Rethinking civic space in an age of intersectional crises: a briefing for funders

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Funders' Initiative for Civil Society

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This paper summarises the key findings of the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) 2019 strategic review, which sought to elaborate a strategic framework through which independent funders could respond more effectively to the phenomenon of closing civic space through collaborative and targeted interventions.

Established in 2016, FICS brings together private philanthropy from around the world to help defend and expand the space for civic participation. The review was designed to serve as a provocation to civic space funders to reflect on the changing context for their work and to provide a platform for them to strategize on the defence and expansion of civic space over the next decade.

This paper is based on a briefing note prepared for the "Future of Civic Space" convening, which took place in London in December 2019.

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Introduction and background

This paper is based on a briefing note prepared for the "Future of Civic Space" convening, which took place in London in December 2019. The convening was organised by the Funders Initiative for Civil Society (FICS), which had been tasked with elaborating a strategic framework through which independent funders could respond more effectively to the phenomenon of closing civic space through collaborative and targeted interventions.[1]

To this end, FICS brought together a group of strategists and researchers, supported by an advisory group of FICS members, to identify: *current and future trends* that will restrict or open civic space; *cross cutting drivers* that will restrict civil society from advancing their visions/goals; and the *most effective initiatives on civic space* that need scaling up, together with key gaps in current response.[2]

The research team interviewed 150 funders and civil society representatives working globally on the issues that were identified as most relevant to these questions: corporate power; environmental protection; climate change; technological threats; and dimensions of inequality[3]. All of those interviewed recognised the intrinsic value of civic space, but most felt that existing funder initiatives were insufficient in responding to the scale of the challenges now facing civil society.

This short paper does its best to summarise the key findings of the strategic review but cannot begin to do justice to the many rich conversations that took place. The review was designed to serve as a provocation to civic space funders to reflect on the changing context for their work and to provide a platform for them to strategize on the defence and expansion of civic space over the next decade. As a provocation, it focused exclusively on the current gaps and needs, rather than work that is already being funded. The intention was not to obscure many of the great initiatives that were identified during the review, but rather to challenge funders to think about how best to deal with the challenges ahead at a meta-level. We also recognise that the recommendations in this paper are ambitious - and beyond the scope of independent philanthropy to tackle alone. We do however believe that philanthropic foundations are in a unique position to take risks, and that improved collaboration could significantly change and improve how work to combat closing civic space is resourced.

As we were finalising this text at the beginning of April 2020, the extraordinary global impact of the Covid-19 crisis was beginning to take shape, illustrating how the intersection of systemic crises and government responses to them will continue to radically affect civic space for the foreseeable future – for better and for worse – and that the core issues and drivers identified in this paper will be the ones that continue to shape the contours and impact of those responses. We have incorporated preliminary thoughts on the Covid-19 crisis alongside the 'futures thinking' about climate and technological change. Responses to the opportunities and threats created by the Covid-19 will be central to the guidance we develop for funders in coming weeks.

Theories of change, changes of theory

The idea of closing civic space was catalysed by a wave of restrictive NGO laws in the early 2010s that typically focussed on the regulation of the non-profit sector and the prevention of "foreign funding" (or "philanthropic protectionism").[4] Restrictive legislative and administrative provisions spread widely from the small group of States that pioneered them, with epicentres in Egypt, Ethiopia, India and Russia.[5] Yet despite the emergence of these trends, funders at that time were still largely optimistic about the broader direction of travel. TIME magazine had just declared the protestor "Person on the Year" in tribute to the "massive and effective street protest" of the Arab uprisings and the Occupy movement,[6] and most philanthropists assumed that democracy was still continuing some kind of global if messy advance.

These assumptions were anchored firmly in the dominant political and economic thinking of the early post–Cold War period, and the belief that economic development would inevitably lead to political liberalisation. These beliefs appeared well-founded; the two preceding decades had witnessed a spectacular worldwide rise in living standards, activities fostering democratic norms and practices were continuing to increase, and more and more governments appeared to accept the value of independent civil society. With hindsight, however, the collapse of the Soviet Union heralded a decoupling of free market capitalism and liberal democracy, and subsequently China has amply demonstrated that huge economic growth is possible without democratic government. The willingness of many liberal democracies to trade away commitments to human rights or equality in the name of austerity or strengthening security has enabled authoritarian and illiberal regimes to claim legitimacy for their models.

Liberal ideals also characterised funders' assumptions around technology and civic space, where it was believed that increased access to information would contribute to greater government transparency and accountability, and that democracy would be bolstered through civic participation online.[7] It was in turn hoped that challenging particular laws and practices affecting civic space and advocating its centrality to good governance and rights-based frameworks could restore those spaces being closed down.[8]

On the eve of a new decade, it is clear that the assumptions that characterised this approach to civic space no longer hold true and that new strategies are needed. The 2010s are now firmly characterised by a significant backsliding of democracy and the rule of law, resurgent Far Right populism, nativist politics and new Religious Right alliances. Authoritarianism is spreading and human rights and global governance frameworks are under increasing strain in democratic States as well as illiberal ones, threatening the sustainability of the international rules-based order.

Two decades of "war on terror" have set the cause of universal human rights back generations and the effectiveness of the international human rights framework long viewed as the key enabler of civic space and other political freedoms is now being called into question – and systematically challenged by its detractors.[9] Many lament the demise of an "ineffective" United Nations (UN) and "outdated" multilateral order - characterised, for example, by accusations of bias and unequal treatment by the International Criminal Court[10] and the political capture or hollowing out of key institutions- and yet political will to drive reform is muted.

Social media has been used by malevolent actors to spread disinformation and hatred and to interfere in elections, and technology continues to facilitate innovation in State surveillance and censorship.[11] Journalists, environmental defenders, minority groups, street protestors, human rights activists and NGOs are systematically targeted by States and non-State actors alike across a range of geographies and political contexts.[12] These groups face smears, harassment, physical attacks, SLAPP suits (strategic lawsuit against public participation), injunctions and criminalisation.[13] It is also now abundantly clear, in a way that few appear to have envisaged just a few years ago, that "civic space" is by no means reserved for progressive causes. Instead, the democratic culture it was supposed to embody has enabled regressive forces to flourish alongside progressive ones.

Finally, as the global economy continues to concentrate vast wealth in the hands of corporations and individuals, philanthropy itself is changing rapidly.[14] The resources available to funders with an overt human rights and social justice mission are now dwarfed by those of a new generation of philanthropists, many of whom come from the technology sector. While strongly committed to social change, these new philanthropists are often more focused on technological solutions and less likely to invest in human rights and democracy as pathways to solutions. The initial response to Covid-19 underlines the scale and influence of these philanthropists. At the time of writing, $4.3 billion in total has already been donated to Covid-19 related interventions.[15] These interventions are critically important, but may not take into account issues such as human rights, data protection, transparency and accountability, which have been overlooked in responses to previous pandemics.[16] While medical research and public health interventions are clearly paramount, issues of concern to social justice funders and civil society organisations, such as safeguarding human rights and democracy during and after the current state of emergency (*Key trends box: the first global state of emergency*), will do well to attract a fraction of this level of funding.

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Looking ahead: civic space in the 2020s

Interviewees reported a near perfect storm of monumental, intersectional and in some cases existential crises: intensifying economic and social inequality, rising populism and authoritarianism, a growing ecological crisis with the prospect of irreversible climate change, and the proliferation of new technologies including "artificial intelligence" (AI) that are being controlled or abused by malign actors. All of these trends appear to be nearing a "tipping point", with significant implications for civic space.

Insofar as almost everyone we spoke to had a pessimistic outlook, the prognosis is grim. It is widely assumed that growing corporate power, the misuse of national security and counterterrorism frameworks, and the continued strengthening of the Far Right, pose an increasing threat to the civic space of progressive actors. The conversations we had with activists and strategic thinkers working on climate change and technology were particularly striking. Here the potential social, political and environmental impacts coupled with the scale and pace of change has created palpable concern for the very foundations of civic space – and with it the pursuit of universal human rights, social justice and democracy itself.

These challenges too are a product of the political and economic globalisation that characterised the post–Cold War period. This environment has allowed those with political and economic power to forestall meaningful action on climate change and has seen a small group of multinationals accrue vast amounts of power from the revolution in information and communications technology.

Well before the current Covid-19 crisis, growing global concerns about rapid environmental and technological change was generating unprecedented levels of scrutiny of current political and economic models, which in turn has given a wide range of actors the opportunity to shape future economic, political, technological and social trends. Far Right, anti-democratic and fundamentalist civil society actors are aligning with authoritarian and illiberal powers and oligarchs to re-shape the political, economic and social landscape in line with their values and visions. But there are huge openings for progressive forces too. The growing recognition that economic liberalism and globalisation have pushed the planet to its limits and widened inequality is motivating more and more people to engage in political activism to shape their future. This

presents a tremendous opportunity for progressive action that seemed unimaginable just a few years ago. The recent protests in Chile and Lebanon are the latest in a decade of citizen-led protests triggered by anger at the failure of governments to address deep economic and political inequalities. Many interviewees expressed excitement about the School Climate Strikes and the mass mobilisation of youth around climate and global justice.

Less visible, but equally important, are new forms of civic activism and its allies, characterised by collaboration and the coming together of activists with entities that do not see themselves as activists. Climate protestors, for example, have received support from the climate science community, environmental economists, progressive enterprises and shareholders. Humanitarian groups, migrants' rights groups and public health officials are among the front line messengers of the realities of climate change and are confronting its causes. Investigative media and concerned investors are joining forces with Indigenous Peoples, farmer and worker-led movements, and the business, human rights and environmental sectors to challenge the abuses of the energy, agri-business and manufacturing industries.

Digital rights activism is supported by a growing community of technologists and developers working on feminism and tech, the "digital commons", and countering digital authoritarianism. A new generation of campaigners lead movements for racial justice and civil rights, from Black Lives Matters in the USA to the Dalit mobilisation in India to refugee solidarity in southern Europe. New collectives and fluid networked movements of feminist, LGBTQI, and sexual and reproductive rights groups are attracting public support and diverse allies, from pro-choice medical professionals to religious leaders. Mutual aid societies are flourishing globally to address the needs of the most vulnerable during the pandemic. Across the board, an increasingly widespread acknowledgment of systemic failures is fostering interest in radical and dynamic civic spaces in which conventional models of economy, democracy, security, culture and society can and are being re-imagined.

Following years of polarisation, division and culture wars, the current crisis offers actors engaged in these conversations a unique opportunity to advance a progressive agenda for a post-pandemic future. On the ground, the pandemic has already led to an explosion of community organising as citizens and civil society groups provide solidarity and support to the most isolated and vulnerable in ways that have transcended social and political divisions. More broadly, the pandemic has momentarily upended assumptions about the social contract between state, private sector, and civil society, and created openings for activists globally who are arguing that long called for measures – including climate justice, community agriculture, universal basic income, investment in public health, strengthening workers' rights, and equality – offer the most effective protections against future systemic crises.

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Civic space funders are already motivated by a fundamental belief that civic actors have a vital role to play in offering alternative economic and political visions that have human rights, social justice and environmental protection at their heart.

The key challenge for civic space funders is to continue to defend civic space as a pillar of democracy while working to create, nourish and those spaces in which radical and dynamic solutions to the crises we face can flourish. This means identifying and supporting those progressive actors most likely to be catalysts of change over the next decade, defending them against the specific threats they face and enabling them to take their disruptive and transformational ideas from the margins to the mainstream.

This changes everything: civic space in a climate changed world

Growing understanding of the causes and consequences of climate change coupled with public anger at government inaction has catalysed a wave of local and international protests, engaging millions of young people. The success or failure of the broader climate justice movement will be among the defining civic space issues of the next decade.[17]

In October 2018, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that the world had at best 12 years to keep global temperature rises below 1.5 °C. The panel stressed that the difference between this level of warming and the outlier of 2 °C considered in the Paris accord of 2015 was crucial to the protection of the lives and livelihoods of millions of people.[18] Achieving this target, the IPPC warned, would require wholesale transformation of transport and energy systems, and needed governments to take "hard choices". On this the science is clear: radical global action is needed to combat climate change, and tinkering around the edges of current high carbon emission systems is squarely incapable of delivering this. Many of the "quick wins" on offer have already been realised and, as comforting as it might be to many people, the idea that our current economic system can produce enough green energy and electric cars to avert this tragedy is fantasy. Business as usual will be devastating for the planet. At present the world is on course for a rise in temperature of 3-4 °C which would destroy ecosystems and make many parts of the currently habited world uninhabitable. Even 1.5 °C, to which the world is fast heading, brings more extreme weather events – heatwaves, floods, droughts and fires;

widespread damage to crops and fisheries; mass extinctions and the loss of 90% of the world's coral reefs. Even then, the models on which these relatively optimistic projections rest have been criticised as too conservative for failing to consider the prospect and impact of tipping points or "feedback mechanisms".[19]

Although the impacts of climate change are more and more visible, it is marginalised and already largely invisible group who are most affected and who will bear the brunt of the worse-case scenarios.[20] While rich countries have the potential capacity and resources to adapt to climate change, many people in poor countries face marginalisation and dispossession in the face of what has been widely described as a "threat multiplier", and more aptly as a threat that "puts a finger on every existing inequality and amplifies it".[21]

The response to these threats and inequalities will determine the fate of the planet's most vulnerable people. This has fundamental consequences for the growing "climate justice" movement, which understands climate change as a social justice issue rather than simply an environmental one, and demands a "just transition" (solutions to the climate crisis that reflect and address these global inequalities).[22]

The impacts of climate change will be most severe in Asia and Africa; the poorest countries least able to adapt or respond will be hit by rising sea levels, droughts and crippling heatwaves. This "threatens to undo the last fifty years of progress in development, global health, and poverty reduction".[23] In 2015 the

World Bank estimated that without immediate action, climate change could push 120 million more people into poverty by 2030.[24] In the same year, Oxfam estimated that developing countries will bear an estimated 75-80 percent of the costs of climate change, despite them been the least responsible for causing it.[25] In fact, while carbon emissions are increasing rapidly in major emerging economies,[26] historical concentrations of wealth and industry has seen as 79 per cent of historical emissions attributed to developed countries.[27] With concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic could decimate livelihoods and economies in the developing world, these inequalities may be set to increase.

Under the headline "climate apartheid", Philip Alston, the UN's Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, stressed recently that climate change not only threatens the basic rights to life, water, food, and housing for hundreds of millions of people, but – as States struggle or fail to come up with just responses to the local and regional impacts of climate change – also democracy and the rule of law.[28]

Digital threats to civic space: the people versus technology

The internet has fundamentally changed how people access and receive information, making vast amounts of human knowledge instantly and freely available. It has also given more people a platform and a voice, allowing disruptive and innovative civic actors to flourish and compete in the so-called "marketplace of ideas" – for better or worse – transforming the public square and with it the way civil and political advocacy is done. All of this interaction is hosted and mediated on a largely privatised if fragmented global infrastructure that has afforded vast power to the world's largest tech companies and new media conglomerates because they exercise tremendous control over what people see. That the information people receive is no longer determined by editors or broadcasters, but by algorithms and advertisers that can shape and influence behaviour, is seen by some as posing an existential threat to democracy itself. Although there are a range of views on this topic, most observers agree that these trends have helped divide populations into like-minded tribes and accelerated the erosion of trust in democratic institutions.[29]

This is underpinned by a business model predicated on the agglomeration and exploitation of personal data; a model that appears to undermine the very capacity for human freedom by creating power asymmetries between society and those who control the information about how it functions.[30] Machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) is exacerbating this problem.[31] The same US and Chinese tech giants that have deliberately or recklessly allowed their platforms to be used for State surveillance, election interference, information warfare and hate speech – most notably *Amazon, Google, Facebook, Tencent, Baidu, Alibaba, Microsoft, IBM* and *Apple* – are poised to dominate the AI sector. While AI is advancing social, scientific and environmental goals, these companies now promise cash-strapped administrations the ability to "do more with less" and better serve, understand and shape the behaviour of their citizens.[32] States have realised that the manipulation of populations may be as powerful a tool as social policy or overt repression when it comes to achieving their political goals, and tech companies are encroaching further and further into spaces of government.[33] From "nudge units" to 360° customer views, smart cities to smart borders, the world is being re-ordered and coded, entrenching existing bias and power imbalances and putting new means of social control into the hands of governments and private companies.[34]

Whereas the underlying technological advances genuinely promise incredible opportunities to expand human knowledge, capacity, freedom and well-being, the ongoing re-imagination of everything from commerce to employment, from governance to war-fighting, also carries a dystopian vision that reflects existing power dynamics, threatens human rights and the pursuit of social justice, and leaves key elements of civic space on and off-line in corporate hands. AI already underpins a new generation of autonomous weapons and surveillance technologies such as facial recognition.[35] These tools promise unprecedented capacity on the part of States

to engage in the mass surveillance of civic engagement and activism, and a global industry is now dedicated to providing government and corporate actors with new tools to do this.[36] Taking its lead from the USA, Israel and the UK, China is now aggressively exporting surveillance technologies to countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.[37]

As with climate change, we are already feeling the effects of a world in which Fascism has a new global platform on which lies can travel faster than truth, information is easily manipulated, communications networks can be shut down, and communities silenced. India frequently shuts down its internet for "public order" purposes,[38] autocratic regimes routinely use commercial spyware to take out their political opponents, and western intelligence agencies demand "backdoors" in systems that compromise the safety and security of internet users worldwide.[39] Science tells us that radical action is needed on climate change, but there is no such consensus on technology, digital risks and harms. Data protection, digital rights, ethical innovation and platform regulation promise much in terms of "data justice" but fall far short of an overarching vision that addresses threats to civic space online. On the contrary, the coming together of State surveillance and surveillance capitalism point toward a radically different scenario in which these ideals may be systematically marginalised and undermined.

The first global state of emergency: what does Covid-19 mean for civic space?

A t the time of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the global economy to a standstill and placed around a quarter of the world's population on "lockdown". Governments around the world have already implemented extraordinary measures that many people might have never have envisaged in their lifetimes: mass quarantine and physical distancing, the effective nationalisation of key infrastructure and assets, the de facto introduction of a universal basic income, control of land and air traffic, the remote organisation and delivery of their work and education, and their own bodies becoming the focal point of public policy. For the moment, these measures are temporary, ushered in with a promise of protecting "ways of life" and restoring "business as usual", but as with other cataclysmic events, it is already abundantly clear that the decisions taken during and after this crisis will shape the world for years to come. As noted in the introduction, if this crisis tells us anything, it is that crisis is set to be the key driver of social, economic and political change for the foreseeable future.

It is also clear that the responses to this crisis, temporary and permanent, will have a tremendous effect on civic space, both in terms of the capacity for human rights defenders, campaigners and change-makers to continue their work, and the nature of that work itself.[40] As with the extraordinary legal and political transformations engendered by the events of '9/11', which were global in scope, we can already see authoritarian regimes using the crisis as a pretext to extend their powers, suppress freedom of speech, increase surveillance and introduce sweeping restrictions of fundamental rights – in a manner that clearly exceed those demanded by the exigencies of the situation. See for example Russian President Vladimir Putin's use of the pandemic to grab more power, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's introduction of rule by decree in Hungary, and China's denial of food access to Uighur citizens already facing massive repression.

Across the world, many of the emergency powers and civil contingencies frameworks developed in the aftermath of 9/11 are now being used and legitimised at scale for the first time. It is inevitable that existing structures of security and control will be reviewed and strengthened in the name of countering future "bio-risks", with every chance that those democratic states that failed to curb the spread of the virus will look to authoritarian ones which (claim to or have) achieved better results, even if the evidence is yet to show any correlation between efficacy and regime type.[41] Social/physical distancing requirements have also curtailed the recent wave of global protests, and fears that restrictions may continue after the pandemic has subsided are palpable. Irrespective of the surveillance and control of online spaces described above, civil society has had no real choice but to move yet more organising and activism online.

Far right movements are predictably exploiting the Covid-19 situation to further their agendas by spreading harmful and hateful messaging on social media. Anti-migrant and far-right networks are blaming particular countries or communities for benefitting from the pandemic, fuelling Sinophobia and

anti-Semitism, and scapegoating migrants, refugees and Muslims as vectors of the disease. The closing of borders on health grounds and the barriers to the delivery of humanitarian services to refugees in camps and on the move are playing into their hands. The pandemic is also being used to peddle the extreme right's "accelerationism" trope, which promotes the idea that democracy is a failure and mobilises social conflict and violence to hasten its demise. Notwithstanding the efforts of technology companies to address disinformation on Covid-19, social media platforms are home to myriad conspiracy theories that could undermine efforts to deal with the crisis including those disputing the reality of the virus, its impacts and treatments. Fears that governments will use the pandemic to pursue regressive social measures are already a reality in Hungary, where the government has been accused of using the "distraction" of the pandemic to end legal gender recognition for transgender people,[42] and in Uganda where the government abused lockdown laws to raid an LGBTQI shelter.[43]

At a global level, in contrast to the prevailing "all in this together", "rich and poor alike" narratives, we can expect the pandemic and its aftermath to expose and potentially intensify existing patterns of inequality, stigma and discrimination. Health is now a national security issue, as well as a social policy one. The right of government to intrude yet further into the lives of the population during emergencies will only be strengthened. A host of population-monitoring and prediction techniques will be tested and introduced. The mass collection and surveillance of individual heath data will enable the profiling of individuals and groups at a scale that was unimaginable pre-Covid19. Untrammelled surveillance capitalism promises that this too will lead to discrimination and differential treatment, just as the securitisation of health policy issues may be used to repress of civil society. We can also be certain that the

Homeland Security industry will diversify into all things bio-security, promoting and selling security technology and equipment, much of which will have little to do with combatting bio-risks.

Yet while we must firmly expect and try to counter the "shock doctrine" and its flagrant profiteering,[44] there are reasons for civic space funders and other progressive actors to be optimistic. In a matter of weeks governments have demonstrated what could be done to address entrenched environmental social, political and economic problems. With the financial crisis of 2008 still fresh in people's the minds, it will be difficult if not impossible for the governments of the major economies of the world to propose that austerity is the only viable response to the inevitable global recession. In deciding whether to print or borrow money, and where to put it, the "green new deal" demanded by climate justice campaigners may now be among the best options for revitalising crippled economies and redeploying workers whose jobs may never return. Resurgent nationalism notwithstanding, the value placed on human life over and above economic financial interests in the response to the crisis provides a compelling counterweight to the "disposable people" approach that increasingly characterised contemporary governance. And although civil society concerns may be marginalised in the rush to let the science dictate public policy responses, renewed reliance on public authorities, independent expertise, trustworthy information and public interest media could provide a similar bulwark against recent counter-trends.

Ultimately, whenever things are in a state of flux, there is an opportunity to make something better of crisis. What matters now is what gets prioritised and why, and how to keep the civic space open for those able to set this agenda.

Addressing the systemic drivers of closing space

Even if funders are willing to make this conceptual shift on civic space, the question is how. Scaling up efforts for protection and security, legal defence of those criminalised, defending free expression and the right to protest, and keeping routes open for cross border funding are vital, but will do little to expand the civic space of progressive actors on their own.

One of the most important take homes from the research that FICS conducted was a demand to focus on the root causes of restricted space for civic actors and threats to activism across the board, and with it an understanding that these drivers must be radically disrupted or reformed in pursuit of broader human rights, social and environmental justice aims. The three intimately related areas that were identified as fundamental in this respect are (i) securitisation, (ii) the concentration and abuse of corporate power, and (iii) the capture of political systems, including media and technology platforms, by the Far Right, Religious Right and authoritarian populists.

Securitisation

Contemporary security policies and the frameworks and agencies that have been established or strengthened to implement them were consistently identified as presenting the most significant challenge to civic space globally. In 2018, 58 % of the cases dealt with by Front Line Defenders and over two thirds of the communications received by the UN Special Rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights concerned the use of security and counterterrorism legislation against human rights defenders, civil society groups and political activists.[45] This is the result of the long-term proliferation of overbroad counterterrorism laws and sanctions frameworks that have been used directly and indirectly the world over by States and private actors to brand activists and civil society organisations as "terrorists", "sympathisers" or "associates".[46] Under the banner of "countering violent extremism" and "counter-radicalisation", the counterterrorism lens has been widened further still, while avoiding any national or international definitions that would prevent their misuse.[47]

In Europe and North America, Muslim organisations and activists in particular have borne the brunt of counter-extremism policies, while activists on a whole range of issues – from environmental activism to anti-Fascism and animal rights – have been labelled as "domestic extremists" or "violent radicals".[48]

In Latin America and Asia, environmental activists and anti-corruption campaigners have been targeted by national security laws. Under the pretence of fighting terrorism or cybercrime, several Middle East and North African States have restricted protest and dissent, with mass criminalisation in Egypt and Turkey.[49] In other countries, brutal non-State actors have targeted civil society actors and those who oppose their political and religious agendas. Across the world, with some notable exceptions, the counter-extremism response has failed to prevent the ascendancy of Far Right and Religious Right extremists in public and political life, while forcing many progressive voices from it. In fragile States, where government is absent or incapable of addressing violent extremism, extremist actors are often supported by foreign States or foreign funding, or facilitated by companies and other non-State actors, all of which is to the detriment of civic space.

The UN security and counterterrorism architecture is central to these developments. Once characterised by a human rights and human security approach to conflict and political violence, a plethora of UN bodies have been created or reoriented around the perceived need, and the funding that followed, to provide legal and technical assistance to developing countries that will furnish them with the security apparatuses of their developed counterparts. The "war on terror" has also been intertwined with a "war on migration" as national security logic and exceptionalism has been steadily expanded into all things "homeland security".[50] This too has become part of the international agenda, with Overseas Development Aid (ODA) increasingly linked to goals related to stability, security and migration control, with serious implications for civil society space in recipient countries.

Securitisation also impacts freedom of association and assembly through the policing of protest and the para/militarisation of the police. There has been a particularly frightening spike in extra-judicial killings in Latin America and South East Asia.[51]

Finally, a host of obligations have been placed on governments, banks and financial platforms, drastically impacting the ability of civic actors to access financial services in particular, while organisations working with migrants and refugees in Europe have faced prosecution under laws adopted to combat people trafficking and the facilitation of unlawful residence.[52] Many problematic security frameworks have been developed or diffused globally through international and intergovernmental organisations subject to minimal oversight or human rights input.[53] The Financial Action Task Force is well known among civic space funders but there are now dozens of international bodies, forums and agencies with a security or counterterrorism mandate. Civil society rarely has a seat at the table at these institutions, and lacks the resources to follow, engage or shape the global policy-making and diffusion that is taking place. Conversely, having grown exponentially this century, private security and security technology industries are well represented, despite the fact they have been routinely implicated in the closing of space for civil society, whether in direct confrontation or as service providers of surveillance and subversion.

Many of the emergency powers currently being invoked in response to the Covid-19 pandemic were adopted with little debate in the years following 9/11 and other terrorist attacks. It is imperative that civil society strives to intervene when the contours of the powers that will be used in response to future emergencies are shaped.

Corporate power

Corporate and financial actors were also widely cited by interviewees as a key driver in the restriction of civic space. Over the last fifty years, globalisation and privatisation has produced concentrations of wealth and power outside the control of the State or electorates, leading to State capture, democratic erosion and State failures to address global crises. Widespread deregulation has seen companies avoid many of the social and environmental costs of their business models, costs which have instead been passed on to society. The international failure to address climate change, for example, is linked directly to fossil fuel, agricultural and other industry lobbying influence over government policy in countries such as Australia, Brazil and the USA.[54] These lobbies have also been instrumental in targeting civil society groups and movements.[55] The huge profits linked to resource extraction, infrastructure projects and agribusiness and the "land grabs" associated with them are directly implicated in the repression and forced displacement of local communities and the killing of activists.[56] Central and South America, central Africa, India and Southeast Asia figure prominently among the most dangerous places to be an environmental defender. State agencies, corporations and private security agencies are frequently implicated but rarely indicted. Innovative corporate strategies to silence or frustrate dissent, including SLAPP suits against activists and private recourse to defamation, trespass and property law, have been replicated across the world, while investor-State settlement dispute mechanisms seek to derail progressive reform after the fact.

The ease with which transnational corporations have been able to subvert the rule of law and democracy throughout the world builds on decades of corruption, which despite the best efforts of campaigners remains endemic in many countries, and present everywhere in one form or another. As a form of corporate power, corruption and civic space are intimately linked. On the one hand, the exposure of corruption causes public outrage which has at times been the catalyst for pro-democracy movements that have taken many international observers by complete surprise. On the other hand, and for precisely this reason, corrupt governments and private interests routinely detain, imprison or kill activists and reporters engaged in anti-corruption efforts.[57] Endemic corruption also appears to breed apathy within societies, reaffirming a world view that says politicians cannot be trusted and "liberal elites" are as bad as any other group.

Corporate power also restricts civic space in less tangible ways and at every spatial level, from the factory floor to the gig economy, where vulnerable workers are exploited and companies repress attempts to organise labour.

Lobbyists work concertedly against corporate regulation and ceaselessly for more favourable rules, occupying the spaces of political contestation in which civil society has traditionally plied its trade, from civic halls to federal government offices.[58]

More broadly, corporations and private interests are increasingly displacing civil society organisations as partners of government in policy design and implementation through the use of mechanisms such as lobbying, Public Private Partnerships, sponsorship and Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives. This is impacting the presence of NGOs in international decision-making spaces, which is increasingly being presented as a "privilege".[59] Major global institutions are following a similar trajectory, as reflected in the new partnership between the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the UN.[60] At a time when concerted and creative action by the UN and other international bodies is desperately needed to address issues such as climate change, corporate actors are working openly to remake the multilateral order in their own image through efforts such as the WEF's "Global Redesign Initiative".[61]

While many perceive the UN to be outdated and ineffective, States must shoulder much of the responsibility for its current predicament. If States withdraw their support for existing international human rights and social justice frameworks in favour of their economic and foreign policy interests, the UN and other multilateral organisations are left with little choice but to engage on the terms set by powerful States and corporations if they wish to remain relevant. This too has significant implications for the capacity of civil society to enter and influence debates and decision-making on key global issues.

The increasing power of transnational corporations relative to States, international bodies, civil society and workforces has significant implications for the future. Corporations and financial institutions sit at the intersection of mega trends such as climate change, AI and automation. They will not only shape how States respond to current and future challenges, but inevitably work against the efforts of civil society actors seeking to bring the voices of affected workers and communities directly into debates about the future of the environment and the future of work. Where democratic checks and balances do not constrain corporate power, many fear a tendency toward fusion with political power. While this has long been the case in some autocratic and authoritarian regimes, these tendencies are now on display in all regions of the world.

How will the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic intersect with these trends? Could the willingness of some governments and corporations to place the lives of the most vulnerable before profit, renewed interest in the propensity of government to meet the basic needs of society and a duty to ensure that the private sector serves the basic public interest be a turning point in the struggle for economic justice? Or will the global recession that is already underway close down this window of opportunity to re-think economic models as quickly as it did in the aftermath of the previous global financial crisis? It has already left millions of workers in the Global South who are dependent on existing trade patterns and supply chains without a livelihood

… CORPORATIONS AND FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS SIT AT THE INTERSECTION OF MEGA TRENDS SUCH AS CLIMATE CHANGE, AI AND AUTOMATION…

or safety nets, just as it did in the major economies of the North last time around. While voters already suffering the results of a decade of austerity have little if any appetite for more of the same, it is by no means certain that this vacuum will be filled by progressive policy responses. It is also possible that the most powerful corporations in the world will emerge stronger than ever, and exercise even greater leverage over governments hard pressed to "do more with less". Whether this is the moment for progressive actors to redesign government, actively shape and create markets that deliver sustainable and inclusive growth, meet ambitious climate goals, ensure safety for their workers and do not violate the human rights or environments of indigenous and other communities globally, will depend entirely on the space and capacity they have to push this agenda, and the support they can galvanise, relative to those with a different vision and power base.

Anti-democratic and regressive forces

Almost all interviewees raised concerns about the rise of populist and illiberal actors in Europe and countries such as Brazil, Turkey, Israel, India and the Philippines. These actors have sought to weaken the rule of law, erode democratic pluralism (through tampering with electoral systems and restrictions on civic freedoms) and attack fundamental rights. The latter has taken the form of a re-imposition of "traditional" values and the harsh punishment of groups perceived to be a threat to security (for example, migrants and religious minorities), values (feminist and LGBTQI rights) or economic stability (environmental and climate activists). In some cases, particularly in the US and Europe, the Far Right and Religious Right have aligned with wealthy libertarians (most notably the Koch brothers and Mercer family in the US) to advance a neo-liberal, anti-regulatory, anti-welfare agenda.

More broadly, populist parties and movements promote their ideologies through the education system, political narratives (for example, the term "culture wars" is premised on the idea that majorities are losing their rights), policies, laws (for example, criminalising humanitarian assistance to migrants) and manipulation of the media. This has enabled them to consolidate a base of public support, while in turn fuelling polarisation and the collapse of the centre ground. In other contexts, where criminal networks and non-State actors control large swathes of territory or sectors of the economy, civil society often finds itself squeezed between the violence meted out by armed groups and a heavy-handed response from local government or the "international community". Recent examples include the intimidation and killings of journalists in Mexico and the Balkans who were investigating crime and corruption[62], and violence against environmental activists in Latin America.

Attacks on civil society and civic actors are one element of a broader assault on democracy and the rule of law. Civic actors are a threat not simply because they play a watchdog role, but because they offer alternative values and visions that undermine the legitimacy of the populist and Religious Right, who have positioned themselves as the alternative to the "elite establishment" and status quo. Whether from the political margins

or in power, the Far Right and the Religious Right have accelerated the closure of civic space by compounding the attacks on minority and migrant communities, refugees, feminist activism, LGBTQI communities, indigenous populations, and environmental and social justice campaigns. Manifestations of this closing space include attacks on funding, administrative harassment, smear campaigns, criminalisation (particularly of those supporting migrants), surveillance (particularly a risk for those engaged in work on counter terrorism, the right to protest, and environmental rights) and in some contexts violence and killings – increasingly the case in Brazil, India and the Philippines. From here it has been a short leap to more systemic attacks on political opponents, democratic processes, whistle-blowers, academia, journalism and the rule of law. While civil society has long struggled against these forces in many parts of the world, for many western democracies this is a new problem.

In conversations with civic space stakeholders it was difficult to escape the sense that things may well get worse before they get better. With politics both fostering dissent and driven by discontent, many of the people we interviewed assume that there will be a continuation of dominant security paradigms, corporate consolidation of power and the Far Right's exploitation of the "politics of fear". The main reason for this is that progressives appear to have lost the narrative battle in respect to security and human rights, while the Right has tapped into genuine fears about terrorism and globalisation and now public health.

The short to medium term implications for civic space are profound. Emergency powers and civil contingency frameworks have already been updated to address current and future threats of every stripe. As States struggle to develop progressive solutions to global problems, they are tending toward more draconian forms of social control, which are already being deployed to counteract political unrest and climate change protests. The Far Right, religious conservatives and authoritarian populists have weighed in on many of these issues, capitalising on the legal and rhetorical legacy of the "war on terror" and ceaseless demand for greater "security" in the face of perceived challenges to authority, struggles for self-determination and political violence of every kind.

UN Special Rapporteur Phillip Alston pulled no punches in warning recently that "human rights might not survive the coming upheaval". Many predict that climate-induced migration could be among the first "tipping points". We are already starting to see how this issue plays out as humanitarian action is restricted at precisely the time it is needed most. The criminalisation of search and rescue organisations operating in the Mediterranean offers a glimpse into this dystopian future, underscoring a lowest common denominator policy position which implicitly suggests that it is better to let people drown in the sea as a deterrent than rescue them. The arrests and prosecutions of hundreds of activists, refugee groups, civil society organisations and members of the public providing assistance to asylum-seekers across the EU demonstrate the institutionalisation of this approach. Some European States have gone so far as to criminalise the provision of legal advice to "illegal migrants". Having previously framed these issues in terms of "restrictive

... PROGRESSIVES APPEAR TO HAVE LOST THE NARRATIVE BATTLE IN RESPECT TO SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS...

measures", the world's largest humanitarian organisations are now adopting the language of "closing space", citing a raft of new limits on their work: the denial of access to migrant detention facilities, the prohibition of humanitarian services to undocumented migrants, the instrumentalization of humanitarian funding, the abuse of humanitarian language to legitimise containment and repression, and a raft of new requirements on humanitarian actors to cooperate with State security agencies.[63]

Looking further ahead, the potential for worldwide economic shocks, conflict and insecurity caused by the impacts of climate change can be expected to fuel authoritarianism and even give rise to new forms of "Eco-fascism". The spectre of millions of climate refugees from MENA, Africa and Asia is a narrative that is already being exploited and martialled in support of highly repressive policy outcomes. Left unchecked, there is a significant risk that the ideologies of the racist and Religious Right could determine whose interests and well-being comes first in a world that fails to prevent or prepare for systemic crises. As noted above, far right and extremist groups are already capitalising on the Covid-19 pandemic to push anti-Chinese, anti-Jewish and anti-migrant narratives and conspiracy theories, and use political upheaval to push through their social agendas. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro failed to call for even basic measures to safeguard the livelihoods of 11 millions citizens living in favelas. In India, President Modi's introduction of "lockdown" with four hours' notice has displaced hundreds and thousands of migrant workers - many Dalit and Muslim - resulting in the country's largest exodus since partition in 1947, and with evidence of widespread police brutality.[64]

The gravity of the situation we face will require us to tackle these drivers head on. Disrupting and reforming these systems will require much more than the traditional strategies of the human rights, social justice and environmental movements.

Learning from the Right: the key battlegrounds for civic space

As noted above, the challenges we now face are not external to modern, liberal democracies but rooted in their contemporary development. Vested interests acting in the name of political and economic liberalism have produced the structures that are now at the intersection of closing civic space. Corporate power and privatisation, the failure of democracies to meet the needs of many citizens, and ceaseless rhetoric of national security have also provided fertile ground for right-wing populism.[65] A rich and, until recently, often overlooked and maligned scholarship has painstakingly documented how neoliberalism has paved the way for the ascendancy of corporate power and the hollowing out of democracy over the last four decades.

This too was a backlash: a response to the post-war gains of the labour movement and the cultural and political revolutions of the late 1960s. The same can be said of the concerted effort to deny or "greenwash" climate change in the face of irrefutable scientific evidence. Among the reasons that climate change now poses such a significant threat to civic space is that it lays bare the limits of the current global economic system. This is turn requires radical action that threatens vested interests that have no intention of simply stepping aside. In this sense, "big tech" is indeed analogous to "big oil".

It is also possible to draw a straight line from the reaction of religious conservatives to the global gains on sexual and reproductive rights (SRR) to the challenges now facing LBGQTI communities in many parts of the world. Following the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development, where these gains were translated into global health and development goals, the Religious Right allied with political conservativism and invested in a long-term strategy to fight back.

The same deliberate strategy can be identified in respect to the systematic delegitimisation of international solidarity with the cause of Palestinian human rights and statehood, which has been a long-term strategic goal of successive Israeli governments. The growing restrictions and attacks on pro-Palestinian civil society groups we see around the world today reflect the success of this strategy in converting supporters to its cause.

The world over, we see civic actors and activist communities under systematic attack precisely because of the power they are challenging. Across all of these examples, the reactionary Right has deployed consistent tactics that – in no small irony – draw from progressive critiques of power and social control, from Gramsci to Foucault to liberation theology.[66] Many interviewees encouraged us to learn from the "playbook" of the Right with the aim of better understanding what we are up against.[67] Six features of these "counter-revolutions" stand out.[68]

1. **Investment in ideas:** while human rights and social justice funders have prioritised single issue groups and campaigns, economic liberals and neoconservatives, with the support of corporate finance, have invested in overarching ideas and models of governance that have now attained "hegemonic" status.

   The Right understood long ago that in the so-called "marketplace of ideas" it is neither academic merit nor objective outcome that matters, but simply how many people you can get to buy in to an idea. From a small network of right-wing think tanks, created in the US, UK and Europe to advance a global neo-liberal agenda, the prevailing ideas that have created the current crises are now mainstreamed across the lion's share of corporate media.

   Moreover, through growing corporate presence in universities, and through public-private partnerships, these ideas have also become entrenched within national and international institutions of governance.

2. **Investment in State capture:** while organised civil society and its funders remain committed to "playing by the rules" and upholding the values of democracy and universal human rights – even as these tenets appear to crumble around them – their adversaries do not, and have gained ground through ever more innovative methods of circumventing or usurping those rules.

   This has included long term campaigns to capture or hollow out democratic institutions, weaken public administrations, sever the links between public funding and community organising, instrumentalise the judiciary and undermine the rule of law, including the rules based supranational order. International organisations created to supervise and enhance these frameworks have proven, to varying degrees, as susceptible to the capture or hollowing out as their national counterparts. This is not to suggest that these tactics are legitimate, but to acknowledge a failure to first recognise and then prevent the damaging flow of private money, vested interests and damaging rhetoric into public life, and with it a failure to defend the democratic order and the core principle that the basic human rights of all peoples need to be protected, regardless of majority rule.

   Much of this deterioration happened on the watch of the ostensibly social democratic governments of the global North that dominated the early post-Cold War period. These administrations were comfortable with privatisation, insufficiently invested in principled multilateralism, and champions of the "war on terror".

… THE RIGHT UNDERSTOOD LONG AGO THAT IN THE SO-CALLED "MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS" IT IS NEITHER ACADEMIC MERIT NOR OBJECTIVE OUTCOME THAT MATTERS…

3. **Investment in "value"-based narratives:** the issues-based approach to human rights and social justice continues to cede ground to the Right's traditional rhetoric of "law and order", "family values" and appeal to patriotism. Whereas the Right has clearly found many converts on these issues (and the Left many traitors, as the old adage goes), progressive internationalists have been successfully painted as part of a "liberal elite" that is disconnected from the hopes and fears of "ordinary people". It matters not that this narrative defies logic and reason; to tackle electoral populism requires some analysis of what it is the electorate is buying into. It is far from clear that progressive forces have a common understanding of what that is, less still of how to counter it.

This is all the more challenging in the face of new and resurgent forms of "identitarianism". This includes the "great replacement theory" promoted by the Far Right, but also claims that Islam, multiculturalism, immigration, and a failure of migrant communities to integrate, are responsible for terrorism – claims which often came from liberal quarters.[69] Cuts in funding for international development initiatives supporting HIV/AIDS programmes and access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, attacks on gender equality laws, and the delegitimisation of programmes to end violence against women, are similarly predicated on the defence of traditional values. The presentation of climate change as a "liberal elite" issue that threatens domestic jobs and living standards also provides a narrative that legitimises xenophobia and threatens to seal the fate of those who will suffer most. The Philippine "drug war" is presented as a social protection mechanism, and Islamophobic tropes have been deployed in tandem with "war on terror" and national security rhetoric to justify or downplay massive human rights abuses in China, Myanmar, Kashmir and Northeast India and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Across the world, the language of populism is used to discredit the establishment, "liberal elites" and independent expertise in order to win over the electorate. Now, as it has been historically, the spectre of Fascism is grounded in claims about the protection of local communities and their "way of life" against external threat.

4. **Investment in the means of production of cultural hegemony:** while their adversaries are flourishing, progressive movements appear to be divided by their own identity politics and are actively competing with one another for scarce attention at the margins of what has been described as a "sentiment stock market".

Among the key reasons for the new Right's success is their control of access to the public sphere, first through the takeover of State and private media, then through successful social media strategies, including micro-targeting and disinformation. The Right has also engaged in a concerted and equally successful effort in countries including Turkey, Poland, India and Brazil, to influence education systems and embed their ideology through privatisation and curriculum change, the provision or instrumentalisation of academic funding, and a range of attacks on progressive and activist academics. It is

difficult to overstate the role of education vis-à-vis societal values, knowledge control and culture creation, and in turn its impact on the manner in which young people engage with politics and political causes.

5. **Investment in transnational movements:** although waves of progressive movements have emerged in recent years around women's rights (Beijing and Cairo), the financial crisis and austerity (Occupy and the Indignados), municipal politics (Fearless Cities), anti-corruption (the Colour Revolutions), autocracy (the so-called "Arab Spring") and climate change (Extinction Rebellion and the School Climate Strikes), funders have only minimally engaged in supporting, linking and consolidating the civic power they represent.

In contrast, the Right has long been working transnationally, first in support of economic globalisation and now through new international alliances of the Far Right. This has long since eclipsed the bedrock international solidarity that once characterised struggles for self-determination against colonial rule, capitalist exploitation and imperial war. Today's authoritarian populists and their client States are collaborating, sharing strategies and exporting technology and knowhow to one another. Many interviewees reported frustration at the "NGOisation" of progressive politics and an overwhelming focus by civil society organisations and funders on policy, legal and institutional reforms, at the expense of grassroots work and community mobilisation.

6. **Investment in foresight and strategy:** finally, whereas civil society appears anxious and unprepared for an uncertain future, vested interests maintain and consolidate power by being clear sighted about what the future holds and correctly calculating the risks, threats and vulnerabilities they face – and acting to counter them.

Disaster capitalism is able to profit from disaster precisely because it so well-prepared. From multinational corporations to State Security agencies, investment funds to insurers, the most powerful actors in the world invest a huge amount in maintaining and expanding their positions, resources and supply chains by looking to the future. The risks and opportunities they identify lead to concerted efforts to change or shape public perceptions, politics, legislation and events on the ground – and in doing so has a profound effect on civic space. Shell is modelling the future impact of climate change on its global operations, factoring in different public and political reactions. Exxon recently testified before the US congress about its long-standing knowledge of climate change and its implications, and why it chose to withhold this information. Countless national security agencies are using the spectre of failed States and climate refugees to expand their budgets and operations. It follows that any concerted, strategic initiative around civic space must be grounded in the same futures approach to the challenges we face.

The Covid-19 pandemic has already demonstrated that crisis brings huge opportunity for civil society as well as huge challenges. What would a progressive "shock doctrine" look like? What levels of progressive philanthropy would be required to support its groundwork?

… THE MOST POWERFUL ACTORS IN THE WORLD INVEST A HUGE AMOUNT IN MAINTAINING AND EXPANDING THEIR POSITIONS, RESOURCES AND SUPPLY CHAINS BY LOOKING TO THE FUTURE…

Civic space strategies for the next decade: what funders can do

Over many years and decades, neoconservatives and corporations have funded neoliberal think- tanks and research institutes in support of their economic and political agendas. The "war on terror" and hi-tech national security frameworks have been similarly legitimised by defence institutes and counter-terrorism "experts".

Following the conclusion of the FICS review, we asked experts on the global economy, counter terrorism and security, and fighting the Far Right, what interventions could be made to disrupt the three systemic drivers outlined above (securitisation, corporate power, and anti-democratic and regressive forces) in ways that could bring about systemic change. Their proposals are ambitious and will require civic space funders to work quite differently to the way they do now. The experts highlighted an urgent need to invest in ideas and visions; some of which have been identified while others need to be found. Taking these ideas from the margins to the centre of power will require simultaneous investment in building civic power, and will need to appeal to the public across the political spectrum. Here we briefly touch on the four overarching sets of recommendations we received.

1. DEVELOP ALTERNATIVE VISIONS OF "SECURITY"

Firstly, there should be a concerted effort to bring the powers and practices developed as part of the "war on terror" under meaningful democratic control and to develop alternative visions of "security" in order to preserve civic space, ensure the accountability of State agencies and prevent the delegitimisation and violence that has been perpetrated against key actors and movements.

This is essential because the unchecked use of national security discourse, the rapid development of surveillance technology and para/militarisation of the police is allowing governments to target protestors, civic actors and other forms of dissent with minimal public backlash or even outright impunity. A phenomenon that was already the key driver of closing civic space worldwide can be expected to take on even more significance as the emergency powers implemented during the global public health crisis threaten to fuse with wider public order and national security frameworks. While civil society and human rights funders will understandably focus on the defence of civil liberties in this new political climate, the work to challenge and reform this driver requires sustained, long-term work as well. This work includes: exposing and disrupting the political economy of securitisation, including regulation of the homeland security industries that promote and profit from the high-

tech surveillance and securitised approaches while equipping states with the tools of social control and political repression; restricting the vague and overbroad definitions of terrorism, extremism and security in order to prevent states from abusing new and existing legal frameworks for political ends must be another central aim; and influencing the plethora of international bodies that produce soft law and set international standards at the intersection of security, technology and emergency response. All of this will require the articulation and advance of a new vision for security that elevates human security, "root causes", and communitarian approaches, while reducing hard security interventions to last resort. This will need investment over a generation to support of a global movement capable of challenging dominant security paradigms, inspiring new allies to re-think security, and bringing key governmental and the public actors onside.

2. AUTHORITARIAN ALLIANCES SHOULD BE CHALLENGED HEAD ON

Secondly, threats to democracy from undue corporate influence, the Internet's impact on politics and new authoritarian alliances should be challenged head on. This is needed to both protect democratic pluralism, fundamental rights and to enabling progressive civil society to flourish.

Strengthening democracy will require a re-set of the social contract between State, private sector and civil society, and a doubling-down of efforts to curb the corrosive influence of corporate lobbying, the private financing of political campaigns, corruption and organized crime. Civil society will also need support in disrupting the business model underlying surveillance capitalism and the agglomeration of vast amounts of personal and public data, through the advancement of a structural policy agenda that focuses on data rights, competition, education, and public service. It will require strengthening the voices and aggregate power of citizen-led movements that represent the most marginalised in society, in particular the women's rights, LGBTQI, migrants' rights and minority right movements who are at the vanguard of changing culture and social norms and a buffer against majoritarian rule. Progressive movements and sectors – domestic and transnational – will need: funding to build a broad and inclusive vision for a future impacted by public health and climate crises; strategic communications capacity to support their visions; investment in independent media, artistic and cultural production to enable civic actors to build broad popular support; and digital innovation to enable these movements to organise and mobilise securely, protected from surveillance and subversion. Strengthening democracy will also need a concerted effort to think about the renewal of democracy at the national level, as well as the future of international and regional architecture, and for groundwork to be laid for institutions capable of safeguarding human rights over the next few decades.

3. DEMOCRATISE THE ECONOMY

Thirdly, it is essential to democratise the economy and check the power of economic actors in order to reverse the corporate capture of policy-making and private control of the media, which has led to corruption and targeted attacks on civil society organisations who threaten the status quo.

… STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY WILL REQUIRE A RE-SET OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT BETWEEN STATE, PRIVATE SECTOR AND CIVIL SOCIETY…

The current economic paradigm has given rise to unprecedented concentrations of wealth and power which in turn has created an irresistible incentive on the part of the powerful to undermine democracy and civic space in order to maintain their position – an insurmountable barrier for those advocating private sector reforms. Diverse ideas are emerging globally. The business and human rights sector's demand for binding human rights standards is part of a wider re-imagining of the role of corporations, which could see enterprise and business harnessed for public good. In the Global North, alternative economic models are being driven by the demand to address climate change and rapidly transition to a green economy. The "Green New Deal" and "just transition" frameworks, together with experiments in "energy democracy", all require governments, the private sector and investors to manage that transition in a just and fair way. Grassroots movements are leading the development of alternative economic models in the Global South, many rooted in Indigenous People's traditions of environmental stewardship and governance. If implemented, these initiatives have the potential to expand democracy and civic space by weakening the undue influence of some business sectors over governments, and requiring the private sector and States to work in partnership rather than in conflict with communities and workers, particularly those from low income, rural or minority communities. The time-limited opportunities opened by the pandemic should be met by urgent and at scale support for those leading this work.

It will clearly be impossible to deliver such a transformative agenda without galvanising broader civic power and public support at an unprecedented scale. This will require investments in building movements across issues, borders and generations. It will require the building of a popular base through investments in strategic communications, progressive media organisations and civic education in support of a shared vision for the economy, security and society.

4. RESOURCE THESE EFFORTS AT SCALE OVER A LONG TERM

Finally, in this broader and more ambitious horizon for civic space, there is an obvious need to resource these efforts at scale over a long-term time frame that reflects both the sustained effort that will be required and the urgency of the challenges we face – particularly, but not least, in the case of climate change.

The scale of the funding required is beyond that of independent philanthropy; both government funders and the next generation of philanthropists will need to be persuaded to act to more radically and urgently. The onus at this point, is with progressive philanthropy which, unlike government, has much greater freedom to take risks, support innovation and invest in disrupting the forces that have created the intersectional crises we now face. We also have a duty to persuade and inspire the next generation of philanthropists to share our values. The preservation of democracy and civic space demands nothing less.

What next for civic space funders?

In December 2019, FICS brought together 40 foundations and 10 experts to discuss the future of civic space, informed by an early version of the analysis presented in this briefing note. Participants explored what philanthropy could do to support effective alliances across movements and sectors, alignment between the different approaches to tackling closing civic space (an "eco-system" approach) and what it would require to disrupt the systemic drivers of closing civic space.

In the first half of 2020, FICS has begun – in partnership with leading experts and foundations – to scope a strategy for funders on how to disrupt and reform the drivers of closing civic space, including the immediate threats and opportunities stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic. FICS is also working closely with a range of funds and funding networks to lead a reflective conversation about the implications of the findings in this report for how progressive philanthropy operates

FICS will be publishing new thinking and recommendations for civic space grant-making, informed by this analysis, throughout 2020.

For more information about the convening, this analysis, or how we might work together, contact FICS@global-dialogue.org

Endnotes

1   For the purpose of this report we use Civicus's definition of civic space as *"the place, physical, virtual, and legal, where people exercise their* **rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly**. *By forming associations, by speaking out on issues of public concern, by gathering together in online and offline fora, and by participating in public decision-making, individuals use civic space to solve problems and improve lives. A robust and protected civic space forms the cornerstone of accountable, responsive democratic governance and stable societies"*. For a more critical discussion of the concept of shrinking space see also: Hayes, et al, On Shrinking Space, Transnational Institute, April 2017

2   The term "civil society" is more contested. In a human rights funding context we refer to the OHCHR definition: *"individuals and groups who voluntarily engage in forms of public participation and action around shared interests, purposes or values that are compatible with the goals of the UN: the maintenance of peace and security, the realization of development, and the promotion and respect of human rights"*.

3   A team of six researchers undertook 152 interviews between June and September 2019. Of these, 54% were civil society actors (including CSOs, researchers, think tanks, academics, infrastructure organisations and media representatives) and 46% were funders (including private and public funders and funder infrastructure bodies and networks). Interviewees came from a mix of global, national and grassroots organisations, and identified across a range of thematic areas including: holding economic actors to account (24); environmental protection (29); equality (32); impact of climate change and responses (16); human rights and democracy (11).

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The 2020s will be a decade of transition, but it is unclear what form that transition will take and the values and norms that will guide it.

What are these global changes, how will they impact civic space, and how – as funders who invest in progressive causes and movements – should we respond?

Established in 2016, the Funders' Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) brings together private philanthropy from around the world to help defend and expand the space for civic participation. This briefing for funders summarises the key findings of the FICS 2019 strategic review, which sought to elaborate a strategic framework through which independent funders could respond more effectively to the phenomenon of closing civic space through collaborative and targeted interventions.

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