

Better  
preparedness:

# FUNDING RESILIENCE

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Improving coordination between  
funders addressing acute human rights  
crises and restricted civic space

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**HRFN**

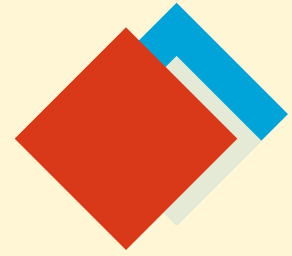
Human Rights  
Funders Network



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# LANDSCAPE RESEARCH REPORT AND CODESIGN LAB SERIES



We are living in a time of intersecting crises. Natural disaster, democratic collapse, and humanitarian emergencies sit against a backdrop of rising authoritarianism. At Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN), we believe that there is an urgent need for new approaches to funding civil society and social movements where human rights are most under threat.

The time is now. In the last two years alone, a range of large-scale crises – from Ukraine to Afghanistan, Myanmar to Burkina Faso, Nicaragua to Maui – has galvanized philanthropic actors around the world and led to unprecedented levels of financial investments in crisis. At the same time, a growing number of foundations are working to reach movements and civil society actors facing substantial restrictions on their ability to organize freely, from India to Uganda and beyond.

In 2023-2024, 'Better Preparedness: Funding Resilience,' is bringing together peace and security and human rights funders so that they can deliver more coordinated,

effective, and efficient resources in contexts of extreme threat or crisis. There is a commitment to find ways to address historic power imbalances between actors in our field, in part by decolonising our practices. Ultimately, we aim to create a blueprint for coordination and the political will, relationships of trust, and future-facing perspectives necessary to activate it. To do so, we will bring together funders in a process designed to:

1. establish a funding community to prototype, practice, and normalize preparedness;
2. build analysis, skills, and narratives to support movements' resilience in an uncertain future;
3. spark leadership commitments to invest where restricted space and crisis threaten the future of human rights and civic engagement; and
4. identify philanthropic points of entry within larger funding and policy interventions.

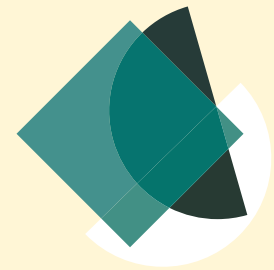
This report outlines the work ahead. In section 1, we detail the next steps and ways to participate in the initiative. In section 2, we provide a summary of findings from the scoping research and engagement to date, which together showcase both the state of the funding field and the entry points for this initiative. Finally, the Annex provides background on our design principles, structure, and team.

# SECTION 1 BETTER PREPAREDNESS: FUNDING RESILIENCE: OUR WORKING VISION



In the next two years, we will build a blueprint to enable better coordination within and between funding institutions to more effectively deliver resources in contexts of extreme threat or crisis and longer-term closing civic space. Ultimately and enduringly, the goal is to ensure that human rights defenders, social justice movements, and civil society have access to resources when and how they need them.

## MAIN OUTPUT: A COORDINATION BLUEPRINT BY JUNE 2024



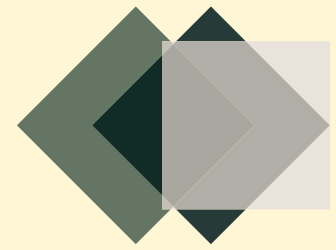
Whilst we purposefully will not prefigure the final blueprint, it is likely to require a range of different approaches and tools that together enable coordination around different types of crises and longer term civic space challenges.

Importantly these approaches need to enable foundations to play their different, complementary roles. Some change will be internal, with tools and practices that strengthen agility and alignment within a single institution in different types of crisis and restricted space. For others, coordination may take the form of more formal and potentially resourced mechanisms. As such

the blueprint could comprise a number of different components including coordination principles, mapping of foundations' work and of an ideal wider funding ecosystem, taxonomies of risk and crisis, protocols and mechanisms for coordination, crisis preparedness drills, and a range of supporting templates.

Though this work will focus on funding institutions, accountability must always be to those leading change. Throughout the series, we will work with civil society and movement partners to ensure that any outcomes reflect their analysis and needs.

## BETTER PREPAREDNESS: LAB ARC & PARTICIPATION



The 'Better Preparedness: Funding Resilience' initiative is taking place in four phases:

- 1.** Setting the Frame: research report and validation meeting (May-June 2023, co-designed with a founding circle of 15 foundations);
- 2.** Learning and Codesign Labs series (November 2023-April 2024)
- 3.** Validation of Findings (April-June 2024); and
- 4.** Launch of findings, community building, and leadership outreach (2024)

The Learning and Codesign Labs series will consist of output-oriented 60-120 minute online Labs, each starting with a clear focus question for consideration. There will be two session formats:

- Learning Lab: Spaces to share knowledge and engage with experts from civil society, philanthropy, and beyond. Creative and collaborative, learning labs will be open to partners wanting to address a range of relevant foresight and trending topics; and
- Codesign Lab: Co-create, build, and test solutions. Refine and prototype new and existing tools for action. Codesign labs are for core foundations (detailed below) and build toward concrete practices and coordination mechanisms.

The roles and timeline below show the different participation opportunities. This initiative is first and foremost for human rights and peace and security foundations working in highly restricted civic space and/or in crisis contexts.

## Foundations

**Core Group:** Foundations that commit to participating in the full initiative and attending most sessions. Core Group members will be eligible for Co-design Labs, where we will actively co-design the tools and approaches crafted through this initiative. Staff members may rotate based on interest and topic.

**HRFN Community of Practice (CoP):** Foundation staff interested

in attending distinct, open sessions. Participants from funding institutions will be vetted through HRFN's community of practice for human rights defenders and closing civic space. To receive regular updates, [sign up here](#).

## Civil Society

Civil society organizations are welcome to participate in open sessions, including the Learning Labs Week. The Initiative also engages a global Civil Society Advisory Group, which participates in codesigning and providing feedback on outputs (such as a coordination blueprint) at key moments.

## LAB SERIES

The series will include a range of learning and codesign labs, building toward coordination mechanisms and approaches by mid-2024.

Due to the nature of initiative, some labs will be held in closed sessions with core group members only. Others – including a Learning Labs Week in early November – will be open to a broader community of funders and civil society and movement partners.

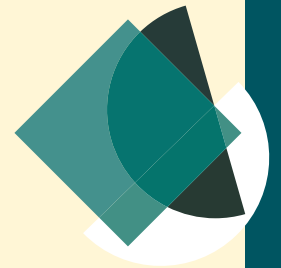
## SECTION 2 SETTING THE FRAME, RESEARCH REPORT AND VALIDATION MEETING



As part of the first phase of the initiative, the HRFN project team conducted a first piece of research to analyze the human rights and civic space funding landscape. This was followed by an in-person meeting in London to review the findings, refine the key questions, and set in place the direction of the initiative.

**The findings and the London outcomes provide a snapshot of where we are as a field and the opportunities, challenges, and possibilities for funding movements and civil society under threat more effectively.**

## RESEARCH FINDINGS: THE CHALLENGES OF DELIVERING MORE COORDINATED, EFFECTIVE, AND EFFICIENT RESOURCES



Our scoping research had three objectives:

- to identify key challenges and opportunities for more effective collaboration between philanthropic and wider funders;
- to start mapping the work of the core group of foundations; and
- to start to identify coordination best practices and mechanisms that could be relevant to the initiative.

The methodology combined:

- qualitative interviews with 21 foundation representatives; and
- desk research focused on two specific areas:
  - funding and emergency response coordination mechanisms from humanitarian, government, climate justice and feminist movements; and
  - opportunities for engagement with wider funding ecosystems looking first in detail at bilateral funders.

The following findings highlight the intricate challenges in coordinating philanthropic resources for human rights crises. Among other issues prominently underscored, we explore how external systemic drivers, including restrictive national laws and banking regulations, hinder swift and efficient resource allocation, limiting cross-border partnerships and local support. We further see how internal systemic issues, including lack of crisis preparedness and underfunding of grassroots organizations, hinder effective responses. Acute issues ranging from a lack of shared understanding of crises, fragmentation of resources, low risk appetite, restrictions on grantees, and limited knowledge among funders further impede coordination all act to undermine the effectiveness and harmonization of resourcing in the context of crisis.

Among a range of barriers inhibiting effective coordination articulated by respondents, the following issues emerged as the most pronounced and are detailed below:

#### **EXTERNAL SYSTEMIC DRIVERS IMPACTING CRISIS FUNDING STRATEGY AND CAPACITY**

- Layered and arcane restrictions on the operations of civil society organizations
- Challenges in addressing long-term civic space deficits
- Increased surveillance of human rights defenders

#### **INTERNAL SYSTEMIC ISSUES IN FOUNDATIONS**

- Lack of crisis preparedness inhibits swift and strategic responses
- Limited internal buy-in and capacity among foundations
- Low risk appetite among some foundations
- Fragmentation and insufficiency of resources
- Insufficient inclusion of diverse grantees

#### **BARRIERS TO COORDINATION BETWEEN FOUNDATIONS**

- Lack of a field-wide holistic approach to addressing acute human rights crises and longer term civic space challenges
- Lack of knowledge of each other's focus areas
- Lack of shared understanding of the nature of crisis
- Lack of coordination preparedness for crisis
- Lack of investment in early warning systems and foresighting

#### **LACK OF COORDINATION WITHIN THE WIDER FUNDING ECOSYSTEM**

- Limited coordination among stakeholders within broader funding ecosystems



## EXTERNAL SYSTEMIC DRIVERS IMPACTING CRISIS FUNDING STRATEGY AND CAPACITY

**Layered and arcane restrictions on the operations of civil society organizations.** However, hurdles arise from restrictive national legislative frameworks, including new sanctions regimes, cumbersome registration processes, foreign funding limitations, and inhospitable banking laws. The proliferation of these constraints undermines philanthropic resourcing by creating bureaucratic obstacles that hinder swift and efficient resource allocation. These barriers obstruct cross-border partnerships, limit support to local organizations, and impede responses to pressing humanitarian needs.

**Challenges in addressing long-term civic space deficits.** Shared and sustained approaches are lacking. A repressive tactics-sharing paradigm among authoritarian states challenges traditional advocacy. A polarized

global order hampers international collaboration and limits multilateral support. Inadequate framing of “civic space” obscures the severity of challenges, necessitating a reevaluation of strategies and a collaborative redefinition of the concept to address these obstacles more effectively.

**Increased surveillance of human rights defenders.** Increased surveillance and compounded persecution hinder effective support. Heightened surveillance and persecution of human rights defenders limit resource allocation and communication, creating an atmosphere of fear. Failure to acknowledge the compounded persecution faced by human rights defenders during crises weakens tailored support.

## INTERNAL SYSTEMIC ISSUES IN FOUNDATIONS

### **Lack of crisis preparedness inhibits swift and strategic responses.**

When foundations need to prioritize establishing frameworks over timely action, the result is delayed or inefficient responses, undermining the ability to address urgent needs during crises. Additionally, the underfunding of grassroots and frontline organizations and a lack of consideration for social movement perspectives hampers agile and connected responses. The reluctance to localize and decolonize granting further perpetuates power imbalances and undercuts contextual expertise necessary for targeted interventions.

### **Limited internal buy-in and capacity among foundations.**

Foundations often fail to recognize and invest adequately in cross-foundation coordination, as some decision makers may be removed from crisis response coordination, as well as prioritizing internal project delivery. Rapid response funders lack capacity for follow-up, necessitating connections with long-term support groups to ensure sustained impact. Some

foundation staff spoke of facing time constraints and a need to prioritize that hindered the establishment and upkeep of dedicated coordination spaces. This constraint impedes efficient communication, partnerships, and decision-making, in turn delaying resource delivery for human rights issues. The absence of a designated entity responsible for coordination and learning spaces during and after crises obstructs effective coordination, resulting in missed opportunities for collaborative strategies and suboptimal crisis responses.

### **Low risk appetite among some foundations.**

Foundations described themselves as having varying risk appetites, also noting that a need to manage reputation and legal risk may hinder bolder actions. Fear of reputational damage was seen as deterring support for contentious issues and work in more closed civic space contexts, inhibiting efforts to address root causes. Similarly, apprehensions regarding legal repercussions limit innovative interventions, constraining the potential for impactful initiatives.

**Fragmentation and insufficiency of resources.**

Philanthropic funding can sometimes be characterized by hesitation to pivot core strategies during human rights crises, resulting in fragmented interventions. This strategic ambivalence and resource scarcity together pose challenges to effective philanthropic action. The influx and subsequent retreat of resources during crises also leaves gaps in sustained support, particularly when determining the transition from acute to entrenched crises is complex. Moreover, limited resources impede comprehensive support, limiting the scope of interventions.

**Insufficient inclusion of diverse grantees.**

The current coordination

landscape is centered around major English-speaking foundations, which restricts broader engagement and localization. Biases in language and size marginalize smaller local foundations, undermining inclusivity and diverse perspectives. Escalating surveillance of human rights defenders and philanthropy fosters reluctance to openly share sensitive data and collaborate due to safety concerns. This fear impedes information flow, thus limiting effective coordination and the collective influence of philanthropic endeavors. Inadequate psychosocial support for human rights defenders undermines their sustainability, while bureaucratic verification processes delay effective philanthropy.

## BARRIERS TO COORDINATION BETWEEN FOUNDATIONS

**Lack of a field-wide holistic approach to addressing acute human rights crises and longer term civic space challenges.**

Colleagues reflected that this can hamper efficient philanthropic resourcing and effective support for civil society. In some cases this was through not addressing the interlinked nature of social justice struggles. In others an inadequate acknowledgment of the role of civic space restrictions in hindering development and rights progress led to insufficient funding for interventions addressing civic

spaces. This knowledge gap creates fragmented solutions, uneven resource distribution, ultimately obstructing effective and efficient philanthropic endeavors.

**Lack of shared understanding of the nature of crisis.**

The absence of a consensus on what constitutes a crisis complicates the allocation of resources. A lack of shared definitions and a taxonomy of crisis complicate efforts to prioritize crises. Additionally, the undue influence of media and politics on defining crises can divert resources from neglected issues,

hindering comprehensive responses. Treating crises as isolated events, rather than part of a larger civic space continuum, restricts sustainable solutions.

**Lack of knowledge of each other's focus areas.** Lack of awareness among philanthropic organizations about each other's work hampers coordination. The absence of transparent information-sharing limits collaboration, synergy, and resource alignment. Viewing donors as competitors rather than partners hinders collective action, barriers collaboration, and limits efficient resource allocation. This lack of knowledge impedes the collective response to challenges and efficient delivery of support.

Lack of coordination preparedness for crisis. Lack of preparedness and

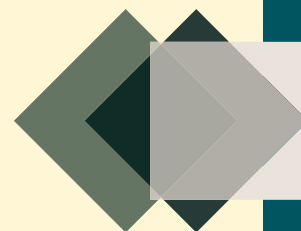
reactive coordination undermine effective responses. The absence of preparedness by philanthropic foundations impedes timely and effective responses, emphasizing the need for drills and simulations. Reactive coordination hampers strategic planning and collaboration, missing opportunities to address crises comprehensively. Neglecting long-term systemic issues during crises inhibits sustained and impactful interventions.

Lack of investment in early warning systems and foresighting. Insufficient early warning mechanisms and foresighting exist. Foundations lack systematic and comprehensive early warning systems. Approaches include signals from on-the-ground networks and operational security teams. Few organizations engage in foresighting, hindering strategic planning.

## LACK OF COORDINATION WITHIN THE WIDER FUNDING ECOSYSTEM

Limited coordination among stakeholders within broader funding ecosystems. Colleagues spoke of a lack of strategic coordination between foundations and other actors in the wider funding ecosystem, including bilateral funders and the private sector.

# RESEARCH SUMMARY: STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES



The research identified an emerging longlist of opportunities to focus on in building a blueprint for effective coordination between foundation partners funding crises and longer-term civic space work. Potentially transformative in potential, these opportunities were considered at the subsequent London validation meeting to be chosen from as the subjects of Labs or as the focus for the design of prototype components for the eventual blueprint.

## **Creating a greater understanding of each other's work, relative risk appetites and complementary roles**

- **Regularly mapping who is funding where, what, and how** is essential for foundations to gain a comprehensive understanding of the funding landscape and to enable targeted coordination.
- **Developing a taxonomy of risk and asking philanthropic groups to self-identify their appetite** is a building block that can enable the collective identification of specific roles leveraging the strengths and expertise of each foundation, in forming a collaborative and complementary approach.

## **Building a shared understanding of crisis and contexts**

- **Developing a taxonomy of crisis would enable philanthropic foundations to effectively coordinate responses** across various domains such as political, humanitarian, economic, and human rights.
- **Prioritizing the development of coordinated and discrete approaches to support civil society throughout the lifecycle of a crisis** will ultimately promote resilience and sustainable outcomes in times of crisis.

## Creating coordination principles and mechanisms

- **Coordination is required between foundations at a number of levels** including leadership, legal and compliance units, operations, programming and communications.
- **Develop coordination principles.** Whilst the context of crises changes, requiring strategies to be adapted, there are examples from the humanitarian, climate justice and feminist movement sectors of the importance of creating founding coordination principles.
- **Design coordination mechanisms.** From our own sector and others, there are examples of successful mechanisms, which can inform the development of one or more coordination mechanisms as appropriate to global, transnational and national coordination efforts.
- **Prioritize flexible resources to invest in convening platforms** that enable long-term and crisis coordination among stakeholders.

- **Consider more pooled and basket funds** to enable swift and effective response in times of crisis, philanthropic groups can establish pooled rapid response funding mechanisms.
- **Develop bespoke templates and regular drills** to deepen and accelerate coordination during acute, short-term human rights crises.
- **Develop a shared and trusted list of banks in each region** to navigate the challenges posed by varying banking regulations.

## Preparedness through early warning and forecasting

- **Ensure the labs provide space to explore key trends and foresighting trends.** Issue areas could include the impacts of AI and technology, geopolitical and military horizons and drivers of closing civic space.
- **Explore the potential for early warning systems and forecasting principles** from the pragmatic to scaled, audacious, field-wide systems.

**Continue to shift the power by** involving local civil society/donors, backing localization, and embracing decolonization.

- **Ensure grantees and movements are seen as the first order of analysis and their needs are met.**
- **Enhance coordination and streamline grant application processes during crises** by developing a common application for grantees.
- **Create secure systems** where people feel safe and comfortable sharing sensitive information.
- **Support sustained movements by investing in comprehensive self-care and well-being programs.**
- **Prioritize investing in building up existing local protection mechanisms** and / or developing new ones to ensure the safety and security of civil society actors.

#### **Widen the funder ecosystem**

- **Map and define the ideal ecosystem that directly**

**shapes funding in crisis and close civic space.**

Include bilateral funders, financial institutions, social movements, service providers, local government agencies, and businesses, and more in an initial scoping for those providing resources for – or against – human rights in these contexts.

- **Actively engage and collaborate with bilateral funders** to encourage the adoption of progressive and grounded policies for funding civic space and addressing long-term civic space deficits.
- **Collectively engage in both public and private advocacy efforts.**

#### **Catalyzing internal and sectoral change by meeting the needs of foundation colleagues**

- **Through codesigning together, ensure the lab series and final blueprint create the case for colleagues to advance the case internally,** and the tools to start improving coordination before the next crisis.

# JUNE 2023 LONDON MEETING: VALIDATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS AND STRATEGIC DIRECTION OF THE INITIATIVE



On 20 June 2023, a group of 22 representatives from 15 organizations gathered in London to explore the emerging initiative hosted by Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN), in partnership with a team at Better by Codesign, and co-sponsored by Funders Initiative for Civil Society (FICS). This meeting refined the work and led to the following conclusions and guiding questions.

## KEY LONDON TAKEAWAYS

**1. We are on the right track.** There was a high level of validation about the need, potential, and momentum for collaborative approaches to funding in highly restricted human rights contexts.

a. It is better to take a holistic, strategic approach to funding civil society in addressing both acute, short-term human rights crises and longer-term systemic civic space challenges.

b. There is unanimous concern about the absence of systematic and structured philanthropic coordination in resourcing civil society, and agreement that greater coordination between each other is desirable.

**2. At the same time, we have room to clearly and concisely articulate a shared vision** as the initiative moves forward. We want to be able to clearly answer, “What is the Big Idea?”.

**3. This is ambitious, and we need to focus.** The hopes are huge and the potential scope too. Different areas could constitute programs in their own right. Ultimately, we want to see significant, concrete movement within the next year. To get there, we need to focus sharply on what is possible and what is most needed, and then enable concrete actions. We will take a modular program design approach that enables us to start focused, whilst also being able to add further pieces of work, as



resources become available.

**4. There is no one-size-fits-all model,** but we see the potential for curated/bespoke blueprints that individual institutions and those seeking to collaborate can use that respond to different types of events. A taxonomy is needed to guide this work and ensure we're using shared language and definitions.

**5. Power matters.** In the next phase, engaging with other peers and with movements/civil society will be critical to ensure the ideas set forth are grounded in a) the realities activists and human rights actors face; b) the institutional constraints that shape how funding moves; and c) a power analysis, both within institutions and between movements and among different kinds of funders.

**6. The success of this initiative requires buy-in at multiple levels of an institution,** from leadership to operational arms to legal and compliance. The structure of the lab arc should reflect this and bring people in at the right times.

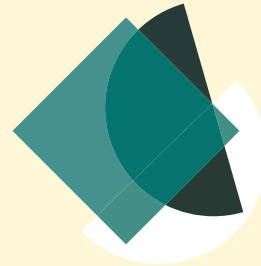
**7. We are an ecosystem.** Even in the room, we brought a range of approaches and locations in the larger funding field. We see the potential of this initiative to build genuine community so people know what others are doing, have a sense of their own risk appetites, and can find places of complementarity to both deliver resources and influence the larger funding ecosystem.

## GUIDING STRATEGIC QUESTIONS FOR THE NEXT PHASES

In London colleagues identified and debated a number of key insights and questions that will inform the overall strategic direction of the initiative and to which we will refer through-out the next year.

- Where should we focus our efforts: internally; field-wide; externally in the wider funder ecosystem?
- We need to spend more time learning from successes and failures, and these learning spaces need to look at both large- and mid-scale examples e.g. Uganda
- What could be the big ideas that could catalyze change and provide a clarity of purpose for our leadership?
- How do we envisage developing coordination mechanisms beyond what already exists, particularly what we already do at country level?
- Given the dynamic nature of crises, how do we avoid responding with static structures and documents?
- Coordination in other settings e.g. humanitarian, works in part because orgs play different roles, assigned through rosters. Are we capable of similarly giving up some autonomy to make this work? We may need to make internal cultural shifts.
- When responding to crises we make choices but prioritization across the field is not the same and this can block operational coordination. Can we articulate prioritization and allow for shifts in our positions?
- Coordination means different things for different orgs - public, private foundations, small and large etc - depending on where in the ecosystem you are, can we describe a set of principles that we can all agree with?
- Rethinking time: planning cycles, markets, financial years, how do we make those better align?

## SUMMARY



The priority challenges and opportunities to focus on, and the key stakeholders to work with to do this, have been identified through this first phase of the initiative. The Learning Lab series will now widen out and create spaces to learn from previous crisis coordination successes and failures, and host an open Learning Labs Week to hear from various thematic knowledge holders, to consider the impact on the field of trending topics and foresight issues. Insights from these sessions will in turn inform the Codesign Lab series which get down to building and selecting the various coordination mechanisms and tools that will make up the end product, the coordination blueprint. The final set of Labs will then validate this.

# ANNEX



## Codesigning the coordination blueprint:

The HRFN project team will lead and support the co creation of initial prototypes of different coordination components either in Labs or between them. Given the urgency of the work the intention is to deliver usable prototype principles, tools and mechanisms needed by foundation colleagues, in a way that they can be used ‘out of the box’ - both internally and between foundations - whilst enabling them to be tested and improved.

## ABOUT THE TEAM:

**Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN)** will host and lead Better Preparedness. HRFN was founded in 1994 and is the largest network of funders working to advance human rights around the world. In 2021-2022, HRFN led a learning journey, *Chronicles of Crises Foretold: How funders can prepare, respond, and build resilience in human rights crises*, co-hosted with Peace and Security Funders Group (PSFG) and co-sponsored by FICS and other leading funders. HRFN also hosts a community of practice on human rights defenders (HRDs) and closing civic space.



The process will be facilitated and codesigned by **Better by Codesign**, a multi-disciplinary, participatory design network of consultants and practitioners. Better byCodesign partners with nonprofits, businesses, and governments – and the people they serve – to codesign innovative solutions to complex challenges. They believe that bold collaborations spark powerful new ideas, so we use approaches like design thinking to help diverse thinkers co-create impactful, sustainable and scalable solutions. Better by Codesign’s people have decades of experience in strategy design and programme implementation across the nonprofit, private and public sectors.



**Funders Initiative for Civil Society (FICS)** has been a thought partner to HRFN and is a co-sponsor of Preparedness for Uncertain Futures: Funding Resilience. Through this work, HRFN aims to complement FICS’ Civic Futures work and draw on the analysis of the drivers of closing of civic space as a world-wide phenomenon. FICS will play an ongoing advisory role.

### **Initiative oversight**

A Guiding Group of 15 people representing the diversity of foundations is shaping the initiative. They come together across areas in the funding ecosystem with the mandate of providing feedback on direction, content, and blueprint components.

The Initiative also engages a global Civil Society Advisory Group, which participates in codesigning and providing feedback on outputs (such as a coordination blueprint) at key moments.