision of due diligence / reverse due diligence – e.g., national CSOs select ICSOs they want to work with based on their purpose*

1) What can you do to activate this action area and how?	2) How are you engaging the people that you want to create positive change for?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate a mindset-change process – work with communities, grow a sense of civic agency, think outside the box</li> <li>• Work on the language – less jargon, turn the tables of power</li> <li>• Get communities to be co-investors, rather than beneficiaries</li> <li>• Deploy community assets (local knowledge, skills and relationships) and trigger community voice and power</li> <li>• Activate the mindset of risk-sharing instead of risk-transfer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying critical friends that ask difficult questions</li> <li>• Acknowledging and managing internal resistance to new ways of working</li> <li>• Identifying “edge actors” to be drivers of change</li> <li>• Building institutional knowledge management system</li> <li>• Piloting “reversed” due diligence</li> </ul>



*Theme D: More collaboration to deal with intersectional problems that are outside any single organisation's mandate and more holistic approach*

1) What can you do to activate this action area and how?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish the same level of awareness and understanding of urgency for change</li> <li>• Bring different stakeholders and relevant actors together</li> <li>• Build alliances and reach to other sectors</li> <li>• Research; intersectional analysis through lenses of different organisations</li> <li>• Apply systemic and holistic approach to solving issues (holistic solutions)</li> <li>• Act in solidarity internationally but strategies need to be defined locally</li> </ul>

*Theme E: Develop a new CSOs charter (social contract) at the high level (e.g. UN, EU)*

1) What can you do to activate this action area and how?	2) How are you engaging the people that you want to create positive change for?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy, influencing, lobbying</li> <li>• Advocate for a creation of a CSO office within the UN to define standards for CSOs; it should also do research and have a holistic and intersectional approach</li> <li>• Encourage inclusive conversations to redefine the sector and remove the colonial approach from its roots</li> <li>• Use advocacy channels in UN, coalition-building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elect a consortium of members that manages and coordinates the process</li> <li>• Mobilise donors to fund the process</li> <li>• Provide space for partners</li> <li>• Initiate an online global consultation about the charter</li> <li>• Communicate</li> </ul>

*Theme F: Do foresight processes together with donors and ICSSOs/CSOs*

1) What can you do to activate this action area and how?	2) How are you engaging the people that you want to create positive change for?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build capacities to share foresight methodologies (e.g., replicate what happened at the ICF)</li> <li>• Launch foresight capacity-building at national level and share learnings</li> <li>• Connect pockets of the future today (e.g., futures thinking cluster in Brussels)</li> <li>• Come up with actions using foresight</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participatory processes, promoting multi-stakeholder conversations</li> <li>• Research, capacity-building, advocacy campaigns</li> <li>• "Humanifying" foresight</li> <li>• Focusing on process and co-creation, not on projects</li> <li>• Amplifying good ideas and cases</li> </ul>





## **Bridging present and future: Organisational actions and individual action planning**

### **Moving towards organisational actions**

The participants further worked in pairs or peer constellations to draft organisational action plans, focusing on resource requirements, key partnerships, and collaborations to drive change. They further identified tangible actions that they can contribute to, create or collaborate on.

Two common themes that emerged across different pairs and peer groups focused on engaging with foresight and strengthening participation as a few examples outline below:

- Replicate a foresight workshop/process at the national level, with local partners or within an individual organisation
- Conduct a foresight exercise to feed into a strategy process
- Implement inclusiveness in decision-making and facilitate access of affected communities to meaningful participation mechanisms
- Invest more into co-creation, reflection and exploration of alternatives together with partners and local communities

### **Individual action planning**

In the final session, the participants focused on individual agency and reflected how they can translate sector-wide and organisational actions into individual actions, what conditions and resources are needed, and how first steps can look like.

When asked about one concrete next step, the majority of the participants committed to follow on foresight and futures thinking, see a few examples below:

- Share insights from the ICF workshop internally
- Replicate the foresight journey of this event
- Research foresight methodologies and exercises
- Facilitate a foresight exercise
- Use foresight to develop a new strategy
- Incorporate a foresight discussion into annual planning
- Integrate futures thinking and foresight into organisational processes and activities

### **Next steps**

The ICSCentre will organise a virtual check-in with the ICF participants at the beginning of March 2024 to exchange and provide peer support on developments of their actions. The ICF journey will be turned into a guidance that can be replicated by the ICF participants and other stakeholders.

In 2024, the ICSCentre will work with a few selected organisations on how to translate future scenarios into organisational strategies and practices. If you are interested in exploring this for your organisation, please reach out to Eva Gondor, Senior Project Manager:

[egondor@icscentre.org](mailto:egondor@icscentre.org).

Stay tuned for further developments of the “Anticipating futures” initiative by keeping an eye on [this webpage](#), where the ICSCentre will regularly share updates, materials, and upcoming opportunities.