



DEMOCRACY FOR ALL: BEYOND A CRISIS OF IMAGINATION

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM A YEAR-LONG INITIATIVE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
1. ABOUT THIS REPORT	9
2. A NEW NARRATIVE OF A REIMAGINED DEMOCRACY	9
3. TODAY'S CHALLENGES	16
4. KEY CIVIL SOCIETY CONCERNS	19
5. CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONDING	29
6. FIRST STEPS TOWARDS THE VISION	33
7. OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO LEAD BY EXAMPLE AS DEMOCRATIC CIVIL SOCIETY	40
CREDITS	43

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report sets out the conclusions of a year-long research project led by CIVICUS, the global civil society alliance. Our consultations heard the voices of people from around 80 countries. Civil society leaders, activists and stakeholders shared 54 written contributions and provided 97 interviews, while 26 democracy dialogues – informal citizen-led discussions on challenges with and hopes for democracy – were convened in countries around the world. All contributions have been published on our ‘reimagining democracy’ homepage. We thank all who shared their views.

DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION AND DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS

In country after country, democracy is under attack. In many countries, we see democratic regression and the withdrawal of democratic freedoms. We see the rise of polarising politics and the cult of the strong-arm leader. We see right-wing populism on the march. At the same time, profound global problems such as climate change, inequality and conflict are left largely unaddressed. Everywhere around the world, people are unhappy with the limited forms of democracy they experience.

Our consultations tell us that people want more democracy, not less. In the many countries that do not have functioning institutions of representative democracy, people want them, but in countries where these exist, people want more, and demand more participatory, deliberative and direct democracy. In our consultations, people overwhelmingly expressed the view that democracy is the best form of governance, even though it presently falls far short of its potential. People want democracy both because it enables better decisions to be taken and decision-makers held more accountable, and because there is a fundamental human need to have a voice and influence over the circumstances of our lives.

A NEW VISION OF DEMOCRACY

If we are to have the kind of democracy where people have agency and their voices are heard, we believe three fundamental shifts are needed.

1. **Governance defined by local needs and aspirations:** We need to see democracy as a process that has participation at its heart and is open to all. We need much more local and community-level participatory democracy, including devolved and decentralised governance that allows communities to develop their

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Town hall meeting with UN Secretary-General António Guterres and civil society on the margins of Commission on Status of Women (CSW) 62

Photo: UN Women/ Ryan Brown

own locally grounded solutions to the challenges they face. We need more deliberative democracy, through such means as citizen assemblies. We need more direct democracy, providing there are safeguards against the majoritarian abuse of power and manipulation of instruments of direct democracy by political leaders. All systems of democracy need to be open to a wide variety of viewpoints and respect the rights of minority voices to be heard.

2. **Global democracy to tackle global problems:** While we need more local democracy, at the same time many of the major problems of the day can only be tackled on a global scale, and we should all have a role in developing global solutions. We need genuinely international institutions, rather than intergovernmental institutions, free from the narrow calculations of national leaders. We need to be consulted on

new international initiatives and have a direct say in the governance of international institutions. We need a world parliament, elected on a direct suffrage rather than along nation-state lines.

3. **A democratised economy that works for all:** All the institutions of democracy will count for little if our economies remain under the control of super-rich elites. We all need to have more say in economic decision-making and to have an equal say in political decision-making, rather than one that is determined by our economic status. We need to transition to a post-growth economy focused on the better distribution of what we have and can generate for all, the provision of quality essential services that can be accessed by all, and the ability of all to participate in the management of our resources.

KEY CURRENT CHALLENGES

Clearly, the present-day situation falls far short of this expansive vision of democracy. Key challenges of the day identified in our consultations include:

- **Flawed elections and governance institutions:** Various indices of democracy point to democratic decline. In many countries, elections lack substance and are performative and ceremonial. Even when elections are more free and fair, they exclude groups of people or fail to deliver adequate choice. The ability to participate and express dissent, and civil society's ability to act, are often clamped down upon around elections. Incumbents are often unfairly advantaged. Flawed elections can cause people to withdraw from participation, leaving the field open for extremist alternatives.
- **Skewed economics:** Tiny elites control our economies, and the gap between the obscenely wealthy and everyone else is increasing. Economic and political elites are tightly enmeshed, such that the super-rich are able to skew political decision-making in their favour: as economic inequality increases, policies to address inequality become less likely. Almost all of

us are shut out of economic decision-making. Workplace democracy seems an impossible dream for most. Large, transnational corporations have penetrated decision-making at the international sphere too.

- **Narrow development approaches:** Approaches to development have increasingly become top-down, technocratic and oriented around mega-projects and the promotion of economic growth in ways that most benefit the wealthy. It is harder for citizens to exert democratic accountability over development projects, and corruption flourishes in the absence of accountability, impacting on democratic freedoms. People are increasingly not asked or trusted to define their own development needs.
- **The stability and security paradigm:** Threats to national stability and security, whether real or imagined, are used to restrict democratic freedoms and suppress democratic demands. Democratic dissent is often conflated with terrorism. People are open to persuasion that their democratic freedoms can be given up for a promise of security, and worse, that the freedoms of other groups may be waived.
- **Exclusion:** While we are all excluded from economic decision-making, marginalised and minority groups are particularly so, and have long been excluded from many political systems. Now increasing political polarisation is widening divides, and right-wing populists are targeting excluded groups and encouraging their supporters to attack them. In many contexts, culture wars are being waged, framed around notions of citizenship and nationality that are deliberately exclusive rather than inclusive. These deny people the power to express their views and participate.
- **Global democratic deficits:** States that are repressing democracy at the national level are also doing so at the international level, making it harder for citizens to influence international institutions. International institutions are being attacked and weakened by right-wing populist leaders. They are also increasingly being targeted by highly conservative groups that position themselves within the civil society arena to take advantage of and skew consultation processes.
- **Democracy in civil society:** In civil society, we are being questioned about how democratic we are in practice, not least in the light of recent high-profile scandals that have exposed worrying deficits in our internal practices and posed troubling questions about how strongly we adhere to our values. Our policies may not enable those who work and volunteer for us to have a voice. We often fail to connect with citizens and understand their needs, particularly those who may not share our values and ways of seeing the world. Within the civil society sphere, democracy is undermined by the rise of anti-rights groups.

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CIVIL SOCIETY LEADING THE RESPONSE

But the news is not all gloomy. Across the world civil society is responding and making democratic progress. Mass movements sparked apparent democratic breakthroughs by ousting corrupt and autocratic leaders in **Armenia** and **South Korea**. In **West African** countries such as Burkina Faso and Senegal, young people have led, mobilising creatively to stand up to autocratic rulers who tried to extend their time in office. **Malaysia's** ruling party was finally defeated after more than six decades of entrenched power, with civil society's campaigning against corruption and electoral abuses pivotal. In **The Gambia**, united civil society action helped force a longstanding dictator to accept the people's verdict. In **Paraguay**, attempts to change the constitution to allow the president to stand again were dropped following mass protests. In **Tunisia**, concerted and coalition-based civil society action prevented democratic backsliding following revolution.



Mass anti-government protests in Armenia from April to May 2018 led to a 'Velvet Revolution'

Photo: Narek

The **MeToo** and **Time's Up** movements mobilised huge numbers of people, changing the debate about the status of women in societies and workplaces, not just in the USA, but around the world. In **Ireland**, civil society showed how citizen assemblies and referendums can advance rights with a successful campaign to change the abortion law, marking a victory for women's sexual and reproductive rights.

Away from the headlines, our contributors offered many other examples of how civil society is stepping up to make the difference.

FIRST STEPS TOWARDS THE VISION

Despite civil society's many efforts, we are clearly still a long way away from our expansive vision of democracy. But there are steps we can all take that build on our responses so far:

1. BUILDING BETTER INSTITUTIONS AT EVERY LEVEL

- **Making elections more free and fair:** We can advocate for independent election management bodies, high standards of conduct and acceptance of dissent during election periods and fairer and more proportional voting systems. We can undertake and support citizen-led election monitoring and reporting. We can challenge the exclusion of candidates and voters from marginalised groups.
- **Building greater participation:** We can model, demonstrate and call for forms of participatory, deliberative and direct democracy, such as community parliaments, citizen assemblies, referendums that arise from popular will and are geared towards extending justice and rights, online petitions and other forms of participation in decision-making enabled by social and mobile media. We can develop and deliver high-quality civic education that encourages participation and teaches people to respect and value democratic freedoms.



Speak! Campaign 2017, youth anti-hate speech event in Nigeria, organised by Nigeria Network of NGOs (NNGO)

Photo: NNGO

- **Democratising the international system:** We can advocate for international parliaments to offer oversight over global and regional institutions and demand greater civil society access to the international system. We can advocate for exemplary democratic oversight over the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and campaign to reaffirm the direct link between development and democracy as part of the SDGs. We can work with the international system to develop and propagate new and stronger international norms on elections.

2. CREATING CONNECTIONS

- **Building alliances:** We can build stronger and broader alliances to defend and expand democracy. We can work to combine short-term and long-term, online and offline and spontaneous and organised actions.

We can reach outside civil society to form alliances with independent parliaments and judicial institutions, election management bodies, the media, businesses that share our values and governments that support democratic values and freedoms.

- **Brokering unusual conversations:** We can strive to reach beyond those who agree with us and start conversations with those who don't. We can reach out to the people we normally fail to reach. We can offer disaffected citizens positive platforms to express their views and participate. We can create spaces where polarisation can be addressed, dialogue beyond political divides fostered and reconciliation between opposing groups promoted.

CIVIL SOCIETY LEADING BY EXAMPLE

We in civil society need to take the lead in reimagining democracy, because civil society is the sphere of dialogue, innovation and reinvention. But we must lead by example in democratising ourselves and demonstrating that we adhere to exemplary transparency and accountability standards, including by making citizens the primary focus of our reporting and enabling them to participate in our decision-making. We need to experiment in and model workplace democracy and change our leadership styles to do so. We need to learn from the horizontal leadership styles of contemporary social movements and feminist movements.

We must take on these challenges and show leadership because today's events show that democracy is lacking almost everywhere, and everywhere it is fragile, even in contexts where it was believed that arguments for democratic freedoms had long been won. In response, we must step up our action and create the spaces where active citizenship is lived and becomes real. We need to think big and be bold. We need to renew, revitalise and reimagine democracy.



The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) promotes democracy in Asia by assessing the integrity of electoral processes and advocating on issues of good governance

Photo: ANFREL

1. ABOUT THIS REPORT

This CIVICUS report on reimagining democracy is informed and inspired by many conversations with activists and leaders in civil society and beyond from all around the world.

We listened widely to the voices of the CIVICUS alliance in preparing this report. We asked a variety of people to write about an aspect of democracy on which they have knowledge. We interviewed people close to the key events of our times. Through an open call, we asked our members to share their experience of a problem they see or a way in which democracy is being built from below. We invited young people to be inspired by the theme and create art. Our members held democracy dialogues – informal group discussions that drilled down into what democracy means to people on the ground, what challenges they see, and what they want to do to make a difference.

All these insights, perspectives and recommendations have been published on our [reimagining democracy](#) platform, home to 54 written contributions, 97 interviews and reports from 26 democracy dialogues, offering the voices of people from around 80 countries in every global region, and in a variety of languages. We acknowledge the outstanding voluntary efforts of the CIVICUS alliance as the deep well of inspiration from which this report draws.

We have been motivated to explore the question of how democracy can be reimagined by today's urgent problems, which tell us that democracy is under attack in many countries, and more broadly, that present governance systems are failing many of us. The challenges outlined below impact profoundly on civil society and demand civil society action. The enthusiastic response of the CIVICUS alliance to our call is a sign of how concerned civil society is about the health of democracy, and how committed civil society is to seeking change.

With 2018 also marking the **25th anniversary** of CIVICUS, we wanted to take a moment to think forward 25 years and imagine how democracy might work



for us all in the future. What we present here is a perspective, informed by our many conversations, of what democracy that works for all might look like, why we think we need radical change, and what first steps we can take, as active citizens and progressive, rights-based civil society, on a journey to reimagine democracy.

2. A NEW NARRATIVE OF A REIMAGINED DEMOCRACY

A CRISIS OF IMAGINATION

Can we imagine what the world might look like in 25 years' time? What could have changed by then for a child being born today, and just as importantly, what might not have changed? Much commercial effort goes into trying to

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imagine precisely that: trying to predict how we may use technology, how we may communicate, how we may live and work. It is common to imagine a world in which technology brings us medical breakthroughs, enables us to access goods and services instantly, even allows us to travel to other planets.

But most of these visions of the future remain prosaically grounded in the present when it comes to imagining how our future selves might have a proper say in the decisions that affect us, our communities and our world. In mainstream thought, it is still largely assumed that the nation-state, a 17th century creation, is the settled and final form of political organisation. It is assumed that more-or-less free market capitalism will continue to be the dominant economic model. And it is assumed that we will still primarily surrender our power to make decisions to a special professional class of people called politicians who decide on our behalf.

But why should any of this be the case? If it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of free-market capitalism, then perhaps the main crisis of our time is a crisis of imagination. In an age in which so many old assumptions have been swept away – about how we, our families and communities, live, work and relate to each other – why are we not questioning more the assumptions about how decisions are made, and how we as people can be at the heart of decision-making? Why is apparently the best we are capable of aspiring to is a model of narrow representative democracy, where periodic elections are held that to a varying extent are fair, in which we participate with varying degrees of freedom and levels of understanding, to vote for people who then make decisions that may or may not be good for us? And why is even this thin version of democracy something so many around the world are still denied?

Many of us in civil society are striving to prevent further backsliding on current limited practices of democracy, everywhere this is happening. Many of us are trying to hold governments to account and insist that democratic freedoms be respected. Many of us are striving to prevent those who control the most resources having disproportionate influence. Where we can, we are trying to nudge gradual progress towards slightly better practices of representative democracy. But in doing this essential work, we in civil society must be alert to the danger that we might not be taking time to think bigger and dream bolder.

WHY SHOULD WE REIMAGINE DEMOCRACY?

Why might we want to do so? Because, as set out below, the signs that our present systems of governance are failing and people are unsatisfied with how they are governed are seen in country after country, and are so stark that they cannot be ignored. These failings cannot be tweaked out of existence. Current approaches to governance are not addressing profound problems, and indeed are helping to cause them. Imagine if, in the

next year, every country in the world held free and fair elections: we would expect many people to see improvements, but we could not expect the major challenges the world faces today – climate change and environmental degradation, violence and extremism, exclusion and discrimination, the denial of basic rights and essential needs – to be solved. Economic and political elites would still enjoy disproportionate power. Many people would still be denied their full potential.

The world's governance systems have lived in the moment, taking short-term decisions informed by the tactical considerations of those in power. Even when such decisions have delivered some benefits to people and communities, the enduring problems that affect vast swathes of the world's people suggest that long-term problems have festered, radical solutions have been deferred. Decision-makers have largely been unable to look to the future.

To do better, we need an expansive, inclusive vision of democracy that stretches far beyond the holding of elections in which the many select the few who rule over them. Present times have proved once again history's lessons about the power of narratives to shape opinions and mobilise people. We need a powerful new narrative about democracy that takes on current failings, addresses contemporary grievances and offers a positive new vision for people to get behind. In an era in which regressive narratives are gaining ground, we need an optimistic narrative that offers people more democracy rather than less: a narrative that articulates vital concepts such as democratic freedoms, human rights, social justice and respect for the planet in new, convincing and exciting ways.

As civil society, we should put forward a case for democracy that emphasises both its instrumental and intrinsic benefits. Part of the value of democracy is that it helps us reach decisions that serve people better, and gives us better accountability over those decisions. But democracy is also important because participation is a human need and human right, deeply rooted in our need for dignity as people capable of forming and voicing opinions and

influencing the structures within which our lives unfold. This means that democracy must be participatory and rights-based: it can only exist where human rights are respected and upheld, because rights enable participation. And as contributors from all around the world make clear, the rights that enable democracy must be universal, because the yearning to be heard is everywhere, in all societies and cultures; current efforts of authoritarian leaders to present democratic rights as somehow incompatible with national cultures and values are self-serving and must be rejected.

Democracy's intrinsic value implies a need to focus on participation as process: democracy is a journey, not a destination, a perennial work in progress that can never be completed to the satisfaction of all. Democracy represents a constant striving – for voice, participation and the right to express dissent: a system of managed open-endedness, organised uncertainty. This means that democracy is complex, imperfect and comes with costs. Democracy is often messy, but it should never be chaotic.



Black Lives Matter protest, London, UK, July 2016

Photo: Alisdare Hickson

So what might a vision of reimagined democracy look like? Taken as a whole, the many contributions to this process suggest that three fundamental shifts are required:

- a. governance defined by local needs and aspirations;
- b. global democracy to tackle global problems;
- c. a democratised economy that works for all.

A. GOVERNANCE DEFINED BY LOCAL NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS

Where can we start to reimagine democracy? We should surely start not with the nation-state as the fundamental unit of governance, but with people and communities. To think bigger, let's first think smaller.

Let's start by recognising that each of us inhabits an identity that is complex, layered and dynamic, formed of a patchwork of many beliefs and belongings, the weight of which shifts according to context. We are each self-defined as a person by our values, beliefs, belongings and interactions with others. This means that while many of us carry some form of ID that indicates our nationality – generally classing us as a citizen of the country where we happened to be born, or the one in which life's unpredictable currents landed us, or increasingly, as a citizen of no state at all – nationality is not necessarily the identity that most strongly defines us. Nation-states are not eternal, and frequently result from complex and contested histories, with borders often **arbitrarily defined** by conflict and colonialism. While national identity can be a powerful belonging that can bring people together for progressive as well as regressive ends, it is not the only form of identity available.

For many of us, the things that matter most have little to do with our national identity: we might identify more strongly with our families, our social group, those whose opinions we share, those we follow on social media. We live in countries, but we also live in cities, towns and villages, in districts, regions, sub-national states and territories that straddle borders, in diasporas and

places of asylum and exile, and in neighbourhoods and communities. It is in these spaces – virtual as well as physical – that many of the decisions that affect our daily lives are made. And people want to have a say in how decisions are made in all these spaces.

So let's start there, and reimagine how democracy can be built at the local level, and built up from there. Let's make it a fundamental principle of democracy that decisions should be taken at the most local level possible. Let's recognise that while democratic rights and the yearning for democracy are universal, the forms and mechanisms of democracy may vary and be adapted to local context, and should evolve continually: what is essential is that they be shaped around local demands and enable rights and participation for all.

This implies that decentralisation and devolution to local levels are crucial to the management of difference. No system of governance can be called democratic if it is used to rob minorities of their rights and dignity. No sense of national unity can be imposed from the top. It must grow upwards from the people. Established approaches to representative democracy are inadequate if they allow major population blocs to dominate politics and crowd out a plurality of voices, or if they enable the top-down imposition of such contested concepts as 'national unity' and 'national values'. Almost every democracy dialogue defined the democracy they want both as one in which leaders listen to the voices of the people, but also one in which minorities do not have to **submit** to the wills of majorities, and rather are recognised as having a valid right to their struggles and an ability to be heard. It is the job of democracy to reconcile respect for the popular will with respect for minority voices. Similarly, while elections often divide people along party lines and can be polarising occasions, it is the job of democracy to reconcile people following divisive elections, through mechanisms that allow different strands to be represented in decision-making.

As part of the many forms of democracy that may be on offer, let's imagine **new and enhanced forms** of community-level participation. Our contributors

suggest mechanisms such as citizen assemblies, panels and councils, **community parliaments** and local-level groups that reach **consensus**. Let's trust that most people, at the local level, if empowered to make decisions about the distribution of resources and provision of services in their communities, will in the main make reasonably sensible decisions that put aside their immediate self-interest: evidence from participatory budgeting and **community-controlled grant-making** shows that when people are asked to collaborate to make economic and social priorities, they tend to make reasoned decisions that are more sustainable and in the general interest than decisions arrived at by other means.

And alongside these, let's demand far more direct democracy. This includes **referendums** – providing these arise from and reflect public demands and are not used to curtail rights. And it includes methods of democratic decision-making enabled by new technologies – providing those new technologies are secure, free from interference and themselves subject to democratic oversight – that enable people to share views in real time, make informed decisions and exercise accountability over those decisions.

There is need to promote the inclusion of excluded groups in existing systems and institutions of democracy, including through means such as quotas and special designated representatives, as crucial stepping stones towards **parity**, in the case of women, and also to enable the creation of new spaces that allow people to develop the skills and confidence needed for participation. But beyond this, let's imagine new ways of dialoguing across difference and brokering unusual conversations, through community forums that help us reconcile our differences, push beyond hatred, prejudice and misunderstanding, and identify the common ground on which inclusive compromises can be forged, while respecting and upholding rights. Let's enable a series of new, inclusive debates, at national and local levels, about what unity means, and how national values can be defined to encompass all, including long-excluded groups, those **new** to a community and those not previously **recognised** as citizens. The meaning of 'citizen' must lose its legal connotations and become a mere synonym for 'person'. Recognition of difference should go hand-in-hand with efforts to eliminate inequalities, because both are built around the notion of respecting each person and enabling everyone to live their lives to the fullest.

As civil society, let's work to create, enable and support the spaces where conversations, negotiations and decisions can happen: the spaces where active citizenship becomes a lived reality and democracy evolves. But as we build greater community democracy, we should of course be mindful of the challenge that local-level decisions can contradict and clash at the aggregate level. So let's work to connect different local-level initiatives so that they dialogue and negotiate, and complement rather than contradict each other.

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Tajikistan National NGO Association convened a democracy dialogue discussion with schoolchildren, parents, local authorities and representatives from civil society organisations

Photo: Tajikistan National NGO Association

B. GLOBAL DEMOCRACY TO TACKLE GLOBAL PROBLEMS

We live in communities and countries, but every single one of us is also an inhabitant of this planet. We live on a planet that is increasingly interconnected, with new technologies enabling us to share stories and perspectives in real time, for good and ill. We are increasingly mobile, moving in search of a better life or uprooted by conflict. We face urgent threats – climate change, wars, economic inequality – that pay no heed to national borders. The global level has therefore become a legitimate sphere of action for people and organisations to claim rights and advance change, in which a range of international institutions have evolved to try to address the problems that nation-states cannot address. If a key principle of democracy is that decisions should be taken at the most local level possible, then for some global problems, the global level is the only one possible.

The present time is one of **retreat** from internationalism waged by right-wing populist leaders and movements, in part in response to recent conflicts that have spilled across borders and forced great numbers of people to become migrants and refugees, sparking nationalism, xenophobia and fears of insecurity. But the key lesson here, likely to be proven again as climate change migration increases, is that democracies cannot survive in isolation: conflicts that spark in autocratic conditions will impact even on nation-states that continue to try to uphold democratic standards. **Islands of relative democracy** surrounded by seas of autocracy are increasingly hard to maintain, particularly in a world where autocrats are forging their own increasingly confident international alliances. We need a world of democracy, and to help build this and tackle the big problems, we need organisations that are truly international, rather than merely intergovernmental.

Many of us in progressive, rights-based civil society are striving to defend international institutions that are under attack. But we should not be forced into a position of defending a **status quo** many of us are unhappy with. Our support for the current international system should come with the aspiration of a new negotiation for the system that we want. We need international organisations where powerful nation-states cannot sway decisions. And we need international organisations that are accessible to, answer to and are held accountable by the people. We need institutions that enable us to evolve from world inhabitants into global citizens. In reimagining global democracy nothing should be off the agenda.

So, let's imagine that models of direct democracy enabled by new technologies can be rolled out to allow us to participate in the decisions taken by United Nations (UN) bodies and other key international institutions. Let's build on the success of the UN's **My World** survey, in which over 9.7 million people voted for their priorities for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Let's insist that this becomes the norm, rather than the exception. Building on this, what now stops us being able to elect the UN Secretary-General and other top officials directly? We need ways of ensuring that high-level officials

reflect and embody our needs and aspirations, rather than the interests of dominant nation-states, and report to and are held accountable by us.

Another key aspiration could be a **world parliament**, to exercise proper oversight over international institutions, elected not on nation-state lines but on a global franchise. A further model that could be scaled is that of the citizen assembly, in which a body of citizens representing a cross-section of society is tasked with coming up with new solutions to entrenched and difficult questions – a method that offers a tacit acknowledgement of the failures of conventional processes. If this can work at the national level, as seen recently in **Ireland**, then it can work at the global level. We can imagine this as a form of global citizen service, something to be celebrated. Another direct model that could be scaled up at the global level is the European Union's (EU) **Citizens' Initiative** procedure, in which people can propose a change that, if it attracts enough public support, must be put on the agenda and debated.

There are, therefore, plausible models that are ripe for further exploration and scaling up.

C. A DEMOCRATISED ECONOMY THAT WORKS FOR ALL

But it cannot be enough to democratise political institutions if control of our economies remains in the hands of a tiny elite, because that elite will then enjoy disproportionate political power. One of the most visible signs that current economic orthodoxy is failing is the pervasive and highly visible economic inequality that we see in so many of our societies, which is patterning onto and reinforcing other inequalities. Our societies are more diverse than ever, but that should not mean they are more unequal than ever before. We need societies in which everyone is confident they have a fair chance to be heard in decision-making and receive a fair share of the benefits of democracy. That cannot happen when people are locked out of decision-making because they are not wealthy.

The current system of globalised economic neoliberalism is not set in stone; it is a relatively recent development, and nothing says that it can or should endure. So let's imagine an economy and therefore a democracy that works for us all, not just the incredibly wealthy.

To tackle inequality within and between countries, let's imagine a new paradigm of development in which development is defined by its capacity to enable human choice and realise human potential rather than its ability to fuel economic growth. Let's imagine a world in which people are treated primarily as active citizens and rights bearers, rather than **consumers** or producers of goods and services. In this broader understanding of human-centred development, democracy is never the enemy of development, but rather its essential companion, because it enables people to articulate demands and exercise accountability, creating a virtuous cycle in which more democratic control leads to a healthier economy.

We need a new vision of a post-growth economy that prioritises not the endless pursuit of growth that benefits some, but rather the better distribution of what we have and can collectively generate for all, and enables democratic participation in and accountability over economic decision-making. This vision may include proper, working taxation and the redistribution of wealth; the provision of adequate public services that all can access and over which we all have democratic control; workplace rights; and the more sustainable management of the world's finite resources. The SDGs offer language that can help us shape this narrative. Even though when it comes to implementation, the SDGs entail compromises and privilege the **private sector**, the guiding vision of the SDGs has radical potential, having been **informed** by extensive civil society advocacy and public consultation.

We need a fundamental rebalancing of the **relationship** between states, civil society and the private sector, and the means and space for civil society to advocate for a fairer economy. While predatory corporations are a major threat to civil society, not all businesses want untrammelled free markets and

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unceasing growth at any cost. Not all have harmful impacts on human rights. As civil society, we need to find our allies and work with them, regardless of who they are, including **companies** that embrace fair trade and human rights standards and social enterprises with a foot in both civil society and private sector camps: we need to work with anyone where mutual gains are possible.

At the grassroots level, we could work with hybrid organisations to model new, more democratic, community-level economies, including through cooperative forms of ownership, workers’ participation in workplace decision-making and locally managed currencies and trading systems. At the same time, we should think big to find new ways of critiquing the prevailing economic orthodoxy and building an alliance for policy change. This means we should build our connections with the academic community that is also analysing the failures of neoliberalism and probing for alternatives so that we can better hone our arguments and lobby for change. Global headline policies we might work together to advocate for could include greater regulation of financial markets, a global taxation regime and body to unlock resources to provide public services and address inequality, and new standards for workers’ participation in the management of their organisations.

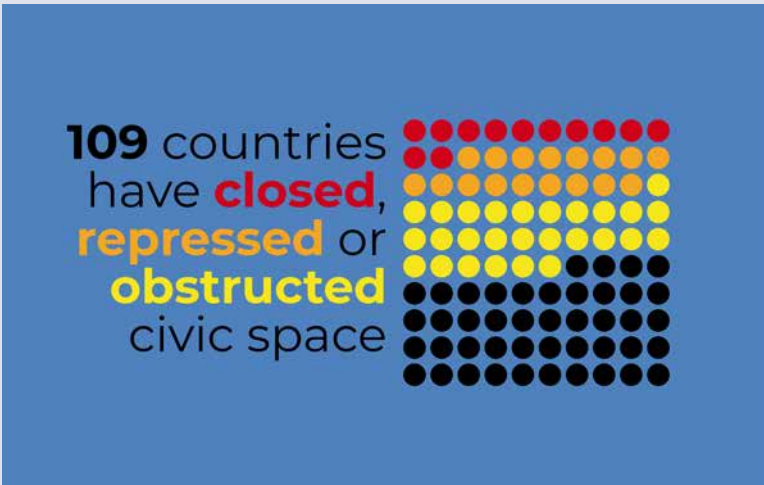
3. TODAY’S CHALLENGES

The present situation, as described overwhelmingly by our contributors, is very far from the expansive vision of democracy set out above. In country after country, people have told us they are unhappy with democracy as it is currently practised and want much more of a say.

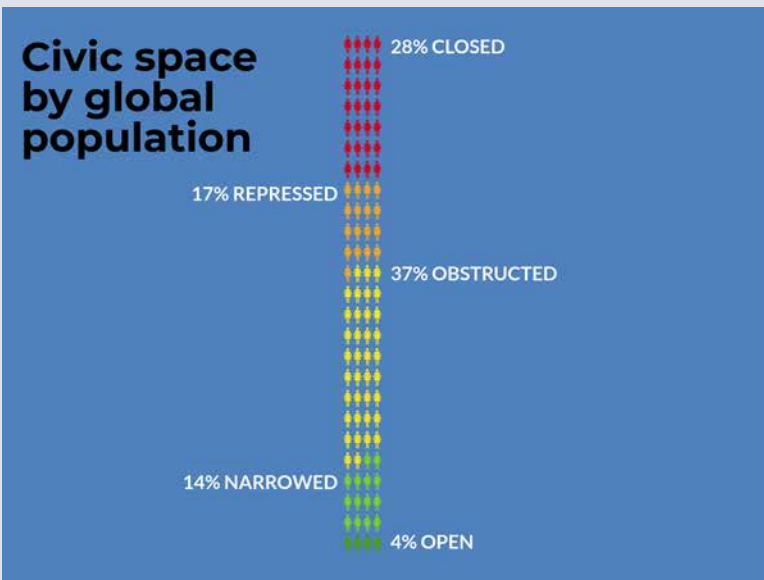
DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Key indices of democracy from **Freedom House**, the **Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)** and the **V-Dem Institute** suggest a picture of decline even in the quite limited practices of democracy we may be accustomed to. Freedom House reports that 2017 saw net declines in political rights and civil liberties indicators in 71 countries: a 12th consecutive year of global deterioration. The EIU’s Democracy Index shows declines in the scores of 89 countries in 2017 and improvements in only 27. And while V-Dem’s 2018 Annual Democracy Report is more sanguine about the health of democracy, for the first time since 1979 it sees as many countries – 24 – backsliding on democracy as advancing. It also reports that 2.5 billion people are subject to a decline in key elements of democracy, a process they characterise as ‘autocratization’.

We in civil society are being attacked as part of democratic regression. Our key civil society freedoms, of association, peaceful assembly and expression, are clearly essential to any understanding of democracy, because



Current civic space ratings from the CIVICUS Monitor



they enable people to come together, debate, organise for collective action, scrutinise the actions of the powerful and express dissent. A key test of the health of any democracy should therefore be the existence of space for civil society activists and human rights defenders to do their legitimate work. On that measure too, the picture is not good: the **CIVICUS Monitor**, which tracks fundamental civil society rights in every country, shows that these rights are now seriously restricted in 109 countries, and only four per cent of the world’s population lives in countries where such rights are widely respected. This means that most of us live in conditions where we are denied the rights to organise towards a common goal and take part in democratic dissent.

The restrictions catalogued by the CIVICUS Monitor exist in every global region, in countries of all sizes and income levels, run by parties and leaders of all political stripes. Contributors to this report from country after country offer recent examples of setbacks in civil society rights.

TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP PRESSURES

As many of our contributors see it, democratic regression is coming from **both** top-down and bottom-up pressures: pressures from the top are exerted by political and economic elites as a means of accessing and maintaining power, and those from the bottom come from citizens who are disgruntled with their lives and want to see change. While the interests of these two groups are naturally opposed to each other, the examples have piled up of political and economic elite members fuelling and directing grassroots anger to serve their interests. As seen in several European countries and the USA, elite members masquerade as anti-elite rebels to build right-wing populist platforms that deflect anger away from their interests by offering scapegoats and deceptively simple solutions to complex problems.

At the elite level, key drivers of attacks on democracy identified by our contributors include the defence of corruption and elite economic interests; the corporate penetration of political governance; the prioritisation of security,

“ AN URGENT CONCERN IS THAT DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION IS NOW HAPPENING IN LONG-ESTABLISHED REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACIES ”

stability and anti-terrorism approaches; narrow, top-down notions of national development; a growing model of highly **personalised rule** by strong-arm leaders as preferable to more democratic leadership styles; and the sharing of support and tactics of repression between different states that have backtracked on democracy.

At the citizen level, key drivers include economic inequality and economic insecurity; the impacts of rapid globalisation and post-economic crisis state cutbacks; fear and insecurity, including in response to crime, terrorism and migration; and **anger** with the failures of conventional politics and governments to solve difficult problems. In many societies, there is a toxic lack of trust in all institutions, including in the institutions of governance and politics, and the ways in which democracy is practised. As indicated by the **Edelman Trust Barometer**, this trust deficit also extends, albeit often to a lesser extent, to those that hold governments and politicians to account, including civil society and the media.

DECLINE IN ESTABLISHED DEMOCRACIES

Underneath the headlines of this global problem, clearly there are different issues and dynamics at play in different contexts. An urgent concern is that democratic regression is now happening in long-established representative democracies where key questions of democratic freedoms and human rights were long considered settled. This means that threats to democratic freedoms are coming from democratically elected leaders and governments, in which parties have won power through largely free and fair elections and have gone on to violate rights and enable regressive forces. As progressive, rights-based civil society, the existence of high levels of public support for authoritarian leaders challenges the way we see the world. Further, the fact that attacks on democratic freedoms are taking place in long-established representative democracies suggests that constitutional mechanisms meant to uphold freedoms are failing. The trappings and machinery of democracy are not enough.

In contexts where regressive politics are on the march, the very definition of what is considered political has changed: to stand up for fundamental rights in places where there was once consensus that rights should be respected can now be deemed as a partisan act. To express dissent about a government or its policies can be to risk accusations of supporting the political opposition, or even lead to charges of treason. To receive funding from an international donor can be deemed political, and potentially provoke accusations that civil society is directed by a foreign power. The ground has shifted. Even when we have done nothing to politicise debates, we in civil society often now work on a terrain that has become highly politically polarised – and on terms that others define to our disadvantage. The challenge this creates for civil society is how to be political without being partisan.

It may be that recent developments have exposed flaws that were always there: that the systems and institutions of representative democracy introduced as people liberated themselves from colonial rule, as the geopolitical order shifted after the Cold War, or as tyrants yielded to protest, may not have run sufficiently deep. If repressive leaders can lead a rejection of democratic principles as alien impositions or the reflection of foreign values, it implies that following democratisation struggles, not enough attention has been paid to nurturing and sustaining the institutions – including civil society – that enable democracy to take root at a **deeper** level.

ATTACKS ON THE MEDIA AND PARLIAMENTARIANS

Civil society is not alone in being the subject of attack. Independent media are attacked alongside civil society because of their role in asking difficult questions of those in political and economic power and exposing corruption and poor governance. Reporters Without Borders records that in 2017, 65 journalists were **killed** worldwide as a result of their work. Short of murder, journalists are put under **pressure** in all sorts of ways, including threats, intimidation and physical attacks against them and their families. The CIVICUS Monitor reveals that journalists are most frequently attacked for reporting on political issues, protests, corruption, political, ethnic or religious divisions, crime, conflict and human rights activism – all of which can threaten elite power. Alongside attacks, there is widespread concern about bias in state-owned media, while the ‘fake news’ smear tactic that came to prominence in the **USA** has quickly spread across the world, for example to **Kenya**. New laws are being passed to constrain online expression, including in **Egypt** and **Zambia**, and repercussions can drive extensive self-censorship, as reported in **Iran** and **Mexico**.

In many contexts where civil society is under attack, so are parliamentarians: in 2017 the **Inter-Parliamentary Union** reported a record level of cases of abuses of the human rights of parliamentarians, with over 550 parliamentarians having their rights violated. Significantly, three quarters of

these are opposition parliamentarians. Parliamentarians who do not support ruling parties can find opportunities to exercise their crucial roles – debating proposed laws, exposing weaknesses and proposing amendments, and scrutinising government decisions and, crucially, government spending – are being constrained by rising executive power and the erosion of constitutional checks and balances that are supposed to ensure the separation of powers. Authoritarian leaders seek to make parliaments subservient to their rule, so parliamentarians may be attacked when they try to prevent and exert accountability over measures aimed at entrenching ruling power, such as election rigging and constitutional rewriting.

The fact that civil society, the media and parliamentarians are all being attacked, and for similar reasons, suggests a need for a common response involving new alliances and strategies that address present vulnerabilities while strengthening the legitimacy of all three spheres.

4. KEY CIVIL SOCIETY CONCERNS

1. FLAWED ELECTIONS AND GOVERNANCE INSTITUTIONS

Elections are a major concern for many contributors. Elections should be festivals of democracy: moments when participation, debate, advocacy and dissent are at their highest. But too often, they are not. Too often, elections are used to deny democracy rather than celebrate it. They are processions rather than carnivals.

When the basic conditions for public debate and meaningful competition are not met, elections become charades: before Egypt’s 2018 election, an **interviewee** suggested that such was the level of repression that the election would function only as a mechanism to endorse the incumbent; he was sadly proved right when the incumbent won 97 per cent of the vote on a

low turnout. Egypt is just one of many contexts where elections are empty, formalised rituals. Because the performance of representative democracy helps establish international legitimacy, even authoritarian leaders hold carefully stage-managed elections: ceremonial elections are part of a strategy to ensure the continued repression of democracy, rather than enable democracy. Debate, advocacy and dissent represent a threat to the ruling interests that elections are convened to uphold, and so are clamped down upon. It is important to repressive leaders that the ceremonial nature of their election is not openly debated, and that a truly democratic verdict that would cost them their power is not possible.

It is therefore not surprising that the repression of civil society often worsens around elections, something seen recently in **Cambodia** and the **Maldives**, among many other places. The rules are often changed around elections to suit the powerful, as seen in the repeated deferral of elections in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**, and the rewriting of constitutions

to enable incumbents to stay on when the rules say they should stand down, as seen in **Bolivia**, **Burundi** and **Uganda**. Often these acts of constitutional engineering are legitimised through plebiscites driven from the top: the implication is that referendums can serve democratic or undemocratic ends, dependent on who activates them, for what purpose, and in which context, as well as the extent to which they are free and fair.

When elections are held, impartial and rigorous electoral observation is widely perceived as seriously lacking. Election management bodies may be penetrated by ruling party officials, with election observers hand-picked to legitimise rather than scrutinise. Geopolitical interests and the need to maintain delicate balances within international organisations may cause other states to overlook electoral problems elsewhere. Civil society attempts to monitor elections often bring great risks. Pliable state media, a concern in **Malawi** and **Uzbekistan**, among others, can also give incumbent candidates a huge advantage.

Recently the potential of new technologies to have a malign influence on elections has become clearer. Social media may be used to shape and manipulate people's voting choices, including by shadowy forces backed by repressive states – as alleged recently in the **UK** and **USA**, where outside interference may have been decisive. More directly, when voting relies on technology, there are inevitably fears of it being manipulated, as appears to have been the case in **Honduras** in 2017: when early results showed a potential defeat for the incumbent, the results system went down; when it was restored, the incumbent had won. There is currently much concern in the **DRC** about new voting machines introduced for the much-delayed elections.

Another pressing concern is the role of political donations in influencing elections, particularly opaque donations from businesses and wealthy elites. Rules on campaign financing may be easily circumvented. In political systems where winning candidates receive heavy financial backing, there is an enduring question of whose interests a winner rules in, and whether the



Members of the Congolese community in Toronto, Canada, protest against the results of the 2011 elections. Concerns continue to mount in the run-up to elections scheduled for December 2018

Photo: Catch Photography

workings of the political system are such that radical ideas are always kept off the agenda. In poorer communities, vote-buying may be common.

While more local-level democracy is needed, not least as a crucial counterweight to central power, it is also the case that some of the worst examples of corruption and personal rule are found at the local level, where politicians and officials may enjoy personal fiefdoms with little oversight. While many forms of traditional rule enable participation, they may also inhibit it and exclude those with least power, such as women and young people. It may also be **harder** to monitor local-level elections. These challenges can exist even in countries that have relatively healthy and inclusive democracies at the national level.

When officially sanctioned vehicles for participation, including elections and state-organised consultation structures of the type seen in **Cuba**, are seen by people to have little worth, and government institutions that are supposed to check executive power are clearly subservient to it, people lose trust in institutions and withdraw, and active citizenship declines. Even in contexts where elections are more free and fair, a common complaint, as voiced in **Nepal**, is that politicians pretend to listen to people's concerns during elections, but forget about them afterwards. The danger is that disaffection with the limited forms of democracy on offer will cause disenchantment in democracy as a whole. This can only store up problems for the future.

2. SKEWED ECONOMICS

Many in civil society are clear that rampant income and wealth inequality is not an accidental by-product of the globalised neoliberalism that has been the post-Cold War economic orthodoxy. It is built into the logic of an economic model that promotes a search for perpetual growth and ever-increasing profit, driving a barrage of practices with profound social, political and environmental impacts: consolidation into transnational mega-corporations that eliminate competition; global-level tax avoidance and

evasion; bewilderingly complex financial engineering schemes; a race to the bottom on labour rights; increasing elite wealth concentration; and an enmeshing of economic and political elites. Business leaders are judged and rewarded not so much for their ability to produce the things that help us live the lives we want as their ability to extract rent.

A challenge here is that the post-Cold War rollout of neoliberalism was associated with a burgeoning of representative democracy: along with a withdrawal from market regulation and the transfer of key responsibilities from the state to the private sector, periodic and competitive elections were part of the neoliberal policy prescription, which also saw a role for civil society, to provide services and exercise accountability and advocacy duties.

But whatever democratic potential this package might have offered has unravelled, and the present situation suggests that deep-rooted democracy has not resulted. As big business seeks ever greater advantage, perhaps it finds too much democracy a hindrance. The decisions taken by large corporations impact daily on our lives, but there seems little we can do to hold them democratically **accountable**. **Transnational corporations** can defy attempts at national jurisdiction. Many of our public services are privately controlled, owned by companies headquartered in another state, and unaccountable. Corporate influence on national governments defies attempts at accountability, and as in the **USA**, big business may use its influence to engineer laws in its favour and suppress scrutiny of its actions.

Large, transnational corporations have penetrated multilateral governance structures too, making them less democratic. A recent slew of **trade deals** gives companies the power to sue states. UN agencies are increasingly oriented around partnerships that grant **privileged access** to the private sector, which can limit the potential for democratic oversight of decision-making, because partnerships may lack high transparency standards or structured opportunities to interact with decision-makers.

The **gulf** between the policies the world needs and the policies that governments enact grows wider: for example, governments retreat from addressing the challenge of economic inequality, and even act in ways that worsen it. The inference is that the forces of privilege are able to exert their influence to protect their wealth. Economic inequality fuels political inequality because the views of the very wealthy massively outweigh those of everyone else. That poses troubling questions for representative democracy: if our voting choices cannot influence how power is distributed, and if, regardless of how we vote, the super-wealthy continue to get richer, then why should we participate? Our expectations should be that democracy will protect us from the power of the very rich, rather than put us at their mercy. If our expectations are not met, then it is time to ask: has neoliberalism become the enemy of democracy?

There comes a point where no more rent can be extracted, and for many of us it feels that point has been reached. For people in many countries, waves of economic crisis, including the one that unfolded from 2008, have offered seminal moments of disillusionment. In the wake of the latest crisis, people saw governments withdraw from providing services while bailing out businesses, and business leaders largely escape the consequences of their actions while many people were **plunged** into poverty and insecurity. It is notable how it is often anger at huge-scale corruption by intersecting business and political elites that drives people to the streets to seek change that the ballot box cannot deliver, as seen recently in **South Korea**, as well as in the protests that greeted the exposure of the giant **Odebrecht** corruption scandal in several Latin American countries, those driven by anger at payouts to ruling party politicians in **Malawi** and those fuelled in part by the ruling family's consolidation of economic power in **Nicaragua**. That same anger is fuelling demand for greater corporate scrutiny, and turning people against **trade deals**. But a challenge is that people's anger with the status quo is also driving support for nativism, nationalism and xenophobia.



3. NARROW DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

Too often, development projects have lost sight of the importance of process. Approaches to development have become top-down and state-centric, often framed with reference to creating the conditions for economic growth and enabling **enterprise**, including private companies and foreign state-owned corporations. Development priorities are too often shaped by narrow targets and technocratic delivery styles, and development methods too often focused on large-scale infrastructure developments. The growth of private and state enterprises and mega-projects may unlock gains for those most closely involved in them and advance economic growth, but generally do little for society's most excluded people; worse, they may actively harm communities, through associated corruption or impacts on the rights of groups affected by large projects.

It often seems that national development priorities are deemed too important to be trusted to people: they must be set and driven by presidents and their elite circles. Democracy may be characterised as a distraction

from development, something to be explored only once sufficient national development progress has been made, and therefore something that can be indefinitely deferred. If development is seen as something that can be directed from above and isolated from ground-up demands, democratic oversight is unlikely. Avenues for exercising accountability and expressing dissent may be closed on the grounds that they endanger development progress. This could be characterised as the approach in China, Rwanda and Viet Nam, among others. Political leaders may argue that people struggling to secure bread have little time for democracy; civil society arguments that democracy enables communities to better determine priorities to meet their daily needs go unheeded.

As has been seen time and again, concentration of power without accountability ensures corruption. The only beneficiaries of corruption are political and economic elites. Corruption is often a driver of development decisions that otherwise seem irrational: an interviewee from the **Dominican Republic** describes a decision to build overpriced coal-fired power plants, although the country has no coal and is supposed to be acting on climate change. The decision was linked to donations to ruling party campaign funds. The waste of corruption stands in stark and visible **contrast** to the many unmet needs of the people. Corruption undermines democracy, generating toxic distrust as processes and institutions are hollowed out.

4. THE STABILITY AND SECURITY NARRATIVE

Democratic freedoms are often suppressed on the grounds of preventing terrorism and preserving national security and stability. Dissent is often conflated with terrorism, leading to the suppression of opposition parties and civil society, even in contexts with no experience of terrorism. Powerful states, including donor states, may overlook an absence of democratic freedoms in the name of ensuring stability.

Democracy continues to be suppressed on the grounds of security, even though research from the **Community of Democracies** shows a positive connection between democracy, peace and security. Contributors from **Egypt** and **Ethiopia** describe how in contexts where democracy is suppressed in the name of stability and security, grievances build up and simmer. Without the safety valve that democracy provides, conflicts eventually break out, often expressed in violence and along identity lines. People denied a voice and a vote eventually riot. The effort by the state to suppress dissent demands continual, ultimately exhausting repression that drains a nation of its imagination and potential to innovate.

A challenge for civil society is that rhetoric around security and stability can resonate with citizens who fear terrorism and other forms of crime and violence. An interviewee from **France** indicates how even in contexts that have long seen themselves as established democracies, leaders are persuading citizens that it is acceptable to

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CONCENTRATION
OF POWER
WITHOUT
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CORRUPTION
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limit their rights in return for a promise of greater safety. More problematically still, because citizens' fears of terrorism and violence are often linked to fears of visible minorities, many citizens are particularly amenable to the notion that other people's rights – the rights of excluded groups – may acceptably be traded for their own safety.

In **many contexts**, people are being told that democratic freedoms hold them back: that rights benefit minorities and enable terrorism, or that only some categories of people – those whose views match those of the powerful – should be allowed rights. Long-established human rights treaties are being questioned and attacked. This positions human rights and democratic freedoms not as universal and inalienable, but as **gifts** of the state to those deemed to deserve them.

In civil society, we are **vilified** as supporters of extremism and terrorism when we stand up for rights, particularly the rights of excluded groups. As in France, where emergency powers were used to put potential protesters at the 2015 **COP 21 Paris Climate Change Summit** under house arrest, broad powers that are supposed to combat terrorism become applied against civil society; as in France, where emergency measures have been written into the constitution, powers that are supposed to be temporary become permanent. Democratic freedoms suffer as a result.

5. EXCLUSION

Time and again, our contributors express concern about the groups and people whose voices are not heard. Even when elections are free and fair, political systems can exclude groups, encouraging winner-takes-all politics rather than consensus-building politics. Majoritarian approaches to democracy allow larger population blocs to dominate, denying representation to key shades of minority opinion. Referendums, vehicles of direct democracy, often prove crude mechanisms in practice, encouraging binary debates that fail to reflect the subtleties of different currents of opinion. In **polarised** contexts, referendum campaigns have fuelled increased division, and alongside progress, as in **Ireland**, have delivered setbacks for progressive civil society voices, including in **the Netherlands** and UK.

Electoral systems may leave particular groups underrepresented: **Nepal's** sizeable Dalit community, evenly distributed across the country rather than geographically concentrated, lacks a strong voice in political institutions. Sometimes, as suggested in the **Ecuador** democracy dialogue, underrepresentation arises out of design to keep particular groups away from influence.

Minority voices may be excluded in clear ways. Decisions about the lives of **migrants and refugees** are often made by political machinery to which they have no access, because they are denied the franchise. The denial of



Migrants, refugees and supporters take to the streets of Hamburg, Germany ahead of the 2017 G20 Summit

Photo: Rasande Tyskar

citizenship to Myanmar's **Rohingya** people offers an insidious example of how even long-established populations can be blocked from having a political voice, with **devastating** results.

More subtly, appeals to notions such as 'national identity' and 'national values' can crowd out a diversity of voices and identities. Such appeals are increasingly being proffered by right-wing populists. When democratic regression sets in and rights are attacked, it is disproportionately people in excluded groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples and LGBTQI people, who suffer. They are no collateral damage: women and LGBTQI people, for example, are being specifically targeted in a wide array of contexts, from **Latvia** to **Tanzania**, and in regional **forums**, in the context of a culture war focused on **sexual and reproductive rights**, aiming to reverse recent gains. Politicians are increasingly attacking excluded groups, offering constructions of identity based around dominant blocs and encouraging their supporters to define themselves by attacking others. Right-wing populist leaders **position** themselves as on the side of 'the people', but define what constitutes 'the people' in narrow and exclusionary terms. As a consequence, in some contexts, prejudice and hate speech have flourished incredibly quickly, and what was once considered unsayable is now normalised in common discourse. In **India**, for example, the pervasive spread of hate speech against religious minorities has led to apparent impunity for horrendous crimes of violence.

In some contexts, including **Denmark**, **Italy** and **Sweden**, the political left as well as the political right is now stoking division against visible minorities – long-established diasporas as well as recent migrants – as dominant population groups seek to secure privileged access to state resources, and as ostensibly progressive parties track rightwards in response to increased support for right-wing populism.

These currents of hatred expose the faultlines in outdated models of the nation-state as built on a largely homogeneous identity. Political systems may still reflect assumptions that men are breadwinners and heads of households,



Almost 700,000 Rohingya people are estimated to have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh since 2017 to escape violence and persecution

Photo: Seyyed Mahmoud Hosseini

and women are housewives and mothers: the franchising of household heads rather than citizens for local elections in **Myanmar** is one example of this. Old legislation penalising non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities, as in **Jamaica**, may be used to restrict democratic action by sexual diversity groups and activists. Apparently open democratic systems may be undercut by subtle gender, racial, class or caste hierarchies and barriers, noted in **Nepal**: although on paper all may be equally free to stand for election, elected politicians overwhelmingly represent socially dominant groups.

The exclusion of women and girls from democracy was a key concern of many democracy dialogues, including in **Nigeria**, **Tajikistan** and **Trinidad and Tobago**. As one contributor points out, constructions of **national identity** tend to be framed around men, and the exclusion that exists in the home and family is reproduced in politics. It is clearly **not enough** simply for women to have the same formal rights to vote or participate as men. Meanwhile, models of participation built around male-female binaries offer no space for

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gender fluidity: in most systems, a candidate who refuses to register under their birth sex would not be able to stand for election.

Young people are also excluded: although **42 per cent** of the world's population is aged under 25, established political participation routes are mostly closed to them. Minimum age limits may exclude them from voting or standing for office, and they may be mostly relegated to bag-carrier roles or worse, recruited as political thugs for hire, as a contributor from **Malawi** describes. Student-led protests are often suppressed and student activists targeted for expulsion from universities, as a contributor from **Zambia** notes. In some countries of the global north that have taken right-wing populist turns, the starkest divide in political opinions is now between younger people and older persons, with young people on the whole expressing far more progressive opinions than elected politicians.

A challenge for civil society, in contexts where culture wars are being waged, is that even principles that many of us may instinctively agree with – egalitarianism and secularism, for example, powerful emotional appeals in **France** – can be weaponised to exclude and deny minority voices. At the same time, a narrow focus on identity politics could cause us to underplay the powerful economic forces that exclude people from participation: a focus on defending political and civil rights might cause us to overlook the economic, social, cultural and family mechanisms of power that prevent women and others from accessing rights that exist on paper.

Appeals civil society might once have made to human rights may find **little traction**, given that the very notion of human rights has become contested. An unpalatable truth for civil society is that when states deny voice to excluded groups – including on grounds that may be dubious such as preventing terrorism and ensuring security – they do so with some level of support from citizens in dominant social groups.

6. GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS

Democratic decline at the national level is reproduced at the international level. There have always been challenges with weak practices of democracy in international institutions and with nation-states using multilateral processes as arenas for asserting narrow interests. But states that have taken recent regressive turns at home are now actively undermining multilateral institutions, including by openly calling their roles into question, refusing to respect their decisions and withdrawing from them or threatening to do so. This includes states previously involved in the limited efforts to democratise international organisations, and donor governments that once claimed to shape their funding priorities around support for democratic freedoms.

The leading exponent is the USA, which has announced plans to pull out of the UN Human Rights Council, but it is not alone: Israel, like the USA, has announced that it will leave the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the UK is in the painful process of exiting the European Union; and several African states have threatened to pull out of the International Criminal Court (ICC). This withdrawal creates more space for regressive states at the international level – notably China and Russia, reduces the prospects of international institutions scrutinising states with poor democracy records, and makes it harder for civil society to use the international system to hold states accountable.

At the domestic level, the case for narrow nationalism pushed by right-wing populists and autocrats is based partly on a criticism of the lack of democracy and transparency of international institutions. This criticism leads to an argument not for democratic international reform, but rather for the concentration of sovereignty in national leaders. Limited international democracy also allows repressive leaders to downplay criticism from the international community as self-interested and elitist.

As civil society, we have always struggled to make our voices heard in international institutions, which are characterised by a **double democratic deficit**: states that restrict space for civil society at home also work to deny democracy in the global arena. For example, states are using their membership of the UN's **NGO Committee** to deny or withdraw the registration civil society organisations (CSOs) need to participate in UN processes. Contributors tell us that a new trend is worsening this situation: while **private sector interests** are being privileged in multilateral processes, regressive states are promoting socially conservative, anti-rights groups and clientelistic, state-sanctioned non-autonomous groups into the spaces provided for civil society at the international level. For example, in the **Organization of American States**, neoconservative faith-backed groups are increasingly contesting space with rights-based civil society, with troubling implications for women's rights.

7. DEMOCRACY IN CIVIL SOCIETY

The trends outlined above demand a civil society response, but may also require us to look inwards. The ways in which we organise as civil society are sometimes in tension with our values and are not strongly democratic. Some prominent CSOs have recently been **exposed** as having failed to do enough to prevent sexual abuse by their staff, or worse still, as having covered up abuse. The implication is that fear of reputational damage won out over upholding the human rights of victims, and the internal systems of democracy that should have brought abuses to light sooner were lacking. As well as having a lasting impact on the victims of abuses, such episodes damage trust in civil society, still one of our most precious assets, and call into question our priorities, leadership styles and organisational cultures. This is particularly dangerous at a time when we are being attacked by and trying to respond to the populism that is on the march in many contexts, and when often our attempted counter-narratives are failing to cut through.

We may claim to stand for democracy and hold to democratic values, but are liable to be challenged as to how democratic we are internally in practice. We may have strong policies on paper for internal democracy, including on gender equality and whistleblowing, and claim to have strongly consultative decision-making processes, but internal practice may be weak. Leadership styles and **organisational cultures** may inhibit democracy, including by making it harder for people from excluded groups to make their voices heard and gain leadership roles. The civil society sphere as a whole also has our own stark **inequalities**, between a handful of large, well-funded, transnational organisations at the top of the pyramid and the great mass of smaller civil society groups, which receive a fraction of the funding and profile, and consequently have much less access to national and international decision-making circles.

A lack of internal democracy holds us back as civil society: we may not see when we are focusing only on short-term objectives and reporting principally

to our funders, nor see when we are falling short of our missions, tolerating bad practice, missing out on potential innovation and failing to learn from failure. Further, if we do not expose ourselves to critical or dissenting voices, we risk locking ourselves in echo chambers. Many of the public do not understand civil society, what we stand for and how we work, which makes it easier for others to convince them to attack us, and harder for us to recruit supporters and build coalitions to defend democracy.

It is also hard to build the alliances we need when we are preoccupied with our daily struggles, or focusing on our survival when under attack, but we know that many of us still work in national or thematic silos. A concern with democratic freedoms and democratic practice is not seen as a mainstream focus for many CSOs. There is much national-level activity, but little sharing of strategies across borders. Many of us are based in capital cities, and so are not good at reaching and understanding what is happening in rural and

isolated areas, from where right-wing populism draws its bedrock support, compared to the more cosmopolitan city communities we tend to inhabit. So we find it hard to talk to the people we most need to.

Despite the challenges it brings in building and sustaining alliances, the diversity of civil society should be recognised as one of our great strengths: we are the sphere of dialogue and respectful disagreement. But increasingly the polarisation that characterises so much of contemporary political discourse is seen within our sphere.

There have always been challenges of states cultivating patronage-based civil society, which trades government funding for silence – a concern expressed in **Nigeria** – and state-organised pseudo civil society that acts as a means of controlling citizens rather than enabling them to share their views, as in **Cuba** and now in **Turkey**, where the creation of a populist, pro-president shadow civil society is part of the strategy to repress democratic freedoms. There have always been progressive faith-based civil society groups that have played a vital role in struggles for democratic freedoms and social justice in many contexts, and alongside these, there have always been more socially conservative elements within civil society – including others coming from a **faith-based** perspective – with which many of us of a more progressive, rights-oriented persuasion have long been able to find ground for fruitful collaboration. But new elements positioning themselves in the civil society sphere have no interest in collaboration; they seek only confrontation.

There are strident groups laying claim to civil society space in order to advance anti-rights agendas. This might best be labelled as **uncivil society**. Uncivil society is on the march, seen recently in the **Americas**, including **El Salvador** and **Peru**, and **Poland**. It is evidently well resourced, including by highly conservative religious groups, and backed by repressive states, which enable it to occupy spaces at national and international levels under the guise of civil society consultation. The implication is that debate becomes harder in those spaces as discourse becomes polarised.



Marielle, Presente!, inspired by a young black female politician gunned down in Rio, became a rallying cry during the 2018 Brazilian elections

Photo: Ines Pousadela

The power and resources of uncivil society challenge what many people think of as civil society. In progressive, rights-oriented civil society, this forces us to consider how we can distinguish ourselves from uncivil society on the basis of our values, and how we can clearly articulate and demonstrate those values. But at the same time, this should caution us not to be elitist or dismissive of other viewpoints, and to make empathy, humility and a willingness to listen essential parts of our values. It raises the question of how we can connect and dialogue with people who may be inclined to support anti-rights causes, peel them away from those who will never agree with us, and try to persuade them of our viewpoints. The need this suggests is for common fronts across civil society that enable combined response to issues that we agree on, and respectful, democratic dialogue on those we do not.

5. CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONDING

The story is not just one of democratic decline. It is also one of action by civil society and active citizens to defend and demand democracy. Many of our contributors describe how civil society is responding and making a difference. All around the world, the power of citizen action is being proven.

CIVIL SOCIETY RECLAIMING DEMOCRACY

Capturing the headlines, mass movements have led to apparent democratic breakthroughs with the ousting of corrupt and autocratic leaders, including in **Armenia** and **South Korea**, while many European and Latin American countries, as well as the **USA**, have seen large-scale mobilisations against divisive and regressive political leaders. In 2018, for example, **US students** got further in questioning the political power of the gun lobby than any organisation had managed to for many years, responding to catastrophe not by accepting comforting platitudes but by taking action. In several **West African** countries, including Burkina Faso and Senegal, young people have led, mobilising in creative ways to change the calculus decisively when autocratic rulers have sought to extend their stays in office.

The ruling party in **Malaysia** was finally defeated after more than six decades of entrenched power, with civil society's campaigning against corruption and electoral abuses a vital part of the narrative for change. In **The Gambia**, civil society's united action helped force a long-standing dictator to accept the people's verdict following an election that was intended to legitimise his rule. In **Paraguay**, attempts to change the constitution to allow the president to run again were dropped following mass protests. The example of **Tunisia**, meanwhile, showed how concerted and coalition-based civil society action can prevent democratic backsliding following a revolution.

“ THERE ARE STRIDENT GROUPS LAYING CLAIM TO CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE IN ORDER TO ADVANCE ANTI-RIGHTS AGENDAS ”

The **MeToo** and **Time's Up** movements mobilised huge amounts of women, and men, to change the terms of the debate about the role and status of women in societies and workplaces. In **Ireland**, civil society showed how citizen assemblies and referendums can advance rights with a successful campaign to change the abortion law, building on an earlier breakthrough on marriage equality.

There were many other lower profile but still important victories for civil society. When the **Zambian** government organised a referendum-style national consultation on leaving the ICC, civil society mobilised, encouraging citizens to defeat the proposal overwhelmingly. In **Finland**, a concerted and collaborative campaign collected enough signatures to force the issue of rights to housing and services for people with disabilities onto the parliamentary agenda. Civil society in **Nigeria** led a successful advocacy campaign that lowered the age requirements to stand for office, a key barrier against youth participation that prevented the renewal of political leadership. In **Jamaica**, civil society advocated for and won civil society roles in key government consultation structures.

Concerted advocacy efforts by civil society in **Argentina** led to the passing of a law guaranteeing 50 per cent women's representation in the National Congress, and civil society also won greater transparency in party political **financing**. A similar breakthrough on gender parity has recently been won in **Mexico**, while **South African** civil society also secured greater transparency of political funding after winning a court case. **Kenya's** 2017 presidential election was rerun on court orders after petitions were upheld about electoral irregularities.

Showing the power of collective action, in **Mexico** in 2018, CSOs joined together to shape a common advocacy agenda and asked presidential candidates to endorse their key demands. That agenda now serves as a basis to engage with the winning candidate and hold him to account on commitments made during the process. Other contributors highlight

the value of building broad alliances. In **Myanmar**, where the military still dominates key institutions, civil society worked with parliamentarians and held public hearings to secure important new amendments to local electoral law, making it easier for a wider range of candidates to stand. Across **Asia**, civil society has built alliances with electoral management bodies to develop dialogue on raising electoral management standards.

Civil society is also active in monitoring and reporting on elections. Youth activists in **Senegal** used their phones to take photos of results at counting centres and reported them online to prevent fraud. In **Kenya**, civil society developed a mobile app to enable rapid communication between election monitors, as well as urgent response to threats, in a context where they have often been threatened.

Civil society is responding in creative ways. In the difficult context of **South Sudan**, which has experienced conflict for much of the time since independence, civil society uses elements of performance art and theatre as a means of calling attention to and mobilising people to act on the unaccountable behaviour of those in power. In conflict-affected **Palestine**, civil society uses theatre spaces to encourage women's and young people's participation. With elections repeatedly deferred in the **DRC**, civil society held its own vote, to choose the leaders of a new network, using schools and churches as polling stations, in part to prove that it was possible to hold an election.

Even when apparent setbacks come – as in the civil society campaign for abortion law reform in **Argentina** in 2018, which did not lead to a vote in favour – it should be recognised that impact has been achieved in changing the nature of the public conversation about the issue and galvanising support that will eventually result in change: the parliamentary debate on the abortion bill was the first in Argentina's history.

LESSONS FROM RESPONDING

In all these cases, civil society and active citizens have been at the heart of response.

Often, when mass mobilisations decisively stand up to entrenched power, events can seem to come as a surprise. They may be led by new movements that have no grounding in existing civil society, as in the case of **March for Our Lives**, but that tap into traditions of resilience and resistance, notably the civil liberties movement. Often, on investigation, as the case of **Armenia** indicates, histories of smaller mobilisations, community action and civil society advocacy can be seen: mass mobilisations often build on the footprint of past civil society efforts that have gathered support for change.

Many of the most successful struggles of recent times – against colonialism and dictatorships, for women’s and LGBTQI rights – involved a mix of local-level, spontaneous acts by citizens and organisational planning and commitment. Many of today’s mobilisations also **combine** online with offline action. Individuals can make a difference. Activism can begin with a ‘like’, and new technologies offer tools both for organising mobilisation better and for focusing citizen power in new and creative ways. The need is to combine individual and organisational action, and online and offline action. For this, we need active citizens ready to put themselves on the line for the sake of a cause, and organisations to help sustain momentum. In between surges of people power, CSOs carry the torch for the long haul.

But to reimagine democracy, we need a new mobilisation of emancipatory activism. Contemporary large-scale protests point the way forward and show the potential that exists. Active citizenship will not develop by accident. Participation confidence and competence need to be stimulated and cultivated, and civil society must lead in building up routines and rituals of participation. We need to walk newly mobilised people through activism journeys.



The Hagana Music Festival, an initiative by the #Anataban movement, brings people from South Sudan and Kenya together with a message of peaceful coexistence

Photo: #Anataban Facebook page



March For Our Lives, a student-led rally for gun control in the USA, New York, 2018

Photo: Mathia Wasik



Zimbabwe tells Robert Mugabe to go!
Solidarity March, November 2017

Photo: Zimbabwe Eyes flickr

Even when breakthroughs come, they can create their own, new tests: dramatic changes can **raise expectations** of civil society and require that we play new roles that we find difficult to fulfil. When presidents who had ruled for decades stood down in **Angola** and **Zimbabwe**, it demanded a markedly different civil society response from long strategies of attrition and survival. It can be hard to move from an oppositional mindset to making practical demands, and civil society can be emptied out of our leadership if people move into government or party roles, while co-option by new governments can undermine civil society's autonomy and credibility. New governments can enjoy great support when they come to power after a long period of misrule, but there is a danger then of overlooking failings, and a need still for civil society to perform our crucial accountability role.

A CHALLENGE THAT IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY

As civil society, we are challenged and threatened by current crises in democracy. These have perhaps exposed problems in civil society that were always there but not adequately acknowledged. We have perhaps been complacent, particularly in societies we regarded as long-established representative democracies, in assuming that the fundamentals of democracy could not be questioned and progress was assured. While we are mobilising in great numbers today, in many contexts, it is **in response** to threats; we were not mobilising before we were threatened. We are perhaps good at reacting to crisis, but less good at working to prevent them. Contemporary events test our assumptions, our ways of working and our response methods. But they also provide opportunities for us to think and act differently.

In some contexts, fundamental questions are being asked about the superiority of democracy as a form of governance, compared to fascism, authoritarian or military rule. Where these sentiments exist, they need to be taken on; it needs to be made clear that the solution to contemporary failings of democracy is more democracy, not less. But what is more often under question is how democracy works today. As the lip service that even autocrats pay to the performance of democracy shows, the notion of democracy retains a powerful hold in the popular imagination. This continuing emotional pull of democracy provides an opportunity to offer a more appealing version than is practised today. The opportunity is not to fall back into a defensive position, but to win support for a new and better vision.

As our contributors from all over the world have attested, people still want democracy. Regardless of whether they live in a society at the top or bottom of the various democracy indices, people are unhappy with their current experience of democracy. If people live in a repressive country, their struggles are for a properly functioning representative democracy, and it is important for civil society to support struggles for free and fair elections wherever they

are being waged. If people live in a representative democracy, they want more participatory and direct forms of democracy. Everywhere, people have a yearning for more and better democracy. We see this yearning, for example, whenever a competitive election is held after a time when democracy has only existed on paper: people seize the opportunity to take part in debate and line up to vote. As an example from **Tanzania** suggests, when asked whether they believe it is good to have transparency over political processes, whether they want more access to information and whether they should be free to criticise political leaders, most people will agree. Despite realism about the present situation, there is also considerable optimism among many of our contributors about the potential for change and our ability to help achieve it. The question now is how civil society can take that optimism forward and serve the yearning for democracy.

6. FIRST STEPS TOWARDS THE VISION

If democracy is a journey that never ends, then we know we have a long distance to travel even to get close to the expansive vision of democracy set out above. But as active citizens and organised civil society, it is a journey we can begin today by grappling with present problems. The recent actions taken by civil society and active citizens to defend, uphold and deepen democracy show that there are many positive steps we can take. Our numerous conversations with people all over the world generated a great wealth of practical recommendations. The need is to take small steps, but not settle for small victories: to combine the seeking of immediate change with progress towards a longer-term vision and the elaboration of a new narrative on democracy.

A range of tactics is available for us to try to advance change, including advocacy, campaigning, protesting, research, documentation, knowledge sharing, solidarity and network building. Experience tells us that approaches are most likely to succeed when they combine these and other tactics in flexible and dynamic ways, mix online and offline action, and make the best use of the different strengths of a wide range of civil society groups and active citizens. Our efforts should address both the ‘supply side’ of democracy – working to ensure that the means and mechanisms of participation are available and open – and the ‘demand side’ – working to help citizens become more active, develop capacities to participate, and voice and channel their demands and concerns.

1. BUILDING BETTER INSTITUTIONS AT EVERY LEVEL

Better democracy requires better institutions at every level, from the local to the global. Many contributors made recommendations on how to democratise institutions, and how we as civil society can push for improvements.

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Members of the first Indigenous International Observation Mission after concluding their visit to Mexico, July 2018

Photo: Fund for the Development of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean

A. MAKING ELECTIONS MORE FREE AND FAIR

Our contributors are clear that elections are not the sole component of democracy, but they are an essential part. No society could be described as democratic that does not hold regular, fair, open and competitive elections. Wherever these are lacking, civil society demands that they be held. Elections also offer a foundation on which more participatory forms of democracy can be built. But for this to be the case, election processes matter.

- As civil society, we should make elections a mainstream matter of concern. This means there should be greater engagement by a wider range of civil society – not only civil society that strongly focuses on democracy and civil and political rights – around elections, including the run-up to and aftermath of elections as well as electoral periods themselves. As part of this, we should work to promote the defence and enabling of space for debate and dissent around elections, given that elections are often times when debate and dissent are clamped down upon.
- Independent election monitoring is crucial. We need to develop civil society and citizen capacities to monitor and report on elections, including through the use of mobile and social technologies to provide accurate results and highlight violations. We need to develop networks and tools to support election monitors, including when their physical and digital security is threatened. We should also advocate for and help work to develop, support and nurture truly independent national and local election management bodies. We should seek to play a role in the governance of these, and build our networks with autonomous election management bodies to encourage them to uphold the highest standards.
- During elections, we should ask candidates to commit publicly to adhering to codes of conduct that set high standards for behaviour in elections, encourage their supporters to do likewise, and monitor and report on candidates' behaviour. We should also fact-check and rebut spurious claims made on social media and in divisive political propaganda, including through active social media presences.
- Election periods can offer advocacy opportunities. We should examine and critique the manifestos of political parties, from a non-partisan perspective, and analyse the likely effects of manifesto proposals on our key issues. We should work across a wide range of civil society to develop consensus on common advocacy positions and put them to all candidates on a non-partisan basis, seeking their support for proposals as they run for office. We can also work to mobilise citizens to raise key issues with politicians when they come canvassing for votes; this requires strong and clear messages and work with citizens to develop the skills and confidence needed. These actions then offer the basis for further dialogue to hold politicians to their commitments if elected, and for post-election monitoring of performance on manifesto pledges. In contexts where laws prevent civil society advocacy during election periods, there is a need to lobby for the laws to be made more permissive.

- Recall processes – in which office holders can be forced to step down and stand for re-election if enough voters support the initiative – offer a powerful mechanism for citizens to exert accountability. Where recall procedures exist, we could advocate for their proper use. Where they do not, we could call for their introduction.
- We need to lead a response to exclusion from elections. Responses could include advocacy to extend the franchise to groups of people excluded from voting, such as migrants and refugees, and to remove barriers against people standing for office, such as age limits. We could advocate for affirmative action and quotas for excluded groups, for example to encourage more women candidates, and for special representation for minority groups. Measures such as these help, but they should not create ghettos; people who benefit from them will still need support, including from civil society, to be effective in their roles. We could work to build solidarity and mutual support networks between people standing for or holding political office who come from excluded groups, such as women politicians and candidates. But any responses need to also take into account the material and economic barriers that exclude people from voting and standing for office even where policies exist to enable them.
- In some contexts, we may also need to advocate for fairer voting systems that encourage the representation of a wider diversity of viewpoints, rather than voting systems that allow well-represented voices to dominate and crowd out a diversity of opinions. This may entail advocating for more proportional voting systems where these do not exist.
- Given that a key challenge to democracy comes from incumbent leaders who rewrite constitutions rather than step down, a further response could be to work on developing pathways that enable leaders to transition into new roles, including ceremonial and ‘elder statesperson’ roles, and regional and international roles.



Thousands marched in solidarity with the Catalan independence vote, 2017

Photo: Dani Blanco / Argia

B. BUILDING GREATER PARTICIPATION

Beyond representative democracy, a range of possible models exist for building more participatory, decentralised and direct forms of decision-making, all of which can expand democracy. Civil society is the sphere best placed to pioneer and test these, including models such as community forums, citizen panels and local parliaments.

- Referendums are a potential tool of direct democracy, but they call for caution. We should distinguish between true expressions of direct

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democracy – in which pressure comes from citizens to advance change – and its false expressions – in which autocratic leaders hold plebiscites, often rigged, to attempt to legitimise a change in their interest. A key principle of referendums should be that they must not offer opportunities to vote to remove human rights. At their best, referendums offer opportunities to advance discourse, cultivate active citizenship and mobilise citizens. But they call for coordinated, energetic and imaginative civil society campaigning.

- We should advocate for further exploration of the citizen assembly mode, as used recently in **Ireland**. Citizen assemblies convene nationally or locally representative panels covering a cross-section of society, involving citizens rather than professional politicians. They offer an alternative route when electoral systems fail to represent a diverse range of views or politicians are deadlocked on a difficult issue. As civil society, we can lead in convening and testing the idea of citizen assemblies, advocate that governments introduce them and engage with any citizen assemblies that are formed to urge them to be transparent, non-partisan and informed by due consideration of expert evidence.
- We should also make more use of advocacy for citizens’ initiatives – processes, often shaped around online petitions, in which demands for change are debated or advanced if they pass a designated threshold of public support. These should include provisions for the instigators of initiatives to address decision-makers directly if they attract enough support.
- We should also take the lead in exploring forms of direct democracy enabled by new technologies, providing that technology is not manipulated. This could include making more use of **petitions** and **surveys** in gathering citizens’ views, particularly those that make use of social and mobile media in which citizens are active. As ever, we should connect online and offline activism, and as we strive to make new technologies enable more direct forms of democracy, we should naturally connect with civil society’s work to promote unrestricted internet access, net neutrality and the transparent management of technologies.
- In some contexts, traditional forms of governance exist; we should engage with these to try to make them more open, inclusive and accountable.
- Underpinning all of this, we should build active citizenship through promoting and delivering civic education, which is lacking in many contexts, and make it inclusive and of high quality. Expansive civic education, offered through formal and non-formal means, can help citizens, particularly young people, understand their role in democracy, build respect for democratic processes and freedoms, and resist

vulnerability to manipulation, including appeals to overly partisan and extremist views, and vote-selling. Inclusive civic education should build respect for diversity and reach excluded groups. An inclusive curriculum should encourage enquiry and scepticism rather than obedience to narrow 'national values'.

C. DEMOCRATISING THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Current criticisms of the international system need to be taken on, and used as a starting point for a radical rather than reactionary reform agenda. We cannot leave the field free for populist and authoritarian leaders who use criticisms of the international system's lack of democracy and transparency to their ends. Today's world is a very different place from the post-Second World War landscape that largely still shapes the international architecture. The UN's forthcoming 2020 75th anniversary offers an opportunity to put forward radical proposals to reshape and democratise the organisation. The model of consultation and dialogue that informed the development of the SDGs should be built upon.

- We should advocate for more direct and participatory democracy at the international level, to allow citizens a proper say in international affairs. While long-term and bold ideas of establishing a directly elected world parliament or citizens' assembly may seem distant hopes in the current hostile climate, there is a need to develop these ideas, test them, prove their validity and advocate for them, including perhaps by testing them at the regional intergovernmental level.
- When it comes to participation in international processes, we need to scrutinise and hold accountable international gatekeepers, which can block minority and dissenting voices. These gatekeeper roles may be held by private sector bodies, or by large CSOs that fail to make space for smaller CSOs. More broadly, we should advocate for greater access to the international system, until we have better access than that the

private sector currently enjoys, and for partnerships with international organisations to be opened up to include a greater diversity of civil society. We could advocate for a change in the international conventions that govern the UN's ways of working to set stronger rules on civil society and private sector engagement, and greater democratic oversight over the rules.

- We should pay more attention to regional-level structures, including regional parliaments, where these exist, and try to work to make them more democratic. Engagement with regional parliaments could be used to hold regional intergovernmental structures accountable and to engage in advocacy to address problems that cross borders and impact on democratic freedoms.
- The SDGs should provide the opportunity to mould and model new democratic international processes, as well as **national-level** processes for engagement. The ambition of the SDGs should be matched by stronger processes of democratic accountability and monitoring, meaning that there should be far more opportunities for participation by civil society and active citizens than at present.
- There is also a need to foster recognition that without democracy, the SDGs are impossible to achieve: the link between democracy and development needs to be reaffirmed and celebrated. We need to **make clear** that more democracy makes the SDGs more possible, and in turn that democracy flourishes when people see that it leads to improvements in their daily lives. We should therefore demand stronger monitoring of and regular reporting on progress in democratic freedoms as a key indicator of progress in achieving the SDGs, with processes that enable civil society to participate in monitoring and reporting.
- The international sphere also offers a locus for advocacy to improve national-level democracy. Recent experiences of democratic regression



Generating ideas for reimagining democracy in Mexico, in a democracy dialogue organised by Centro Mexicano para la Filantropía (Cemefi), coordinated by Red para el Desarrollo Comunitario (REDESCOM)

Photo: Cemefi

after earlier progress suggest that the international system and donors should place more emphasis on support for emerging democracies and **democracies in transition**. Support should enable the development of a broad range of institutions of rooted democracy, including enabling space for civil society. Further, when domestic elections are confined to a largely formal and ceremonial role, in part this is enabled by an international system that sets store by the symbolism of elections but fails to interrogate their substance. This suggests a need for new international norms – perhaps including a new global convention – that set higher minimum standards for elections to which all states

are expected to adhere, with provisions for oversight, monitoring and accountability over failings, in which civil society can participate. As civil society, we can help to develop and propagate such new norms.

2. CREATING CONNECTIONS

A. BUILDING ALLIANCES

Current challenges and failings suggest that we need new and better **alliances** to defend democracy where it is under attack, build momentum for democratic progress and help enable citizens to be more active.

- Within civil society, we should build broad-based **alliances** that break the barriers between our work on different themes. Alliances should unlock the special strengths of different members, for example, by combining insider strategies of diplomacy with outsider strategies of mass mobilisation. They should have short and long-term goals, focusing on urgent defensive action where necessary and immediate gains where possible, but also have a longer-term vision against which progress can be measured. Alliances should place more emphasis on sharing successful response strategies and tested models.
- We need to forge alliances with groups outside civil society, including election management bodies and national human rights institutions, to encourage strong observance of democratic freedoms around elections in particular. We also need to form alliances with businesses that uphold democratic values.
- In the many situations where parliamentarians are under attack, we should cultivate alliances to defend and uphold their autonomy, and the legitimate accountability and advocacy roles of both parliamentarians and civil society. Where parliamentary forums exist, such as committee meetings and hearings that call for expert witnesses, we should try to engage with these to make common, non-partisan cause with

parliamentarians, and work to expand and make these forums more transparent. We should engage with sub-national and regional parliaments, where these exist.

- In many contexts, courts provide key opportunities to hold the government to account and improve democratic processes. So in the same vein, we should build stronger engagement with the **judicial system**, where courts are independent from the executive.
- Governments that are still supportive of democracy should see civil society as their natural ally, and work with us to uphold democratic freedoms and fight democratic regression. Common action to defend civil society rights should be recognised as inherently in support of democracy.
- We need to connect with the many citizens who are already active, and who are concerned about democratic regression and trends such as polarisation and extremism. We need to offer them new vehicles where they feel safe and enabled to act on their concerns. We need to help them understand that the concerns they have about democracy are also civil society concerns, and encourage them to work with us to enhance democracy together.

B. BROKERING UNUSUAL CONVERSATIONS

All the alliances in the world will make little difference if we only talk with those who already agree with us. We need to engage with those who disagree with us, are indifferent to us or do not see us as sharing their struggles. We need to turn culture wars into conversations. A conversation can be the starting point of action; some of the most effective responses to attacks on migrants in **Denmark** grew out of small and local initiatives that involved bringing people to talk to each other and develop solidarity. We have seen that attitudes can be changed towards more progressive positions, as widespread shifts in support for same-sex marriage in several countries show, but none of that

happens unless we talk to people and persuade them. We need to break free from our echo chambers, and connect social media action with face-to-face conversations. We need to find new ways of talking to citizens about democracy in language that eliminates jargon, **resonates** with them and connects with their emotions. We need narratives that connect with most people's innate sense of natural justice and make clear that participation in democracy is a right and a duty. Above all, we must offer hope, optimism and positive motivations for action.

- We urgently need to have conversations with disaffected citizens. We need to offer them new directions and vehicles that acknowledge their anger and channel it constructively. We need to **connect** struggles for civil and political rights with the other fights for rights people may be engaged in, particularly economic rights.
- Even when we cannot change people's minds, we need to encourage widespread respect across the political spectrum for democratic values and tolerance for dissenting viewpoints: to promote rules for respectful engagement.
- To enable us to reach those we do not, in civil society we need dramatically to improve our ability to **communicate** and tell stories, but also our listening skills, as we need to take time to understand what motivates people and where the common ground might lie that we can agree on.
- We need to understand faith motivations, build alliances with **moderate** faith-based civil society, and distinguish between them and extremist, anti-rights faith groups.
- We should try to build alliances with **opinion-formers** – celebrities, popular artists, progressive faith leaders – who are generally seen as outside the political sphere but have influence and an understanding of

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what motivates people. We can try to use arts-based methods to engage people, help build participation capacities and enable dialogue, critical thinking and democratic dissent, including for people from excluded groups who might otherwise be denied access to formal avenues of participation.

- We need to connect with and between different excluded groups, and ensure that women, young people and minorities are able to participate fully in any conversations we hold. Where divides are stark, such as political divides between young people and older people, or ethnic divides, we need forums that bring these divided groups into dialogue.
- With so many larger CSOs based in capital cities, and right-wing populist movements often attracting their staunchest support in rural and isolated areas, we need to make conversations happen between metropolitan and peripheral voices.

7. OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO LEAD BY EXAMPLE AS DEMOCRATIC CIVIL SOCIETY

It must naturally be the business of civil society to lead in reimagining democracy, because in civil society we know that democracy cannot be an elite-driven process: it must come from and be demanded by the people. If democracy is a gift from elites, then elites can always take it back. Democratic freedoms are claimed through struggles, and nothing is permanent. Those struggles must be ongoing. Hard-won democratic rights require sentinels, and as interviewees from such diverse contexts as **Senegal** and the **USA** point out, sentinels come from the ranks of civil society.

But before we can claim to lead, we need to check our privilege. We can only lead if we lead by example, by modelling democracy within ourselves. We need to open ourselves up to citizens and build our internal democracy. We need to remake ourselves as the arena in which new forms of democracy are forged, applied, tested, modelled and shared for wider adoption. To reimagine democracy, we first need to reimagine our organisations.

But we must do it in a present era of great mistrust, including mistrust in CSOs, and at a time when civil society is under attack in many places. This is not easy, but the opportunity is there to change the narrative, build public support and help mobilise citizens in support of democratic freedoms and greater democracy.

The exposure of abuse in some CSOs should be recognised as our own **MeToo** moment that we must respond to by changing not just our policies, but our **organisational cultures**. Approaches that we can apply include: diversity audits; action to eliminate gender pay gaps within set timeframes; effective whistleblowing policies; new working styles that people can design around family commitments and that prevent burnout; action to reduce layers of hierarchy and internal decision-making; term limits for leaders; engagement with staff members who come from dominant social groups to sensitise them to unconscious bias they may have; and the adoption of new leadership styles. All approaches need to be rooted in a thorough analysis of existing power imbalances within CSOs, and we should recognise that within civil society teams, a diversity of opinions should be represented, and there should be a diversity of processes and spaces where opinions can be expressed.

We need to model and promote a style of leadership that is built around listening and hearing. We need to move away from our dated reliance on heroic leadership styles, generally based around alpha male stereotypes of aid workers as saviour figures, seen so often in our work in response to conflict and humanitarian emergencies. We need to model post-heroic, post-macho styles of leadership, drawing from examples of alternative leadership styles, such as those of grassroots **feminist** movements. We need to show the value of such leadership styles in resolving disputes and building inclusive consensus.

We need to model cultures of democracy among our staff and volunteers, to prove the case that democratic participation in the workplace is possible and desirable, and that benefits result. We can assume that if people experience better workplace democracy, they will develop stronger participation capacity, and carry raised expectations of participation into other arenas. It is up to us in civil society to put that proposition to the test.

We must model new ways of listening to people and helping them amplify their voices. If we want to rebuild public trust in civil society, we need to first



The democracy dialogue organised by Karapatan Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights in the Philippines included human rights activists, trade unions leaders, farmers and agricultural workers, urban poor people, women, youth, indigenous peoples and environmental activists.

Photo: Karapatan Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights

show people that we trust them, by listening to them. So we need to explore ways for citizens to take part in our decision-making, such as citizen panels and focus groups to inform our priorities.

We can also win trust by demonstrating exemplary transparency and opening ourselves up to new means of demonstrating **accountability** to citizens, such as regular reporting on our funding and our impacts, but in ways that acknowledge our failures as well as successes and prove our willingness to learn from our mistakes. We must document our failures and not only our successes, and share our learning from these more widely.

Doing so would also help us demonstrate to states that we are leading by example and rebut criticisms of civil society's legitimacy made by politicians, on the grounds that we do not face elections and are not held accountable over our decisions and use of resources. It would help to make the case that there are multiple dimensions to democracy, and that while we may not represent voters or parties, we represent ideas, concerns, hopes and dreams.

And that we renew our mandate daily by opening ourselves up to citizens and doing the work no one else will do.

We should dialogue with our donors about their possible role in encouraging greater internal democracy in CSOs. Perhaps funders could support CSOs to become more democratic through special funding lines, or recognise those CSOs that have taken steps to improve their internal democracy in the funding decisions they take. We also need to find ways of reducing competition between CSOs, which can drive the wrong kinds of behaviours. This could include more information-sharing and agreements not to compete for particular funding lines.

We need in civil society to be realistic and have an honest conversation about what happens when our leaders **move into** politics and government. We should not try to pretend this does not happen and we need to find ways of managing transitions that continue to respect civil society's autonomous and non-partisan nature, do not give ammunition to civil society's critics who accuse us of carrying out party politics by other means, and do not have a major impact on civil society's capacity. We need to find ways to maintain connections with those who move from civil society into the political and governmental spheres in order to advance mutual agendas.

As civil society, we need to be **intersectional** in our approaches to mobilise solidarity and connect the struggles of different movements – but we also need to find a new way of talking about intersectionality that pushes beyond the jargon that many find a barrier. We must recognise and learn from the contribution of the **women's movement** to the fight for democracy, and support the struggles of women's movements, because when these succeed, the **freedoms of all** are advanced: in the words of an interviewee from **South Korea**, “feminism perfects democracy.” We need to learn from and promote the diffuse and horizontal ways of working and practical solidarity of the feminist movement and other contemporary social movements.

As we look forward to the future of a reimagined democracy it falls on us, as civil society and active citizens, to think big, be creative and, above all, use our imaginations. We live in times when many would have us instead look backwards, to a false, imagined, glorious past, characterised by strong-man rule, monocultural societies and imperial aspirations. This cannot be our future. In the 21st century, we can do better than those appeals to the past. While we draw resilience from our histories of struggles for emancipation, we cannot renew democracy while looking backwards. It is time to make a decisive break with the tawdry politics so many of us encounter today.

Only civil society can do this, because civil society is the sphere of dialogue, experimentation and creativity. We cannot, as civil society, retreat into safer territory and simply hope to weather the storm. We must create the space where active citizenship is lived and becomes real. We need to make the difference, build on our recent responses and be bold to renew, revitalise and reimagine democracy.

CREDITS

GUEST ARTICLES

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INTERVIEWS

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- Gayathry Venkiteswaran, University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus: **'People invested in wanting a change' – civil society and the Malaysia elections**, May 2018
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VIDEO INTERVIEWS

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- **Deewa Dela Cruz**, International Indigenous Peoples Movement for Self-Determination and Liberation, Philippines
- **David del Olmo**, Macoris Verde, Dominican Republic
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- **Alex Farrow**, CIVICUS Youth Action Team, UK
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- **Tamami Rarama**, Rainbow Pride Foundation, Fiji
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DEMOCRACY DIALOGUES

- **Argentina**: Centro Cultural de la Cooperación Floreal Gorini and Asociación Pablo Besson, Buenos Aires, 27 August 2018
- **Bangladesh**: Bandarban, 8 September 2018
- **Bolivia**: Centro de Estudios y Apoyo al Desarrollo Local, El Alto, 20 and 27 August 2018; Sucre, 9-10 August 2018; Tarija, 30-31 August 2018
- **Burundi**: Association des Amis de la Nature, Kampala, 17 August 2018
- **Cameroon**: A Common Future
- **DRC**: Yole!Africa, Goma, 12 July 2018
- **Ecuador**: Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo and Universidad de los Hemisferios, Quito, 21 August 2018
- **Fiji**: CIVICUS, International Civil Society Week, Suva, 8 December 2017
- **Gambia**: Global Youth Innovation Network-Cambia Chapter and Network of Freelance Journalists, Fajara, 4 August 2018
- **India**: Blue Ribbon Movement, Mumbai, 26 August 2018
- **India**: Red Elephant Foundation
- **Kenya**: Elgeyo Marakwet Civil Society Network, Elgeyo Marakwet county, 3 August 2018
- **Mexico**: Centro Mexicano para la Filantropía and Red para el Desarrollo Comunitario, Mexico City, 29 August 2018
- **Nepal**: Dignity Initiative, Butwal, 29 July 2018
- **Nigeria**: Girls Education Mission International, Jos, Plateau state, 18 July 2018
- **Pakistan**: Blue Veins, Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 17 August 2018
- **Panama**: Consumo Ético, Valle del Riscó, 17 June 2018
- **Philippines**: Karapatan Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights, Rodríguez, Rizal, 19 August 2018
- **South Africa**: CIVICUS, Johannesburg, 18 May 2018
- **South Africa**: Creative Advantage
- **Switzerland**: CIVICUS, Geneva, 16 November 2017
- **Tajikistan**: Tajikistan National NGO Association, Dushanbe, 28 July 2018
- **Togo**: Amis des Étrangers au Togo, Lomé, 8 July 2018
- **Trinidad and Tobago**: Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women, Port of Spain, 3 August 2018
- **Uganda**: Action for Humanitarian Initiatives, Kawempe Division, 7 August 2018
- **Zimbabwe**: Epworth Arts and Culture Association

Some democracy dialogue reports were pending publication at the time of finalisation of this report.

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