



International
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Centre

ANTICIPATING CIVIC SPACE FUTURES: FROM LANDSCAPE MAPPING TO SCENARIO BUILDING

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INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

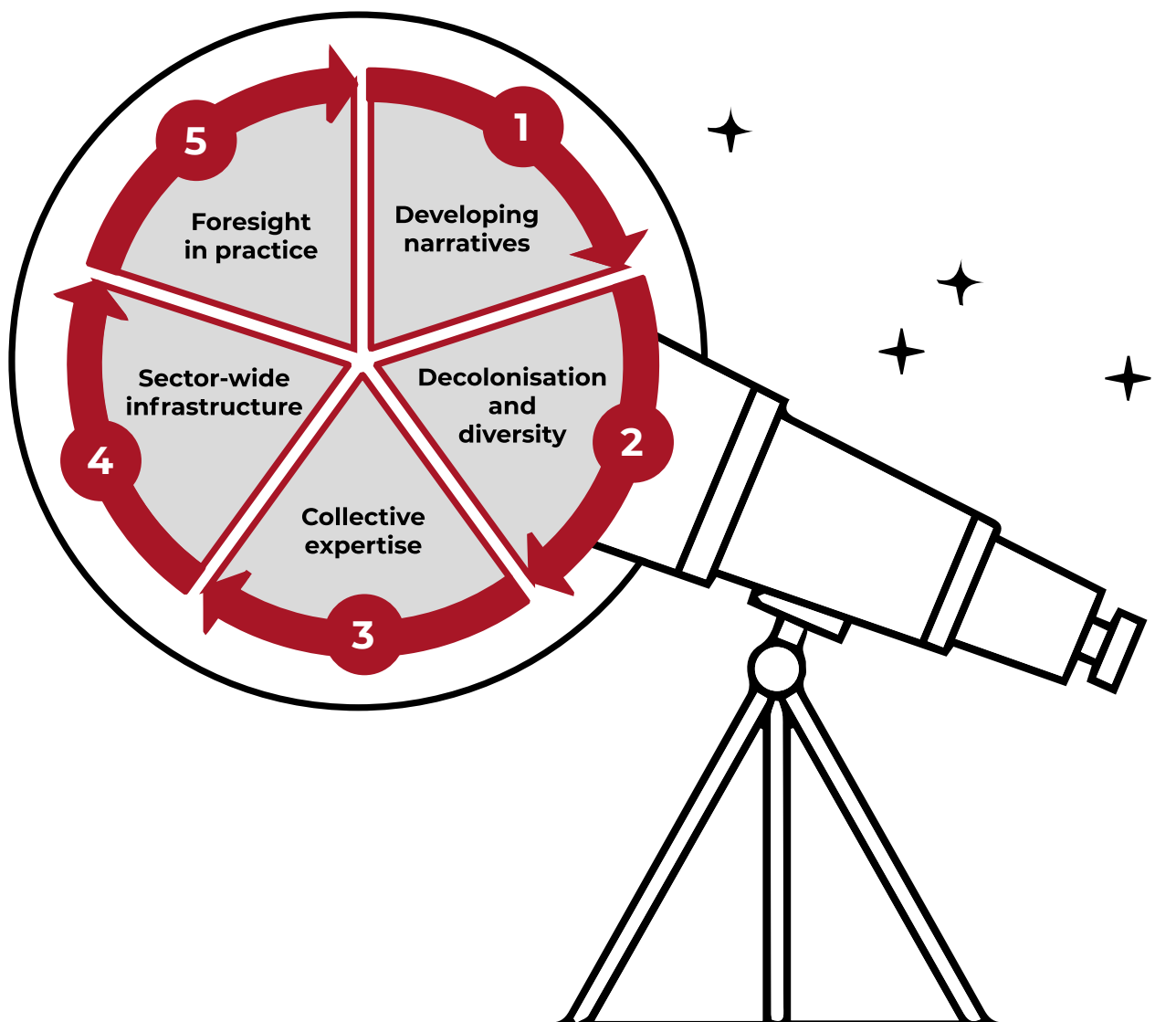
This short paper complements the full report on the outcomes of a collaboration from April to June 2023 between civil society professionals to envisage alternative future scenarios for civic space and civil society organisations. Using a method called ParEvo that enables exploring alternative futures through a participatory evolutionary process, the group generated 109 stories about possible futures through eight iterations of storytelling. The ParEvo exercise – entitled “A history of civic space, 2024–2034” – involved a core group of writers, two sets of external commentators, and a facilitation team.

The ParEvo exercise was born from a multi-year initiative of the International Civil Society Centre (ICSCentre), “Anticipating futures for civil society operating space.” The initiative began in 2022 by mapping the landscape of the crises and trends that impact civic space and the strengths and weaknesses of civil society organisations’ (CSOs) responses to them, aiming to identify ways to strengthen the sector’s future preparedness.

The mapping report identified five pillars of anticipatory capacity:¹

- **Developing narratives**
- **Decolonisation and diversity**
- **Building competence**
- **Establishing sector-wide infrastructure**
- **Foresight in practice**

This paper bridges the two initiatives – landscape mapping and the ParEvo exercise - with an assessment of the outcomes of “A history of civic space, 2024–2034” based on the five pillars of anticipatory capacity. The assessment draws lessons from the practical ParEvo foresight exercise to strengthen sector-wide futures preparedness.



¹ Anticipatory capacity comprises the skills, systems, and mindsets that enable a structured approach to, and continuous practice of, far futures thinking and the development of strategies and plans that aim to shape the future.

PAREVO AND THE PILLARS OF ANTICIPATORY CAPACITY

Pillar 1 Developing narratives

The landscape mapping report applauds “some CSOs beginning to use foresight not only to ready themselves for a future coming at them, but to envision the future they want to see and strategise to give shape to that future.”

While foresight can serve an important purpose to plan for or avoid future scenarios, it can also (and arguably should) serve to inspire and mobilise people toward a shared aspirational future.

In the ParEvo exercise, external commentators reflected that the stories about possible futures were resoundingly hopeful, particularly in their descriptions of the resilience and value of civil society and CSOs, suggesting the sector’s adaptive strength to envisage and shape plausible positive futures. However, some commentators critiqued what they saw as unrealistically hopeful stories. As one eloquently put it, *“We need to prepare for the future we want, the future we don’t want, and the future we think we’ll get.”* In other words, we must **simultaneously shape the ideal future while being prepared for the likely tomorrow.**

The landscape mapping report advocates for “craft[ing] narratives that reaffirm the relevance of civil society for all people” while “disrupting existing narratives and framings that seek to discredit CSOs and dominate civic space.”

Nearly all the ParEvo stories assume the continued existence and relevance of civil society in the future. In the imagined futures, CSOs add value through responding to people’s needs, connecting communities, mentoring young local activists, sharing best practices and learnings, and pioneering collective responses to environmental and human crises in coalitions and collectives. However, the stories include little specificity about *who* CSOs partner with

and *why*. The motives of established partners, incentives for non-traditional partners to ally with CSOs, and needs and values underpinning people's active participation in civil society are missing from the stories. **To attract and mobilise diverse groups toward a shared future, we will need to think more deeply about how hearts and minds are captured, what encourages new and unusual partnerships, and what barriers must be overcome.**

Pillar 2 Decolonisation and diversity

The landscape mapping report finds: "If some groups or perspectives are excluded from the process [of futures crafting], they will be excluded from and unwilling to support the outcomes."

Perspectives that participants, commentators, and facilitators felt were missing or under-represented in the stories include:

- People from outside civil society or those opposed to civil society who might question the strongly assumed relevance and value of CSOs and civil society
- More voices from and advocates for marginalised communities, including people with disabilities, LGBTQI+, and indigenous people
- Gendered impact of the future stories
- Role of older people as an influential demographic in policy making (as opposed to perceptions of older people as vulnerable or a burden), including the older generation of civil society activists and professionals
- Business and the private sector as parties that both influence and are influenced by future events
- Religious or spiritual leaders and perspectives

People from the above communities and their perspectives could be **intentionally included in future iterations and/or actions based on the scenarios from this exercise.**

Missing perspectives are noted despite the ICSCentre's efforts to include multiple diverse perspectives in the 15-participant maximum group size for the ParEvo exercise and select commentators with expertise and experience that were not well represented in the writing group. It may not be possible to be fully representative in time-bound resource-dependent foresight initiatives; thus, it is essential to encourage candid reflection by the group and make intentional efforts to seek out important but absent perspectives.

The landscape mapping report finds: “Anticipatory strategies have the potential to re-imagine relationships and re-build systems that support redistributing resources and power from global to local.”

Re-imagined power dynamics and localisation of power emerged as strong themes across all iterations of the future stories. Some stories envisage power shifts and others envisage power shared. However, the mapping report finding from ‘real world’ CSO interviews that *“crisis response patterns can deepen inequalities within global civic space, entrenching the power and influence of ICSSOs over national CSOs, particularly as funding providers or intermediaries”* is rarely featured in the stories. **The role of crisis in holding power in place may be a potential blind spot** to address in the development of this exercise or other futures exercises.

Pillar 3 Collective expertise

The landscape mapping report finds: “Most CSOs interviewed for this report said they needed new expertise to help them deal with the evolving, multidimensional, and intersecting trends that threaten civic space.”

One of the merits of the ParEvo exercise was creating space for civil society professionals to craft futures that challenge dominant narratives and offer alternatives to a future shaped by corporations, big tech, and governments. However, privileging voices from civil society with an emphasis on civic space may have led to implausible or under-developed storylines that point to the need for more expertise in the writing group – and possibly in the sector – on:

- **Economics:** Realistically, the stories could account for how socioeconomic norms hold current social structures in place and would resist the major transformations described in the stories; imaginatively, they could offer alternative futures of capitalism.
- **Politics:** The stories offer limited analysis of the role of political parties and leaders, as well as the way politics operates at national and global levels to maintain power and profit.
- **Technology:** The stories are relatively sparse in discussion of next-generation technologies and how they will transform lives, society, and civic space.

The landscape mapping report suggests that *“collaboration with existing communities of expertise within the sector and non-traditional partners [are] particularly relevant responses to trends that are strengthening and intersecting to impact the whole sector.”* In future scenario building, the sector might consider collaborating with non-traditional partners from business, media, academia, economics, and politics. Other non-typical sources of expertise – including community elders, children and young people, indigenous communities, and faith leaders – are identified in the stories, and it may be worthwhile to engage these people and perspectives in future iterations or planning on the basis of the scenarios in which they feature.

Another finding relevant to collective expertise is a possible ‘mandate mindset’. Particularly in early iterations of the exercise, participants tended to craft stories based on their geographical location and the issues on which their organisation works. Future initiatives should be intentional about using foresight exercises to **balance representation (of geography, sector, perspective, etc.) and ‘joined-up’ thinking between participants, encouraging participants to consider events and consequences across and outside their own area(s) of expertise.**

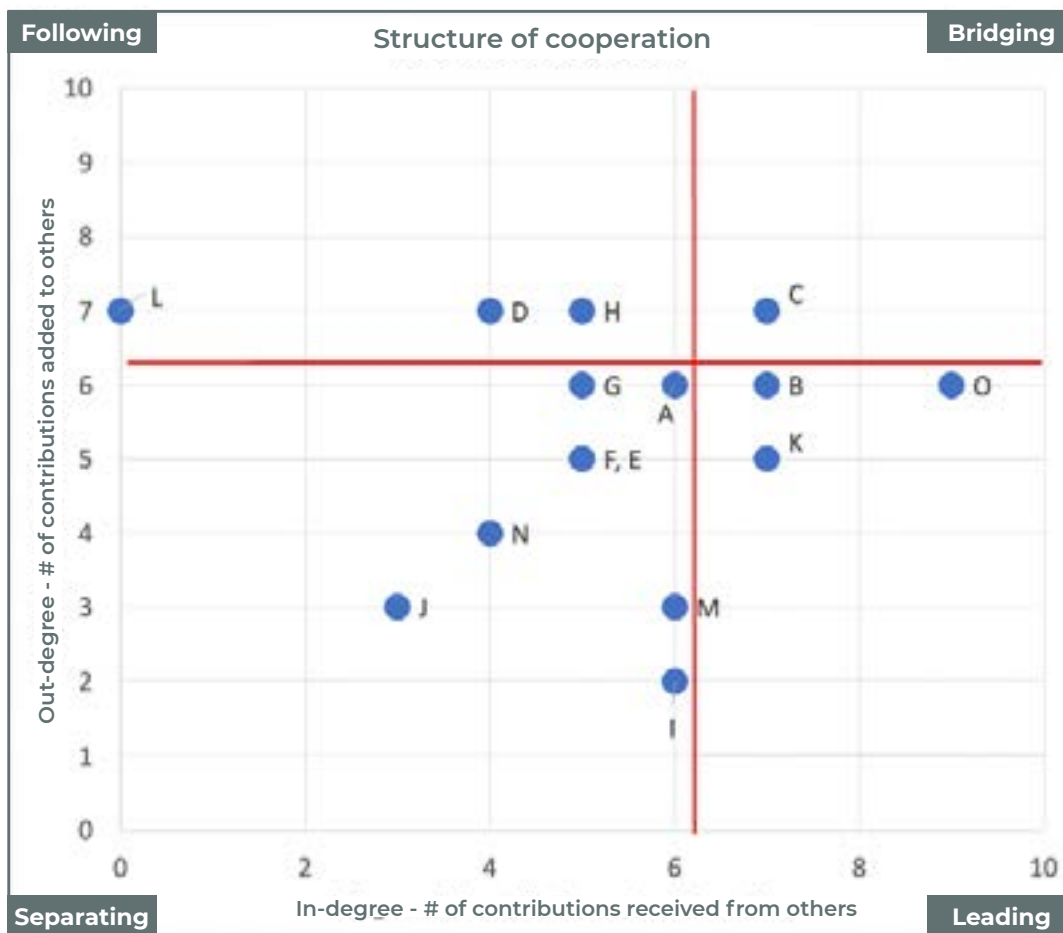
Pillar 4 Sector-wide infrastructure for anticipatory action

The landscape mapping report finds: “One thread connecting the pillars of anticipatory capacity is collective action – initiatives that could strengthen the anticipatory capacity of the whole sector more often than individual organisational developments.”

The ParEvo exercise itself is one such initiative in that it presents a collective articulation of alternative futures for the sector, building on contributions of colleagues from different organisations. Given the landscape mapping report recommendation for collaborative scenario planning, the facilitators explicitly encouraged participants to build on each other’s stories. However, considering the ‘mandate mindset’ risk, just how collaborative was this foresight exercise?

A majority (75%) of participants said it was important to them that others built on their stories (marked 3+ on 1–5 scale with 1 representing low importance and 5 high importance). The diagram below shows the actual patterns of cooperation throughout the ParEvo exercise.

Structure of cooperation among ParEvo participants²



Each participant (A–M) is plotted on the chart according to the number of contributions they added to others' stories (out-degree) and the number of contributions their stories received from others (in-degree).

- **Following:** Participant is building on others' stories more than others are building on their stories.
- **Separating:** Participant is building on their own stories in isolation, with limited contributions made to or received by others.
- **Bridging:** Participant is building on others' stories and their stories are built upon by others.
- **Leading:** Participant is receiving more contributions to their stories than they are making contributions to others' stories.

Of the maximum possible number of different connections in this exercise (95), 80% were made; of those, only 16% were connections in which participants built on their own stories. This finding indicates a high degree of cooperation and collective scenario generation within the group.

² The red lines indicate the average number of contributions received and given, including those given by a contributor to themselves. By definition, the latter are not included in in-degree and out-degree measures shown in the scatter plot.

Few extreme behaviours were observed; rather, the connection types clustered around the centre of the diagram in an even mix of all four types of cooperation – following, separating, bridging, and leading. This mix of cooperative connections generated a diversity of stories. Facilitators' encouragement of participants to build on others' stories may have off-set a natural tendency toward 'separating' behaviour among the participants (7 of 15 in the bottom left quadrant). However, that instruction could also have contributed to the sense that many of the stories trended in the same direction, as more bridging behaviours may lead to convergence on a limited range of storylines.

These findings reveal that for collective foresight exercises, it is valuable to **intentionally set the conditions for 1) a diversity of imagined futures, 2) a convergence on imagined futures, or 3) diversity and convergence of imagined futures at different stages of the exercise.**

Actionable ideas identified by participants in their stories include a number of initiatives that could strengthen anticipatory capacity and future preparedness of the sector as a whole. Some examples of such ideas include sharing learning and best practices; training and mentoring young people for leadership within and outside civil society; formalising equal, mutually supportive relationships and working practices between ICOSOs and CSOs; and securing more core and flexible funding for sustainable and resilient civil society.

Pillar 5 Foresight in practice

The landscape mapping report finds: “Foresight can equip CSOs to imagine possible and alternative futures; to envision the future they want to see and strategise to give shape to that ideal future. [But] foresight is only as strong as the action taken upon it.”

Participants in the ParEvo exercise enjoyed the freedom to imagine sometimes radical alternative futures, but many found it challenging to strike the right balance between creativity and plausibility in their stories and to be specific and tactical in such an abstract and word-limited exercise. Consequently, commentators who reflected on the stories as they evolved itched for more of the 'how'. They wanted to know: What would bring these futures about, and what are the investments in knowledge, capacity, infrastructure, etc., we need to make *now* to move toward these futures?

The ParEvo methodology supported participants in imagining a wide range of possible future scenarios and identifying actionable ideas to take forward as a sector. Moving forward, **action-oriented next steps from this ParEvo exercise will be key to ensuring its continued and maximal value.**

The landscape mapping report finds: “A benefit of engaging in foresight during crisis [is that] at moments of disruption and rapid change, crises can expose underlying drivers and surface opportunities for systems change.”

Though practicing foresight *during* crisis is extremely challenging in practice, the benefit of doing so is supported by the ParEvo exercise. After facilitators introduced a global catastrophe into the exercise, participants seized the opportunity to bring about radical systemic transformations (e.g., city-states, universal basic income, a global network of CSOs, decentralised power, a renaissance of human-human connection) and introduce innovations (e.g., new energy sources, satellite-based communication systems, a government-to-persons payment system).

The vast majority of stories in the iteration immediately after the catastrophe were positive or included positive elements, and few presented wholly negative scenarios: authors rated 10 stories in this iteration ‘desirable’ and 4 ‘undesirable’. One participant found parallels between the fictional disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic: *“We all lived during the pandemic, and those years proved difficult but also served as a fertile ground for some positive changes in civil society. Therefore, the only way to go was to recover and use the crisis to advance the social agenda...taking advantage of the new conditions.”*

Therefore, it may be valuable to **organise CSOs to come together during a ‘real world’ crisis, using ParEvo or a similar methodology, intentionally creating the time and mental space to engage in foresight** to spot and seize upon opportunities while reacting to a real and present crisis.

IN SUMMARY

We hope that readers who have previously engaged with the [“Anticipating futures” initiative](#) and those new to this initiative found this practical test of the recommendations in the landscape mapping report interesting. From this analysis, we learn that:

- Anticipatory action for civic space futures must *both* craft compelling stories to shape the ideal future *and* prepare people and organisations for more likely and less desirable alternatives.
- To attract diverse groups toward the ideal future we craft, we must think deeply about how to capture hearts and minds, encourage new and unusual partnerships, and overcome the barriers people face and the resistance they have to claiming, defending, and expanding civic space.
- Intentionally setting the conditions for imagining and building shared futures means confronting our personal biases; seeking out under-represented people and perspectives; balancing our geographical, thematic, or professional expertise with a wide-angle lens; and knowing when and why we want to expand imagined possibilities and when and why we seek to narrow and deepen the future(s) in focus.
- Action-oriented next steps from this ParEvo exercise will be key to ensuring its continued and maximal value. The full report [“A history of civic space, 2024–2034”](#) provides actionable ideas drawn from the scenarios, as well as practical activities for teams to build on the content generated from the ParEvo exercise to advance their thinking about and action in preparation for alternative futures.

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