

# CIVIC SPACE 2040

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## Bellagio Outcome Report

International Center for Not-for-Profit Law  
Civic Space 2040 Initiative  
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# CIVIC SPACE 2040: BELLAGIO OUTCOME REPORT

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the next two decades, the world will face a convergence of crises — including democratic erosion, widening inequality, climate change, public health emergencies, and the use of digital technologies to constrain human rights. These developments are already underway and will have serious implications not only for civic freedom but also for democracy and society writ large.

There are time-limited opportunities to influence the trends that will dramatically change how we live our lives. Vibrant civic space is a pre-condition for people to shape the future and promote democracy, equality, environmental protection, and human rights over the coming decades.

However, many civic space defenders find themselves in a reactive position, responding to waves of laws that restrict association, protest, and expression, as well as de-legitimization campaigns, surveillance, and in some cases physical attacks. Few have had an opportunity to take a proactive approach — to consider trends that will affect civil society in the coming decades, to develop an inspirational vision of the future, and to map the actions to bring this vision to reality.

It was against this backdrop that ICNL launched Civic Space 2040 — an initiative to help bring new ideas, energy, and optimism to the field. In August 2019, ICNL convened a kick-off meeting at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Center in Italy. Participants included civil society leaders, along with experts on artificial intelligence, technology, climate change, democracy and human rights, conflict and crisis, and philanthropy. Together we sought to envision the civic freedoms we will need two decades from now, and the immediate steps we need to take to guarantee these freedoms in the future.



## Definition of Civic Space

For the meeting, we used the following definition of civic space, recognizing that we may need to add new domains considering the changes ahead:

### A legal and policy environment that:

- Strengthens civil society around the world;
- Advances the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression;
- Fosters philanthropy; and
- Enables public participation.

Four broad sets of priorities for action emerged from the convening:

**Participate in Tech Governance:** Civil society must play a part in shaping the future of digital technologies, including standard-setting for artificial intelligence (AI), regulating surveillance, and the accountability of tech companies.

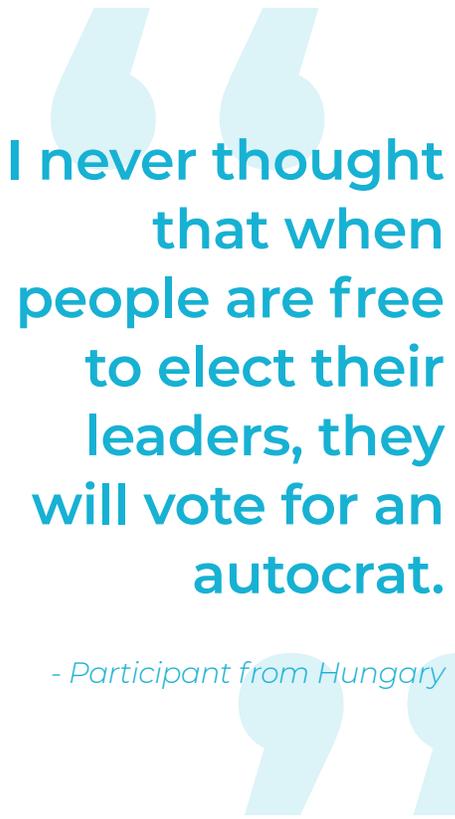
**Engage with Climate and Youth Movements:** The climate change emergency will be a source of mobilization, but might also lead to authoritarian clampdowns. Policy and activism on climate change are central to civic space, and youth movements are at the heart of this activism.

**Renew Commitment to Democracy and Good Governance:** In the face of major shifts in geopolitics — the rise of authoritarianism, increasing populism, and a decline of multilateralism — protecting civic space, supporting civic space advocates, and galvanizing public support for civic space is a priority.

**Increase Civil Society Efficiency and Resilience:** Restoring trust in civil society and strengthening its resilience will be paramount. Strategies to counter disinformation and digital solutions for catalyzing collaboration are critical steps towards these goals.

## ASSUMPTIONS

We started our journey with a critical questioning of the assumptions that have underpinned our work in the past. We discussed which assumptions were fragile and needed to be replaced, and which would remain valid in the future. The conclusions in the chart below informed our discussions throughout the convening.



I never thought  
that when  
people are free  
to elect their  
leaders, they  
will vote for an  
autocrat.

- Participant from Hungary

# EXPLORING ASSUMPTIONS

	<b>FRAGILE ASSUMPTION</b>	<b>REPLACEMENT ASSUMPTION</b>	<b>WHAT REMAINS RESILIENT</b>
<b>FRAMEWORKS AND CONCEPTS</b>	The universal human rights framework is the most effective way to promote human rights across all contexts.	Context-specific concepts and frameworks may be more effective in building support for human rights values in diverse contexts.	Core values of dignity, fairness, and well-being remain relevant and legitimate across contexts.
	Economic liberalization will lead to political liberalization.	The neoliberal framework might not remain the dominant economic model.	
<b>HOW CHANGE HAPPENS</b>	Progress and positive change are linear.	Progress is likely to be cyclical.	
	Democratic liberalization is more contagious than illiberalism or authoritarianism.	Illiberalism or authoritarianism could spread more rapidly than democracy.	The value of liberal democracy and public support for the model of democracy.
	Profound change will be delivered by rational arguments.	Profound change requires engaging emotion and reason.	
	Legal and institutional reform will lead to normative (positive) changes.	Legal and institutional reform needs to be accompanied by efforts to build public support for progressive values.	The rule of law remains a cornerstone of democracy.
	Transnational and international action are effective in achieving local change.	Increasingly, international action does not result in positive change domestically.	Transnational solidarity remains valuable.
	Technology increases association, assembly, and expression by connecting civic actors and citizens globally.	Technology is just as likely to be used to restrict freedom of expression, association, and assembly.	Digital freedoms are necessary for the future of civic space.
<b>CIVIL SOCIETY</b>	CSOs are in touch with ordinary people and communities.	CSOs are increasingly professionalized and viewed as elite. Authoritarian and illiberal forces are more effective at building grassroots movements.	A dynamic and diverse civil society is critically important for promoting democracy and human rights.
	Civil society is largely progressive.	Conservative civil society is flourishing and is well resourced.	Civil society continues to remain a powerful stakeholder.
	People trust that civil society organizations are acting in their best interests.	There is a decline in public trust in civil society – in particular, INGOs and organizations funded from abroad.	Public trust is vitally important for civil society to have an impact.
<b>GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONS</b>	Democratic institutions are robust and naturally resilient.	Democratic institutions – even in mature democracies – can be hollowed out quickly.	Strong institutions are critically important for defending democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.
	Elites are good custodians of public interest.	Elites are viewed as acting against public interests.	
	Nation-states will always be the strongest actor.	Corporate actors and multilateral institutions are rivaling states for political and economic power.	

# CIVIC SPACE FUTURE TRENDS

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In a rapidly changing world, the first challenge was identifying the trends most likely to shape the future of civic space. Through speaking to leading experts on futures thinking, human rights, philanthropy, and civic space, we structured the convening around four major trends:

1. Emerging digital technology
2. Climate change and resource governance
3. Future of democracy and governance
4. Future of civil society and philanthropy

The first three are global in scope and allowed us to explore a wide range of future outcomes, while the fourth was directly relevant to the issue of civic space.

## EMERGING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

### THE LANDSCAPE

The global battle for technological dominance is rooted in a broader geopolitical battle for values between authoritarian states and democracies; the future of civic space will be determined by the values of who governs the internet.

Tensions between the global and unregulated nature of the internet, and the efforts of states, including China and Russia, to assert state sovereignty over it, pose significant challenges to the democratic order.

The extraterritorial reach of the internet and the resistance of the tech sector to regulation has made it very difficult for individual nations to regulate the digital space. In the absence of an overarching legal or regulatory framework, governance decisions since the inception of the internet have been made by the private sector, specifically five US tech giants — Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple. The absence of regulation has allowed digital platforms to monetize data without any obligation to protect the privacy of users, and fail to take effective steps to address the problems created by their ownership of data and systems (including fake news, election interference, polarization, the proliferation of hate speech and illegal content). This accountability gap has made it more likely that states will introduce legislation to regulate the tech sector and control the global internet ecosystem — with serious implications for free expression, association, and assembly. Meanwhile, challenges presented by the tech companies themselves will continue.

Authoritarian states, including China and Russia, pose a different and even more significant threat to civic freedoms through their advocacy for “cyber sovereignty” — the claim that states have the right to control the internet within their borders. States argue they should be allowed to develop a culturally appropriate internet, but in practice the concept is used to justify state surveillance and information censorship. China is not only a major proponent of cyber sovereignty on the international stage but is also driving the proliferation of artificial intelligence technology, with a cohort of countries embracing its model of extensive censorship and automated surveillance systems.

## DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND CIVIC SPACE

Digital technology presents both challenges and opportunities for civic space. Internet accessibility is greatly beneficial for the operation of civic space, but half the world is not connected. Those who are connected can be subject to content blocking or internet shutdowns by governments seeking to restrict dissent and resist accountability. Social media platforms offer connectivity across borders but also enable foreign interference in elections and harassment of civic actors. While some form of regulation is necessary, what form this takes and the intention behind it will carry serious implications for civic freedom.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- How will states balance regulation with protecting civic freedoms? What support do legislators need to understand the regulatory challenges ahead?
- Could civic involvement in tech governance or greater control for users over their data offer alternatives to state regulation?

Digital technologies’ ability to process vast amounts of data beyond the capacity of humans will continue to grow in the future. This ability is already being harnessed for good — from medical research and climate change modeling to blockchain technologies that foster transparency. While this can improve the lives of millions, it also requires users to enter into a Faustian bargain with states — handing over vast amounts of personal data to governments and corporations, which could be



## The Promise of Blockchain

Blockchain is a reliable, difficult-to-hack record of transactions and ownership. It is based on distributed ledger technology, which securely records information across a peer-to-peer network.

Blockchain potentially offers opportunities for defending and expanding civic space. It could be used to prevent voter fraud and election interference, or allow users to control their privacy online through the creation of digital identities. It could also revolutionize the civil society sector by allowing for the transfer of funds across borders and between organizations in ways that prevent fraud, diminish costs, and streamline monitoring and evaluation of organization operations.

The key risks with blockchain are that governments and the private sector may take control of these platforms and the data generated. Additionally, the complex nature of blockchain may deter civil society organizations from capitalizing on the opportunities it offers. Best-case scenarios will allow citizens and civil society organizations to control how they share their data and civic representation in the governance of blockchain platforms.

used in malign ways. Without democratic oversight, access to data could enable a drift towards digital authoritarianism. Human rights safeguards need to be part of algorithm design; otherwise they can reinforce bias, negatively impacting fields including criminal justice, policing of assembly, and expression. China's export of its telecommunications hardware, advanced facial recognition technology, and data-analytics tools to a variety of governments with poor human rights records is an early manifestation of the challenges ahead.

#### KEY QUESTIONS

- What strategies are available to civil society to challenge or prevent the spread of digital authoritarianism?
- As democracies seek to adopt surveillance technologies on national security grounds, what arguments and safeguards are required to protect privacy, protest, and dissent in the age of the Internet of Things and facial recognition technologies?

In a climate of growing public mistrust in information and facts, the emergence of “deepfakes” (images or videos that are altered using neural networks and machine learning, making them both realistic and difficult to detect) could further erode trust in democratic governance, elections, and political discourse. A growing number of states are already using bots, algorithms, and deepfakes to interfere in elections and erode trust, and trolling and deepfakes are more likely to drive women in particular from participating in online spaces.

#### KEY QUESTIONS

- Could AI also be used to restore trust in information through combating information warfare, deepfakes, and supporting media literacy?
- What needs to be done to tackle misogyny and promote gender equity online?

Although the trends are deeply worrying, participants reported that many in the tech sector share the concerns and values of civil society and are seeking to drive reform from within companies. Alliances between technologists and civil society could offer one of the most promising routes to safeguarding civic freedoms in the digital age.

#### WILD CARD QUESTION

- As humans integrate technology not just into their lives but into their bodies and machines approach human consciousness — will we need to redefine human rights and legal personhood?

# CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

## THE LANDSCAPE

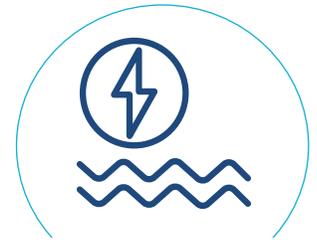
There is a scientific consensus that the world needs to move to a low carbon economy within the next 12 years to stem the most catastrophic implications of climate change. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, climate change “threatens to undo the last fifty years of progress in development, global health, and poverty reduction.” The World Bank estimates that without immediate action, climate change could push 120 million more people into poverty by 2030. Impacts will be most severe in the poorest countries in Asia and Africa.

There are two main policy responses to climate change: mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation addresses the root causes, by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, while adaptation seeks to lower the risks posed by the consequences of climatic changes. In the absence of effective action on either mitigation or adaptation, many governments are viewing climate change as an issue that will need to be “managed” rather than solved. A growing number of states and institutions (including NATO and the European Union) view it as a “threat multiplier” that will fuel tensions in already fragile and underdeveloped states. States that employ a national security lens to address climate change are less likely to pursue inclusive approaches that promote human rights, development, and security for all.

## CLIMATE CHANGE AND CIVIC SPACE

Effectively addressing climate change will require political leaders to secure consent to dramatic economic and social changes. Civic actors have a critical role to play in this process through pressuring governments to act, shaping policy solutions, raising public awareness, tracking progress on carbon emissions, and supporting societies to cope with the transition to a future different from the one many expected.

If governments fail to impose drastic green reforms without securing public support, protests are likely to spread globally — both in favor of climate action and adaptation, and Arab Spring and Gilets Jaunes-style protests against rising food and fuel prices in a broader context of economic inequality. We can expect many governments to use the “climate change as a threat



## Lessons from the Natural Resource Governance Sector

The natural resource governance space is marked by a history of opacity and entrenched corruption, creating grave risks for the Indigenous movements and journalists challenging the social and environmental impacts of the extractives industry. By 2030, 50% of the world’s poor will live in resource-rich countries. The arrival of technology and renewables companies are unlikely to mark an end to bad corporate practices. The mineral boom around “green minerals” or “strategic minerals” like lithium in areas such as Latin America, is already fueling human rights abuses. The renewables industry is the third worst, behind mining and agribusiness, for alleged attacks on civil society and human rights defenders, due in large part to the failure of hydropower companies to respect Indigenous peoples’ rights.

Concerning multi-stakeholder governance, the outlook remains poor. The Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative has sought to introduce safeguards for civic space but has also lowered standards to keep countries engaged. Established international financial institutions may roll back gains to keep pace with new institutions led by the BRICS countries. Technocratic civil society organizations are likely to dominate the natural resource governance space and may come into conflict with social movements.

On the other hand, climate change also opens opportunities for engaging with new allies. New actors in the renewable sector and investors may be more open to respecting civic freedoms and consulting communities to prevent significant and costly project delays and accelerate the transition to a zero-carbon economy.

to security” discourse to justify the use counterterrorism laws to restrict protest, conduct surveillance, and introduce measures that make it harder for protesters to mobilize resources— for example by blocking access of groups to raising donations through financial platforms.

Youth protesters are likely to be the vanguard of climate protests in the future. While they have been afforded some protective cover from the use of force and criminalization due to their age, sustained protests by children and students may provoke harsher measures from the police and political opponents in the future. Those most vulnerable will include protest movements in countries most impacted by climate change, and those opposing fossil fuel and renewable energy projects. In another example, populations in small island-states, who could be permanently displaced by climate change, may have to trade away rights to states, including China, in order to relocate.

#### KEY QUESTIONS

- Could tech companies play an important role as investors in ensuring the renewables industry respects human rights throughout the sector and the supply chain – and in reducing levels of violence, intimidation, and criminalization of land and resource rights activists and journalists?
- Could China play a lead role in contributing to environmental governance and standards through the Belt and Road initiative?
- What are the enabling conditions required for climate protesters?
- Do protesting children and youth need safeguards to the right to protest and association in line with the Convention on the Rights of Children and regional or domestic protections for children?
- What lessons can we learn from how counterterrorism frameworks and measures were used post 9/11 to restrict human rights and civic freedoms, as climate activism is now being framed as a threat to security?
- How should we respond to the increasing criminalization of those engaged in providing humanitarian support to internally displaced peoples and migrants not just in Europe and the US but globally?

#### WILD CARD QUESTION

- Does the environmental crisis mean the end of the Anthropocene age and the requirement for a new framework that balances human rights and the rights of all species?

# DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

## THE LANDSCAPE

Despite serious concerns about democratic backsliding globally, evidence indicates the trend is more complex. Significant democratic slippage has taken place in so-called “consolidated democracies.” And while recognizing that democracy is a journey and the trajectory has twists and turns, during the same time period, there has been positive progress in a number of other countries, including Ethiopia, Armenia, and Tunisia.

Equally, authoritarians may be emboldened, but not because they are any better at good governance. Countries like Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are struggling to resolve grievances domestically and are exporting models of repression partly to distract angry citizens from failures at home.

Public polls indicate high levels of support for democracy. Thriving citizen-led protest movements show a continued appetite for better governance. Positive scenarios include economic development spurring democratic liberalization in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, as well as the successful restoration of liberal democracy in the West. Russia could be shaken by internal demands for civic space and democracy that change the social contract between the state and its citizens, leading to a change of government and approach. The issue of climate change could also create openings for civic engagement in repressive contexts. Governments may find they need to work in partnership with unions, environmental, and humanitarian actors to devise solutions and manage impacts.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- What can civil society do to strengthen the enabling environment for civic freedoms in opening contexts?
- What could philanthropy and civil society be doing now to sustain civic engagement within authoritarian or closing countries?
- Could climate change offer openings for civil society in repressive contexts where governments have accepted the existential threat created by climate change (e.g., in China, Bangladesh, etc.)?

Conversely, cause for optimism might be limited. Democracy was built on the back of 100 years of rapid economic expansion, which will be difficult to replicate in an era of 1-2% growth in the Global North. Technology is entering a qualitatively different phase — where malign actors can harness innovations in artificial intelligence for authoritarian purposes. The impacts of climate — economic shocks, forced migration, crisis, and conflict — will add unprecedented pressures on states globally and could lead to a decline in democracy.

## GEOGRAPHIC TRENDS

China embodies a set of contradictions: it is both a capitalist and communist state with a market-Leninist model. It is a superpower with the capacity to invest in developing economies globally, but many within China live at barely subsistence levels. With the burden of raising living standards for 1.4 billion people, it is a fragile superpower. China's integration into the global economy is being accompanied by rising nationalism and authoritarianism. Current president Xi Jinping is re-making the state and society to align with the traditional values of the Chinese Communist Party.

Under Xi Jinping, human rights defenders and bloggers have been subjected to crackdowns, surveillance, and shaming. Chinese security agencies have engaged in coordinated round-ups of dissidents. Internationally, it is difficult to distinguish between genuine civil society and those pursuing the state's agenda. A focus on closing civic space has obscured the story of the state's incubation and support for civil society organizations that meet state priorities, such as poverty alleviation, care for children and the elderly, and environmental protection.

Looking ahead, there is a need to protect human rights against abuses such as those in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) and Xinjiang Province. More needs to be done to support diaspora groups and civil society in Belt and Road countries that advocate about the risks of Chinese investment projects and surveillance technologies. There are also opportunities to build the capacity of Chinese companies on corporate social responsibility and ally with Chinese philanthropy on global challenges in anticipation of openings in the future, particularly in the areas of environmental protection, climate change, and poverty alleviation.

By 2040, the best case and increasingly unlikely scenario is that Xi Jinping's successor will have toned down nationalism and begun liberalizing reforms (including support for civil society and environmental protection). Such reforms could lead to an uneasy co-existence, and potentially to a gradual convergence, between China and the West. The worst-case and increasingly likely scenario will be a new Cold War between China and the US and prolonged and deep repression of civil society in China.

In Africa, many states have adopted multi-party democracy in the form of constitutions, separation of powers, elections, and political parties. Botswana was given as an example of a state that was "very good at this," along with The Gambia. Botswana was judged by the international community to be a success despite growing disempowerment of citizens and widespread, sometimes violent xenophobia. Increasingly, the state and private sectors have worked together at the exclusion of citizens, lacking transparency concerning business practices, particularly in mining. Demographically, the region is missing a generation due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and their grandparents are raising many young people.

Looking ahead, climate change is already resulting in rising droughts, non-seasonal flooding, and food scarcity. Governments face the challenge of convincing their citizens to cut carbon emissions and give up on some benefits of industrialization experienced by the West. Digital technology is creating vibrant hashtag movements led by youth but is also creating a huge gap between generations and those who do and do not have access to digital technologies.

Youth movements offer hope, but the outlook indicates civic unrest, forced migration, job losses, and a region struggling to face the impacts of climate change. In this context, questions are being raised about the relevance and effectiveness of the multi-party model in Africa and whether the future of democracy lies in models of governance rooted in history and tradition. This begs the question: are there opportunities to re-think democratic governance in ways that consider regional differences?



**China**



**Africa**

Negative scenarios could include the geopolitical conflict between the US and China, while Russia continues to engage in domestic repression and democratic interference globally. India, Brazil, and Turkey might continue toward authoritarianism while the West disappears off the global stage as it deals with internal threats from illiberalism and economic stagnation.

## THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Civil society leaders challenged the group to think critically about the future of democracy and human rights from their contexts and perspectives. Some participants challenged the traction of “human rights” in their region and suggested that notions like “dignity” or “well-being” would be a stronger basis to mobilize people in defense of civic freedom. Others emphasized the importance of maintaining and reinforcing the framework of universal human rights.

Participants also discussed the vulnerabilities within the human rights movement. Retrenchment of the US and the transatlantic alliance as ambassadors of human rights could lead to the hollowing out of international norms and organizations that have been protecting civic space. A business as usual approach — which focuses on global treaties and legal frameworks — is being challenged by the power of narratives and emotions offered by illiberal and anti-democratic forces. Funding cycles of three to five years led to some organizations adopting a short-term, project based approach to defending human rights. To remain relevant, new modus operandi must be adopted by many actors in the movement.

In the future, disruption and learning will come from other fields; the climate movements are instilling a sense of urgency and futures thinking. Innovation is often local: examples were given of human rights cities in South Korea and Indonesia, the landmark inquiry launched by the Philippines Human Rights Commission in 2015 into the responsibility of fossil fuel companies for climate change, and experiments in digital democracy in Morocco.

A potential scenario for 2040 is that human rights will remain a powerful story, but it will no longer be the critical axis or *lingua franca* for progressive movements. In parallel, the human rights community will also need to be reconfigured, and its strategies will have to change.

### KEY QUESTION

- How do human rights values and frameworks need to be reframed to remain relevant — how do you create a lifeboat for the values that really matter?

### WILD CARD QUESTION

- Will human rights become part of a set of tools and values alongside dignity, decarbonization, and human-centered security?

## SHIFTS IN CIVIL SOCIETY AND PHILANTHROPY

Civic space in 2040 will have to meet the needs of the civic actors of the future. Participants considered the evolution of civil society to date, what form it might take by 2040, and how shifts in resourcing are likely to influence which civic actors will survive or thrive.

### CHANGING CIVIL SOCIETY

Generation 1 emerged in the 1990s in the form of civil society organizations that enjoyed an enormous expansion throughout developing and post-Communist countries for over a decade. Over the last decade, restricted access to central government and an increasingly hostile environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) has led to the emergence of the more transient and nimble Generation 2. These include networked movements, single-issue campaigns, and locally rooted collectives who use community mobilization, protest, and campaigns to leverage public support and pressure states and non-state actors. More confrontational and savvy at using social media, they have the power to bring down regimes — but can also be brutally suppressed. Generation 2 is not just comprised of progressive actors — they also include conservative actors who have rolled back rights for women and LGBTQI persons, led campaigns against minority rights, and in some cases, allied with anti-democratic forces.

We queried whether Generations 1 and 2 could learn to live together. Could confrontational civil disobedience sit alongside pragmatic policy and advocacy efforts? Are there brokers who speak both languages who can bridge the divide? What is the connective tissue that can overcome civil society fragmentation, build trust, and enable actors to align when required? Could there be a synthesis of approaches, or would tensions around legitimacy, effectiveness, and accountability prevent collaboration? Looking ahead, we explored what form Generation 3 would take.



### Imagining Generation 3

Participants envisaged a more rugged, resilient, and nimble civil society, ranging from local collectives hosted by tech platforms to decentralized transnational movements — inspired by the Extinction Rebellion model — with autonomous cells in different countries. There could also be a profound return on investment for civil society organizations able to participate in multi-stakeholder frameworks on digital governance. The success of Generation 3 will depend on their ability to tell persuasive stories to a public that is entertainment-orientated and already overloaded with information. Their challenge will be to mix rational arguments with emotion and to channel anger into civic action.

In contrast, humanitarian and development NGOs might become more driven by impact rather than mission and principle, as they are required to divert their focus from rights-based approaches to meeting basic humanitarian and development needs in fragile states.

Progressive civil society will continue to face threats not only from regressive civic actors but also the rise of CONGOS — civil society organizations funded by corporate actors to represent their interests.

## RESOURCING THE FUTURE

Foreign aid and philanthropy are on the brink of significant change in the next two decades. Western democracies — the largest source of funding for human rights and development — will face pressure to divert aid to domestic issues, including climate change and migration. As a result, independent civil society — especially in the Global South — will become more reliant on philanthropy and local giving.

The leading philanthropists by 2040 will come from emerging markets and the tech sector. They will be much more likely to invest in business solutions to social problems, rather than traditional grantmaking. An increasing focus on venture philanthropy, social impact investment, and technological approaches will strengthen civic actors able to demonstrate measurable impact. This trend will pose significant challenges to organizations engaged in activities where progress is harder to measure — including policy reform, advocacy, movement building, and shifting public attitudes. In contrast, conservative philanthropists will continue to provide regressive civil society with large-scale investment in visionary thinking, movement building, and strategic communications. This will widen the gap between the ability of regressive and progressive civic actors to build public support for their ideas.

By 2040 technology will have transformed the modalities of giving, and individuals will seek to engage directly with the people and causes they want to support. This will create opportunities for civil society organizations adept at communicating their impact and for more confrontational actors (such as climate movements) to engage individuals emotionally. With increasing numbers of people giving through social platforms and conversational interfaces, civil society will need to start engaging with tech companies now to ensure users in the future have access to the widest possible range of causes and civic actors online.

These shifts in foreign aid, philanthropy, and technology combined with continuing restrictions on cross-border funding will force CSOs to experiment with new business models. These include social enterprises and crowdfunding, leading to greater legitimacy for those who survive, but mission-drift and extinction for those who do not.

### WILD CARD QUESTION

- What are the implications for civil society if algorithms rather than humans allocate philanthropic resources?

# VISIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN 2040

## ELEMENTS OF A VISION FOR CIVIC SPACE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Armed with greater knowledge on the trends likely to shape the world in 2040, and ideas about future forms of civil society, we explored which values would dominate the world in 2040:

- Would these values be human-centric (Western) or harmony-centric (Asian)? Or could there be different values in different parts of the world, without one dominating?
- To what extent would the international human rights framework apply to new digital manifestations of human action (e.g., hologram protests)?
- Would there be a shift from human rights to terrestrial rights?
- Would we have succeeded in upgrading democratic and human rights institutions, or would the human rights movement be irrelevant?
- Could we ensure human rights would be integrated into the different cultural and philosophical approaches societies will use to navigate the future?
- What actions would we have taken in the 2020s to ensure that the human rights systems continue to be a source of values, laws, and solutions in 2040?

We developed four different but complementary versions of civil society in the future, with a commitment to continue our quest to respond to these questions.

	TRANSCENDENT	FOSTERS WELL-BEING	EMPOWERING	FOSTERS LOCAL PROSPERITY
PURPOSE	Offers a sense of belonging in ways that helps society transcend division – it is a part of our lives. It also offers a social impact.	People believe that engagement matters again.	Restores trust in evidence-based facts, information, and rational argument.	It offers voice and agency.
FORM	Diverse, more rooted, resilient, and less easy to target. The young generation is integrated.	New social contract – multi-stakeholder dialogues become vehicles of legitimacy. Civil society is plural, independent, innovative, and tech-enabled.	Civil society is re-sourced domestically and guided by local interests and needs.	Each place has a flourishing, locally rooted civil society, which is part of a global tapestry. Vital, trusted, and legitimate.
CIVIC SPACE CONTEXT	Safe environment for people to engage in civic activities.	Civil society can participate in government & corporate decisions/policymaking	There is an enabling legal framework at the domestic and international levels.	Universal norms are locally integrated and interpreted.

## CREATING THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF CIVIC SPACE IN THE FUTURE

The meeting concluded with a discussion of the steps that we need to take now to safeguard and expand civic space in the future. Keeping in mind both opportunities and potential allies, we agreed on four priority areas that require action:

**PARTICIPATION IN TECH GOVERNANCE:** Participants discussed the need for civil society to help shape the future of digital technologies, including influencing the normative architecture of the future (for example, creation of a special procedure at the UN on digital rights), the regulation of surveillance, and the accountability of tech companies. A critical first step will be equipping a wide range of civic actors to capitalize on these opportunities.

**ENGAGEMENT WITH CLIMATE AND YOUTH MOVEMENTS:** Recognizing that policy and activism on climate change is central to civic space, participants discussed possible strategies to address civic space issues relating to climate change. Participants proposed ideas to support youth activism, including the development of a global youth leadership curriculum and peer learning group and identifying the specific legal needs of youth protesters.

**RENEW COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE:** Participants discussed how to protect civic space amid major shifts in geopolitics — the rise of China, increasing populism, the simultaneous decline of multilateralism, and the questioning of the effectiveness of the international human rights framework. Opportunities exist to advocate for improved implementation of commitments to human rights and civic participation in the Sustainable Development Goals and greater dialogue between groups working on civic freedoms and climate action and climate justice; ensuring human rights values are central to discussions around democracy renewal, and supporting platforms of progressive municipal level and city-based movements. Creating narratives that build public support for civil society and civic space is also critical.

**INCREASE CIVIL SOCIETY EFFICIENCY AND RESILIENCE:** Participants envisioned how to harness digital technologies to expand digital civic space, including supporting public interest technologies and the creation of open-source platforms that allow civil society to share information and collaborate efficiently. We also explored what action would be required to preemptively counter disinformation and online attacks and, more broadly, to challenge the emotive narratives of the far-right and defend the space for rational debate. Critical allies would include media, educators, social psychologists, and artists.

## EXAMPLES OF FUTURES INITIATIVES LED BY PARTICIPANTS

The **International Center for Not for Profit Law** (ICNL) organized the first Tech Camp for Civic Space Defenders in collaboration with the Global Digital Policy Incubator of Stanford University. It also launched an Innovation Fund to support tech literacy in civil society; is commissioning global research on the legal framework for donations of virtual currency, and is working with UN Special Rapporteurs and the UN Human Rights Council to develop standards to safeguard civic space for climate activists and organizations.

The **Business and Human Rights Resource Centre** (BHRRC) is leading several projects related to artificial intelligence and climate change. It seeks to increase accountability in the tech sector on issues, including surveillance of human rights defenders and the spread of misinformation and hatred on social media platforms through engagement with companies and investors. In 2020 BHRCC plans to support a fair and fast transition to a low-carbon economy through the launch of the world's first renewable energy & human rights benchmark to encourage a race to the top among renewable energy companies on human rights.

The **European Center for Not for Profit Law** (ECNL) is working with global and European institutions to ensure their policies and regulations regarding the development and use of artificial intelligence include safeguards for civic freedoms. ECNL is currently mapping how laws and technologies limit civic freedoms, with a focus on the threats facing environmental civil society organizations and activists. In 2020 it plans to facilitate exchanges between activists, civil society organizations, lawyers, software engineers, and academia around strategies and tactics, including on emerging AI that support mobilization, protect activism and strengthen legal protections.

Inspired by Civic Space 2040, **Funders Initiative for Civil Society** (FICS) applied a future lens to its review of how philanthropy is responding to the issue of closing civic space. In 2020 it plans to develop a global strategy offering funders ways to fund the disruption of the systemic drivers of closing space at scale. This will include strategies to address securitization, digital threats to democracy, the power of far-right and religious right ideologies, and the undue influence of economic actors in politics.

**Social Innovations Advisory** is working with **Rights CoLab** and **Innovation for Change** to strengthen the future financial sustainability of civil society globally through diversification of business models, and strengthening the capacity of civil society in China to respond to the rise of Chinese authoritarianism through knowledge sharing and training.

**Transforming Tomorrow**, a project of **UCL Institute for Global Prosperity** is currently planning to create the civic space for acting on climate change through an 'Africa Assembly,' drawing many different people together to describe plausible pathways to prosperous futures.

# MEETING PARTICIPANTS

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