

A protest is held on 5 June 2020 in São Gonçalo, Brazil, in reaction to the murders of George Floyd and João Pedro, a young boy killed by the Brazilian police. Photo by Buda Mendes/Getty Images



2021 STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT OVERVIEW

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Each year, CIVICUS publishes the State of Civil Society Report to analyse how contemporary events and trends are impacting on civil society and how civil society is responding to the major issues and problems of the day. This is the 10th edition of our report, focusing on civil society action and developments affecting civil society in 2020, looking back over 10 years of civil society activity and highlighting key ideas for action in civil society in 2021 and beyond.

Our report is of, from and for civil society, drawing from numerous in-depth interviews and online consultations with civil society activists, leaders and experts, and others close to the major stories of the year. Our 2021 report is also informed by CIVICUS's ongoing programme of research, analysis and advocacy, and the work of our members, networks and partners, particularly the **CIVICUS Monitor**⁷, our online platform that tracks civic space conditions in 196 countries. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, our report covers five key areas of civil society action during 2020:

- The global struggle for racial justice
- Challenging exclusion and claiming rights
- Demands for economic and environmental justice
- Democracy under the pandemic
- Civil society in the international arena

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Protesters rally against the National Security Law in Hong Kong's Mongkok district on 27 May 2020. Photo by Billy H.C. Kwok/Getty Images



TABLE OF CONTENTS

4		FOREWORD
5		OVERVIEW
12		10 YEARS, 10 TRENDS
16		CREDITS
20		CHAPTER 1 THE GLOBAL STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE
64		CHAPTER 2 CHALLENGING EXCLUSION AND CLAIMING RIGHTS
135		CHAPTER 3 DEMANDS FOR ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE
184		CHAPTER 4 DEMOCRACY UNDER THE PANDEMIC
284		CHAPTER 5 CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

FOREWORD

LYSA JOHN, CIVICUS SECRETARY GENERAL

So much has happened in the 10 years since CIVICUS published our first State of Civil Society Report. Great waves of protest have swept across every inhabited continent as people have risen in huge numbers to demand democracy and human rights. As a result, long-entrenched dictators have been toppled in countries such as Sudan and Tunisia. Movements under banners such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too and Ni Una Menos have rippled across the world to challenge embedded exclusion and demand a radical reckoning with systemic racism and patriarchy. These movements have shifted discourse and changed political priorities, just as youthful climate movements, through mass protests and individual direct action, have won acknowledgement that climate change is a crisis and urgent action is needed.

Our successes have put us in the firing line. The last 10 years have seen a considerable backlash to people's demands for change. Globally, civic space conditions have undoubtedly deteriorated during this time, with more states and non-state groups joining the attack on civic freedoms and honing their tactics. In many countries, troubling forces of nationalism and populism have resurged, fuelling enmity, targeting rights and attacking excluded groups. Disinformation spread by social media has become part of the air we breathe. International institutions, which we look to to defend rights, have increasingly been attacked and undermined by rogue states.

The 10 years covered by this series of reports have, in short, been a time of great contestation between the forces of civil society, seeking human rights, democratic freedoms and social justice, and those determined to stop them. Breakthroughs, wherever they have been won, have been met with backlash, but the power of collective action has been proven. In this report's pages you

will find many examples of civil society struggles that are making impacts and successes that came to fruition after year upon year of committed civil society action.

Our report also looks back on a year like no other. When the pandemic came, it exposed and intensified existing faultlines and showed just how far we still have to go to build a world that works for everyone, in which everyone's rights are assured, everyone's fundamental needs are guaranteed and everyone's voices can be heard. Where we needed cooperation and internationalism we got fragmentation and narrow national interest. States already practised in attacking rights intensified the repression, applying punishment-first approaches to controlling the virus and monopolising the flow of information. Civil society was a target for the new restrictions introduced, which often went far further than could be justified in relation to the pandemic and threaten to outlast it.



But the pandemic also showed why we need a diverse, enabled and active civil society, as civil society was at the forefront of mobilising compassion and putting humanitarian values into practice to provide practical help, share vital information and hold states to account over the decisions they made. After the pandemic, there should be no more argument about why the world needs civil society. As we seek to rebuild our societies once the pandemic is over, the push should be on to make our societies more just, inclusive and greener. That shift can only come by working with civil society and assuring the conditions in which it is free to act.

In the face of often great odds, optimism is civil society's superpower. It is my hope that future editions of this report will be able to look back on the even greater changes that have come as a result of civil society action.

OVERVIEW

2020: A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER

This report looks back on a year like no other. Globally, it was a year of crisis unprecedented in living memory. For many, the pandemic meant living with a new source of fear, uncertainty and insecurity, on top of the daily difficulties most already faced. The crisis patterned onto and deepened existing social faultlines. Those who economically had the least suffered the most. Excluded groups most struggled to keep themselves safe, access treatment and make a living. The pandemic presented a new challenge for civil society, already engaged in multiple struggles and fighting a barrage of restrictions in many countries.

MANY STATES FAIL THE PANDEMIC TEST

The pandemic offered a stress test for political institutions, and most were found wanting. The inadequacy of many systems of healthcare and social support was revealed, and the ways in which economies fail to work for many people were once again demonstrated. The world was not ready: international cooperation was needed to respond to a global challenge, but was lacking as governments asserted narrow self-interest, birthing the dismal practice of vaccine nationalism. Vast disparities in vaccination rates between economically powerful states and the rest exposed an ugly reality in which the value of a human life depends on the lottery of birthplace.

State after state asserted top-down, command-and-control approaches that seemed to show little trust in the wisdom of people and communities. The first instinct of many presidents and prime ministers was to act as though the pandemic was a threat to their power, rolling out well-rehearsed routines of repression. States took on broad emergency powers, and at least some clearly used the pandemic as a pretext to introduce rights restrictions that will last long after the crisis has passed. At a time when scrutiny was more difficult, the suspicion was that some political leaders were opportunistically consolidating their power, rushing through repressive measures they had long wanted to unleash.



Protesters demand the free production of vaccines and their worldwide availability outside the Italian Parliament in Rome on 11 March 2021. Photo by Stefano Montesi/Corbis via Getty Images

Many states poured out official propaganda and, under the banner of controlling ‘false information’, sought to control the flow of information, ramping up censorship and criminalising legitimate inquiry and commentary, including attempts to hold them to account for poor pandemic performance and whistleblowing by healthcare workers. China’s customary response of controlling narratives and suppressing dissent enabled the virus to become a pandemic, but the state did not relent. China was in the front rank of states that expanded surveillance practices and trampled on the right to privacy, on the grounds of preventing virus spread, developing surveillance capacities that will likely enable ongoing intrusion.

States increased their coercive power, unleashing violent enforcement of restrictions on movement and suppressing protests, treating the public as targets for enforcement measures rather than partners in defeating the virus. In the Philippines, people were put in dog cages for breaking pandemic regulations. In several Middle East and North African states, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia, civil society activists imprisoned for their work to defend rights remained in crowded jails, at increased risk of contracting the virus and with little hope of access to adequate healthcare. In Algeria, the state freed some prisoners on safety grounds but filled up the space with activists newly sent to jail.

In many countries holding elections, incumbents applied narrow political calculation and either rushed into votes in unsafe conditions, as in Singapore and Sri Lanka, delayed them, as in Bolivia, or tried to politicise pandemic response to benefit re-election campaigns, as attempted in the Dominican Republic and Poland. Ruling parties took the opportunity to ban opposition rallies while continuing with their own campaigning, as seen in Tanzania and Uganda. Where right-wing populist and nationalist forces were already active, including across a swathe of European countries, they seized on the pandemic as their latest opportunity to sow division and polarisation for political advantage, politicising issues such as mask use and vaccination, little caring that their disinformation cost lives.

While international law sets out that any restrictions introduced on health grounds should be proportionate and time-limited, there is clear concern that many states went further than needed and that at least some new powers will stick, particularly where emergency laws were passed without expiry dates;

past experience, such as the introduction of enduring laws and practices that extended state violence in the wake of the 9/11 atrocity, is not encouraging. Little wonder that at the year’s end, some **87 per cent**⁷ of the world’s population lived in countries with severe civic space restrictions.

This was not the only model, and some states – notably New Zealand, South Korea and Taiwan – got the virus under control, won public trust and communicated pandemic response measures clearly, while largely respecting rights and upholding democratic freedoms. This showed that the path of repression taken by many was not a necessity but a choice.

PANDEMIC PROVES THE NEED FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

In often difficult conditions and even as civic space was being further tightened by new measures, civil society **stepped up**⁷, filling gaps left by state and market failures, providing help to people most in need and defending rights. Civil society organisations (CSOs) quickly responded with vital support, distributing cash, food, medicines and sanitary supplies, sharing accurate information on the virus and providing healthcare and psychological services. When gender-based violence soared under lockdown conditions, CSOs set up helplines, worked to provide quarantine-compliant safe spaces and championed access to the legal system. Multiple new voluntary efforts formed to mobilise and share community and neighbourhood-level mutual support. CSOs worked to ensure that support programmes were administered fairly and reached the most excluded people, and strived to push back against excessive state restrictions, expose abuses and challenge impunity. Civil society was at the forefront of developing and promoting ideas for a more just and sustainable post-pandemic world.

Around the world, civil society proved its value and made a difference. People’s experience of the pandemic would have been much worse without this civil society response. The lesson must be that an enabled civil society is a vital part of the social fabric and a source of resilience in times of crisis, and should be nurtured rather than repressed. Civil society should be enabled not only as a vital provider of services, but in all its legitimate roles that were needed under the pandemic, including to help people participate in decision-making and advance alternatives, and to scrutinise choices made by states.

MOBILISING – AND SUCCEEDING – AGAINST THE ODDS

With the world's focus on the pandemic, it was harder than ever for people to make their voices heard when articulating demands for change on the political, economic and social problems that preceded the pandemic and were intensified by it. But that did not stop them. Through any means they could, people kept claiming their rights. They demanded democratic freedoms. They sought to secure their livelihoods. They insisted on equality. And by asserting that things need to change now, they worked to protect and realise everyone's futures.

Globally, the mass mobilisation that made headlines was the resurgence of demands for racial justice, mobilising under the Black Lives Matter banner in the USA and around the world following the police killing of George Floyd in May. The sickening details of the murder, the very public humiliation involved and the timing, when people were being asked to accept restrictions and respect those enforcing them, burst a dam. People irresistibly came to the streets to demand an end to the systemic racism and police brutality they have lived under for generations. In county after county people defied attempts to characterise systemic racism as only being a problem in the USA, insisting that it was a scourge in their societies too, throwing the spotlight on racism in places as diverse as Colombia, the Netherlands and South Africa, while Asian-Americans also protested against intensifying violence and discrimination towards them under the pandemic. The determination to end police brutality resonated widely, giving encouragement to uprisings against police violence, notably in Nigeria. Globally, the movement exposed entrenched patterns of exclusion and long-running endeavours to overcome them, and recruited new support for those struggles.

Alongside this, action continued to realise the rights of all groups that experience structural exclusion of the kind that deepened during the pandemic but long preceded it, including women and LGBTQI+ people, winning some important breakthroughs. In Chile, commitments to develop a new constitution through processes of deliberative democracy, won through concerted street-level protest, guaranteed gender parity and Indigenous representation. Abortion was legalised in Argentina. Same-sex relations were decriminalised in Bhutan and Gabon and same-sex marriage legalised



A Black Lives Matter organiser leads supporters in a march in New York City, USA, on 8 August 2020. Photo by Ira L. Black/Corbis via Getty Images

in Costa Rica, a first in Central America. Everywhere there was progress, there also came anti-rights backlash, but hope that such forces could be put on the retreat rose in the USA, where people turned out in record numbers and overcame systematic voter suppression to kick out a racist and sexist president.

Countless protests, often met with brutal repression, were sparked by the harsh economic impacts of lockdown measures and the failures of states to provide adequate support to many people no longer able to meet their essential needs. People demanded better governance when it was revealed that politicians and officials had seen in the pandemic not a duty to protect people but rather an opportunity for personal enrichment and patronage, including through corruption in the procurement of vital medical supplies, as occurred in Paraguay and Zimbabwe. Rallying in large numbers, people successfully challenged attempts by states and international financial institutions to impose neoliberal economic austerity measures that slashed the very services people most relied on during the pandemic, as seen in Guatemala. Farmers came out in record numbers in India to protest against corporate capture and elite collusion, defying authoritarianism, forcing an intransigent government to the negotiating table. Further exposure of grand corruption in authoritarian Russia brought people to the streets, where they were met with ongoing repression.

Even in highly repressive contexts, where reprisals for dissent could be lethal, or when lengthy detention could almost be guaranteed, people put their bodies on the line to stand against abusive power and demand democratic freedoms. Bold civil disobedience of military might was offered in Myanmar. The dreams of democracy and of having leaders who truly listen to people were deferred in Algeria, Belarus and Hong Kong, among others, but people continued to show extraordinary bravery, taking to the streets in the face of great odds, keeping alive hopes for change.

Before the pandemic struck, the great climate mobilisations of 2019 had given rise to the hope that 2020 would go down in history as the year of climate breakthrough. That was not to be, and there are not many years left where a breakthrough could make a difference, so people continued to mobilise whenever and however they could to keep up the pressure for climate action, including in online and distanced and masked protests. The work of

countless grassroots environmental, Indigenous and land rights movements to defend local resources and restrict harmful extraction continued, often underacknowledged and frequently risking danger from powerful interests. People insisted that the post-pandemic future must be different and could not be built on further extraction, more emissions and the continuation of unsustainable practices that undermine futures.

These movements made an impact. In numerous countries, rights to make societies more equal were enshrined in laws and unpopular policies were reversed. Civil society action forced an election to be re-run in Malawi, overturning a stolen result. Protests following a flawed election in Kyrgyzstan forced out a president. Victories won by civil society were rarely complete; many did not go far enough or opened up new arenas of contestation, and few were irreversible. But they demonstrated how shifts can come even after long struggles. The global movement for racial justice showed that progress is possible even on deeply entrenched problems, reframing the conversation away from discrimination and individual attitudes towards a collective understanding of the systemic forces at play. It won some high-level political acknowledgement that the problem of systemic racism exists, opened up a greater reckoning with colonialism not only as a historical legacy but as a continuing, traumatising reality, and forced many institutions that had not previously engaged on the problem – including giant corporations – to commit to improve their behaviour. The protests forced racism onto the agenda, in the same way that mass mobilisations did for climate change the year before. These are small shifts that must be part of bigger changes, but they would not have come without people taking collective action.

PROVING THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Although 2020 was a year like no other, it was also part of a bigger picture. For the 10th edition of the State of Civil Society Report, we looked back over 10 years and identified 10 clearly discernible trends that this series of reports has tracked (see this summary's special section). Those key trends continued to be seen in 2020, shaping the course of the pandemic.

What is clear over those 10 years is that the power of mass movements is being proved, time and again. The story of the past 10 years has been one



Pro-choice campaigners celebrate outside the National Congress in Buenos Aires, Argentina, as abortion is legalised on 30 December 2020. Photo by Marcelo Endelli/Getty Images

of large-scale protests, on every inhabited continent, as people have risen up and defied attempts to repress them, to insist on human rights, democratic freedoms and equality, and demand gender, racial, economic, social and environmental justice. The history of these times is essentially that of an almighty tussle between the struggles of people's movements and the forces of repression, and while there have been setbacks aplenty there have also been moments of success.

During this time, something significant has happened in the make-up of mobilisations. People are asserting their identities – as women, as Black people, as LGBTQI+ people, as Indigenous people and more – challenging their lack of visibility, affirming and celebrating their lives, and demanding full and equal rights. Women are pursuing an end to gender-based violence and femicide, respect for sexual and reproductive rights and workplace equality, but they are also leading struggles for democracy; they are not playing support roles traditionally constructed as feminine, but rather are the faces and thinkers of protest movements.

Across protests, in country after country, many of those protesting are young, sometimes very young people mobilising for the first time. Young people have taken ownership of climate change to make it a decisive issue of our time. Alongside climate change, problems such as systemic racism, unequal economies and the denial of democracy are among the issues motivating protest momentum among a rising generation that instinctively sees these as issues of great injustice. Young people see the huge gap between their ideals about what is just, and what states and big businesses are doing, and that chasm propels them to the streets.

People are asserting their identities, but at the same time many protest movements are showing a profound understanding of the connections that link struggles, and bridging across social divides that long kept different communities from making common demands, as seen in countries with faith or sectarian divides such as Iraq and Lebanon. Protest movements have become increasingly intersectional: based on an acknowledgement of overlapping inequalities and exclusions, they are demanding the rights of the multiply excluded, such as Black trans people, certain that all will be free only once the most excluded are. It is becoming clear that movements are stronger and have more impact when they are intersectional and when they are led by

women, young people and other members of groups who are challenging their exclusion.

Young people in particular, having connected across borders and identities through social and mobile technology from an early age, are reproducing open and plural networking routines in real life. Contemporary protest movements are shaped as networks rather than pyramids, with a multitude of locally active leaders. Hong Kong's 'Water Revolution' may have been repressed, but the metaphor of behaving like water – shapeless, mobile, adaptable – holds true.

The mighty backlash from political and economic elites that have a vested interest in denying change is further proof that protest works. It is no surprise that so many of the civic space restrictions CIVICUS has documented in recent years are to do with the direct repression of protests, through security force violence, detentions and bans on public demonstrations, and repression of the expression of dissent and sharing of information, of the kind that gets people mobilising, through censorship, internet blocks and shutdowns and surveillance. Restrictions of protests and repression of free expression are not two separate trends; rather they go hand in hand as part of the great dynamic of our times: the battle between people joining together in great numbers to demand change, and those determined to stop them. Those who stand in the way of change have many tools of repression at their disposal, but civil society has the power that comes from numbers and the willpower of people fighting for their lives and futures.

LOOKING AHEAD: CHALLENGES

After looking back, it is time to look forward. Where the world is today is not where many in civil society would have hoped 10 years ago. While there have been gains as well as losses, overall, conditions for civil society have worsened. Too many people around the world are denied rights. Many struggles remain unfulfilled and many leaders of campaigns for change have been lost to repression or locked away. Multilateral institutions and practices have been weakened, and gross human rights violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity often go unpunished. Hope that rising global south economic powers, such as Brazil, India and South Africa, could play a greater role for good, drawing from their histories of struggles for democracy and

human rights to support democratic values and enable civil society, has dissipated.

Some further troubling clouds lie on the near horizon. The world threatens to become yet more unequal, divided between the vaccine haves and have nots, as wealthier countries inoculate their populations but many people in global south countries remain at risk. The potential is for large parts of the world to be locked into long-term restrictions on freedoms and economic strife, even as global north countries bounce back quickly. The danger is of a virus left free to further mutate, making the world a more dangerous place for everybody.

Meanwhile extreme weather records keep tumbling, and deadlines for action keep being passed. Government commitments to become net carbon neutral by distant dates may offer important symbolic acknowledgements, but the window in which real action can make a genuine difference is closing fast. The COP26 climate summit, in November 2021, must be the moment the tide starts to turn. That will only happen if civil society voices are heard and heeded. If not, the most excluded people in the poorest contexts will pay the heaviest price.

Any strategy to uphold rights and win progressive change will also have to reckon with the increasingly malignant roles being played by powerful repressive states, notably China and Russia, not just within their borders but internationally. While they are not necessarily aligned – China wants to make its model of economic development free from rights the global paradigm, while Russia wants to maintain its sphere of influence around its borders by promoting chaos and destabilisation – wherever they are active rights suffer and conflicts rage. As hopes rise that the USA will take a more responsible foreign policy direction, China and Russia are offering backlash. In 2020, they tested their levels of impunity, trusting that subservient allies bound in relationships of economic dependency would look the other way: Russia blatantly poisoned a prominent dissident who threatened presidential power, and when he survived, jailed him; China erased Hong Kong's special status and turned Xinjiang into a prison state. If such states keep getting away with outrages like these, the ominous question is what they may be tempted to do next.

To help tackle some of these problems, proper, rules-based international

cooperation, based on strong human rights norms, is more than ever needed. Civil society's ideas – to reform the UN Security Council, have stronger scrutiny of and accountability over human rights conventions and develop new rights norms – need to be taken forward. More democratic involvement of civil society in UN institutions, as civil society urged afresh in 2020, is needed to enable this. A General Comment developed in 2020 on the right of peaceful assembly by the UN Human Rights Committee, the expert body tasked with monitoring implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, offers a good example of cooperation between multilateral institutions, states and civil society; more such cooperation is needed.

LOOKING AHEAD: HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

At every level, there is a need to fight back against attacks on rights and defend the gains civil society has made. But there is also a need to keep dreaming big and aiming high. Globally, the movements that have changed the agenda, and the ways people see the world and their role in it, have not been those that timidly seek incremental reform, but rather those that demand big changes – an end to fossil fuel extraction, no more state funding of police racism, political revolutions and new constitutions. They are a reminder of the need to be ambitious.

Looking forward 10 years, it should be in the hope that people will live in more inclusive, just and equal societies: where they are not forced to live in fear, poverty and insecurity and are free simply to be themselves; where climate change is under control; where economies work for everyone; where political institutions, nationally and internationally, are open to oversight and people have multiple ways to voice their concerns; and where people's movements and organisations are free to act. These should not be dismissed as implausible goals. They are aspirations grounded in people's lived experiences

and understanding of their problems. There are enough people who want such changes to happen.

For change to come, two things must occur. First, civic freedoms, including the right to peaceful assembly, must be defended and respected, so that people can mobilise in numbers to demand change. Looking back even further, all major historical transformations, including the right of women to vote, decolonisation and self-determination, racial equality laws and declarations of climate emergency, only came about after mass mobilisations urged them to happen. And yet the very states in which those changes were won are now delegitimising and suppressing protests.

The more democratic states need to set examples by holding a strongly permissive line on peaceful assembly domestically and urging other countries to follow suit in their bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. Temporary restrictions imposed under the pandemic must be reversed at the earliest opportunities. The international system needs to do more to uphold norms on the right to protest. Big business must be called to account and hit in the pocket wherever they side with authoritarian leaders over people's movements. People need to be brave to protest, but they should not have to do so at the risk of being thrown behind bars, or facing brutal, even lethal, violence.

Second, more numbers than ever are needed so that protests become overwhelming. People need to get out and keep protesting en masse. The lesson of the past 10 years is that no change comes without being demanded, and that huge numbers can make a difference. Once a pandemic that made it so much harder to mobilise in crowds is over, let us hope for a reaction that is an outpouring of people joining together: joyfully, to celebrate that to be human is to be social, and righteously, to insist that the world must be better for everyone.

10 YEARS, 10 TRENDS

Over 10 years of publication of the annual State of Civil Society Report, some long-term trends affecting civil society and trends in civil society action can be discerned. These developments preceded the current pandemic times, and have affected how the pandemic has been experienced and reacted to. They will shape our post-pandemic world and remain of ongoing relevance. Looking forward, civil society faces some key questions in responding to these trends and facing the challenge of overcoming the many negative developments of recent years.

1. A SUSTAINED CIVIC SPACE CRACKDOWN

The space for civil society to promote rights and pursue social justice has always been contested, but recent years have seen a greater range of states attacking civil society, including ostensibly democratic states, along with the burgeoning of anti-rights groups that position themselves within the civil society arena but attack the actions of legitimate, rights-oriented civil society. New tactics of restriction have developed, including the increasing use of online attacks, censorship, surveillance and 'fake news' laws, while protests in many countries have been subject to brutal repression. In response, civil society has become better at communicating the problem, spreading awareness and working collectively, and has developed strategies of resilience and international solidarity and support.

What else can civil society now do to fight back and win the argument for civic space at the national and international levels? What further support is needed to strengthen civil society resilience to attacks?

2. POLITICS IN FLUX AND DEMOCRACY AT RISK

Many contexts have seen political upheaval and a rejection of norms around the conduct of politics and democracy. Multiple presidents have rewritten constitutions to stand for additional terms and run elections that were



Filipino women mobilise on International Women's Day on 8 March 2020 to demand respect for human rights and an end to the repressive regime of President Rodrigo Duterte. Photo by Jes Aznar/Getty Images

neither free nor fair. Right-wing populism and nationalism have resurged in many contexts, fuelled by politicians and anti-rights groups who are mobilising disinformation and hatred to sow division. Many people are embracing more extreme positions. Amid polarisation, reasoned debate and consensus-building have become harder. Attacks on civil society actions to promote rights, defend democracy and assert accountability have resulted. At the same time, there have been innovations in organising and mobilising, and political flux has seen the emergence of a new cadre of young, feminist political leaders committed to dialogue, social justice and climate action.

How can civil society work with emerging progressive leaders? How can civil society lead the fightback against extremism and promote renewed respect for democratic norms, including for dissent and dialogue across differences?

3. ULTRA-CAPITALISM'S IMPACTS

Many recent protests have been triggered by the exposure of grand corruption, threats to slash essential public services and economic shocks; even apparently small increases in the prices of basic goods have offered tipping points for uprisings that articulated profound political and economic demands. People are increasingly rejecting an economic model that promotes ever-growing profits and the marketisation of the public arena at the expense of labour rights and social and environmental protections. Economic inequality has become ever more marked and precarious employment is being normalised. Big business is a key source of attacks on civic space and human rights violations, particularly against environmental, Indigenous and land rights defenders. In response, civil society is working to model economic alternatives, campaign for labour rights and hold big business to account.

How can civil society better develop economic literacy, further speak to people's economic anger and promote fairer and more sustainable economic models for pandemic recovery?

4. CLIMATE CHANGE RECOGNISED AS A CRISIS

From the Arctic to Australia via the Amazon, civil society has sounded the alarm on climate change. Mass protests made demands for climate action a mainstream issue. It is now clear that the climate is in crisis and the threat is immediate, affecting everyone but impacting worst on the most excluded people. In response to protest pressure, many administrations have declared net zero carbon targets and made declarations of climate emergency, and models such as citizens' climate assemblies have shown some potential to make a difference. But political leaders and the private sector will not act on the scale required without civil society keeping up the pressure. The need is not for lip service but for real climate action that ends fossil fuel dependence and respects natural environments. The present fear is that plans to restart economies in the wake of the pandemic will see a carbon-fuelled dash for growth.

How can civil society sustain the climate protest momentum, be at the forefront of solutions such as green new deals and climate assemblies, and mainstream climate action in all our work?

5. CHALLENGING STRUCTURAL EXCLUSION AND VINDICATING DIFFERENCE

Progress has been made in challenging the structural exclusion that limits the rights and opportunities of so many people. Civil society actions, including protests, campaigns and litigation, have thrown the spotlight on embedded racism, sexism and homophobia. While seeking equality, many movements are striving for the recognition and celebration of diversity and difference rather than mere assimilation. Successive waves of Black Lives Matter protests have reframed racism, making clear that it is a systemic problem embedded in social interactions and institutions. LGBTQI+ and women's rights movements have made gains in the recognition of rights. But their successes have brought an anti-rights backlash. Populists and nationalists have increasingly stoked culture wars, exposing excluded groups to further threats. International

standards and conventions, including on women's rights, are coming under renewed attack.

How can civil society overcome the backlash, move from acknowledgement of the problem to real change and, in our own practices, be intersectional and challenge our attitudes and behaviours that are embedded in and reproduce structural inequalities?

6. THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DISINFORMATION ECONOMY

The burgeoning of social media has created new opportunities for civil society action, but the persistence of digital divides also became clear under the pandemic. Social media platforms have proved fertile ground for authoritarian and anti-rights forces. Disinformation, hate speech and conspiracy theories seem only ever to intensify. They are deliberately stoked by states and political groups to distort discourse and create confusion and discord, domestically and internationally. They are used to attack civil society, excluded groups and anyone who stands up for rights. The viral ability to spread and profit from disinformation is hardwired into social media's business model, which is engineered to drive compulsion by feeding people streams of unverified content. Political discourse is now dominated by platforms designed to sell advertising and social media giants have no interest in dismantling the lucrative disinformation economy.

How can civil society use social media to further our work without being complicit in the disinformation economy? What alternative platforms could be deployed to improve the quality of political discourse?

7. ROGUE STATES TAKE THEIR MODELS GLOBAL

China's global role now extends beyond infrastructure diplomacy, through which it uses vast projects and loans to lock in support. The Chinese state

has made itself a key global player, increasingly taking a frontline role in multilateral institutions. In doing so, it is asserting a new development norm, emphasising state-driven market growth, detaching democracy from development and repressing human rights. At the same time, Russia is promoting political disruption in states that seem to stand in the way of the ambitions of its leader. Both are using their economic power to limit criticism from subordinate states, while leaders who want economic development without democracy are seizing on the China model. But global awareness is growing of the heavy human rights costs of this model, as seen in the Xinjiang region, and as reflected in the widespread grassroots resistance to Chinese energy and infrastructure projects in Latin America.

How can civil society reassert international human rights norms in the face of the rise of repressive states such as China and Russia, reconnect development to democracy and capitalise on growing concerns about the egregious human rights impacts of these political and economic models?

8. BELEAGUERED MULTILATERALISM

Civil society has sought to deepen its engagement with the international system as a key arena for setting norms, exercising accountability and forging global solutions to pressing problems. In the past 10 years, civil society helped shape commitments such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals and has since worked to hold states to account on these. Civil society is using the levers provided by the UN Human Rights Council to scrutinise states' human rights records and push for stronger human rights performance. But domestic political shifts have brought multilateral repercussions. Alongside China and Russia, states that have shifted towards authoritarianism are asserting narrow sovereignty and challenging the roles of international institutions, including through withdrawal, funding cuts and undermining from within. Vaccine nationalism is the latest manifestation of a rejection of international cooperation. The increasing role of the private sector in international institutions is further damaging

credibility and hampering accountability. And yet the vital need for international institutions to address problems that cross borders – climate crisis, the pandemic, conflicts – has never been clearer.

How can civil society work together and capitalise on US reengagement in the post-Trump era to make a new case for multilateralism, and make UN institutions more democratic and people-centred?

9. THE REALITY OF CONFLICT AND MILITARISATION

For many people – including in the Sahel, Syria and Yemen – their overriding experience is one of conflict. Many children and young people have never known what it is to live in peace. Human rights violations, the targeting of excluded groups and long-term displacement are their everyday reality. The space for humanitarian action has come under attack. Failures to act of the international system, particularly the UN Security Council, have had devastating on-the-ground consequences. State-subsidised military industries are promoting the use of weapons of war and intrusive surveillance, and states are increasingly taking militarised, securitised approaches to suppressing dissent, deploying heavy weapons and drone technology in civilian contexts. In contrast, civil society has led efforts to build inclusive peace, involve affected communities in peace processes and develop new global norms on the arms trade and nuclear weapons.

How can civil society help build inclusive peace and promote the norm of a demilitarised world?

10. NEWLY MOBILISED PEOPLE AND NEW CIVIL SOCIETY FORMS

Time and again, civil society has set the agenda. Mass protests and online campaigns have mobilised creativity to capture imaginations and make headlines. Movements for racial justice, women's and LGBTQI+ people's rights and climate action have changed discourse and perceptions at

incredible speed. The power of protest became apparent as a wave of mass mobilisations challenged and sometimes changed governments. Many of today's movements centre on a new generation of people creating their own structures of participation and activism. Many young people are participating for the first time, many women are taking leading roles and many people from excluded groups are asserting the value of their worldviews. They are the civil society frontier, challenging old assumptions about what civil society is and how it works.

What potential is there to renew civil society? How do conventional civil society models and approaches need to change and how can established civil society groups connect with protest energy, nurture participation journeys and help mobilisation achieve impact?



Climate march in Johannesburg, South Africa, September 2019. Photo by Amal Atrakouti

CREDITS

INTERVIEWS

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- Ulugbek Azimov, Legal Prosperity Foundation, ‘Kyrgyzstan: The citizens’ choice in the referendum will be decisive for our future’⁷, 29 March 2021
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- Marcela Guillibrand, Red de Voluntarios de Chile, ‘Chile: This historic constituent moment was achieved by citizens’⁷, 4 September 2020
- María Alicia Gutiérrez, Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito, ‘Ahora que estamos juntas, ahora que sí nos ven: El debate por la Ley de Interrupción Voluntaria del Embarazo en Argentina’⁷
- Pakou Hang, VoteRunLead, ‘#Beijing25: More women in public office translates into better government and a more robust democracy’⁷, 17 December 2020
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- Ramy Khouili, Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, ‘Tunisia: The official response has failed to consider the gendered aspects of the pandemic’⁷, 1 July 2020
- Krisztina Kolos Orbán, Transvanilla Transgender Association, ‘Hungary: Trans people are having our rights being taken away’⁷, 3 July 2020

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- Viviana Krsticevic, Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional, '#Beijing25: We are outraged at discrimination and are turning our claims into action', 23 August 2020
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- Patrick Poon, independent human rights researcher, 'Hong Kong: The National Security Law infringes on freedom of expression and is intensifying self-censorship', 27 August 2020
- María Rachid, Federación Argentina LGBT, 'Argentina: Cultural change enabled legal change, and legal change deepened cultural change', 30 October 2020
- Aparajita Sangita, human rights activist, 'Bangladesh: To address rape we need a thorough reform of the legal system', 5 March 2021
- Brian Schapira, Centro para la Apertura y el Desarrollo de América Latina, 'United Nations: The existing human rights system must be criticised, while still being defended', 16 February 2021
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- Małgorzata Szuleka, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 'Poland: The crisis of democracy and human rights will deepen', 15 September 2020
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- Bertha Tobias, women’s rights activist, ‘Namibia: Protests against gender-based violence were triggered by collective hope’, 26 January 2021
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- Asya Tulesova, environmental and civic rights defender, ‘Kazakhstan: The quarantine became a sort of cover for the government to persecute civil society’, 22 September 2020
- Jolovan Wham, civil rights activist, ‘Singapore: Opposition parties were given unfavourable coverage by the state media and had difficulty accessing voters’, 27 July 2020
- Anonymous activist, ‘Burundi: The election of new leaders is not synonymous with democracy’, 19 August 2020
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WEBINAR SPEAKERS

“WE THE PEOPLES...”: REIMAGINING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE ON THE EVE OF THE UN’S 75TH ANNIVERSARY, 14 SEPTEMBER 2020

Layan Al-Dani, Access Center for Human Rights, Lebanon; Yolette Etienne, ActionAid, Haiti; Memory Kachambwa, Femnet, Kenya; Beverly Longid, Civil Society Partnership, Philippines; Annie Namala, Centre for Social Equity and Inclusion, India; Alessandra Nilo, Gestos, Brazil; John Romano, TAP Network, USA; Natalie Samarasinghe, United Nations; Daniela Vancic, Democracy International, Germany; Fergus Watt, Coalition for the UN We Need, Canada

THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY: ELECTIONS UNDER THE PANDEMIC, 24 NOVEMBER 2020

Kanni Abdoulaye, Human Rights Defenders Coalition Niger; Julie Haggie, Transparency International New Zealand; Nikolai Kvantaliani, New Group Association, Belarus; Onesmo Olengurumwa, Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition; Michel Pierre, Citizens Engagement Platform Seychelles; Ely Quiroz, Centro de Estudios y Apoyo al Desarrollo Local, Bolivia; Maja Stojanović, Civic Initiatives, Serbia; Anne Tolley, former National Party MP, New Zealand; Sandra Urquiza, Carter Center, USA

CHALLENGING EXCLUSION AND CLAIMING RIGHTS, 3 DECEMBER 2020

Carolina Carrera, Humanas-Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, Chile; Terry Bellamak, Abortion Law Reform Association of New Zealand; Olimpia Castillo, Asociación Civil Comunicación y Educación Ambiental, Mexico; Fahima Hashim, women’s rights activist, Sudan; Yasmin Ullah, Rohingya human rights activist, Canada; Laura Valenciano Arrieta, Asociación Ciudadana ACCEDER-Acciones estratégicas por los Derechos Humanos, Costa Rica

CHALLENGING SYSTEMIC RACISM: #BLM IN THE USA AND BEYOND, 2 FEBRUARY 2021

Sheila de Carvalho, Coalizão Negra, Brazil; Kelsey M, Community Action on Prison Expansion, UK; David Murillo, Dejusticia, Colombia; Axolile Notywala, human rights activist, South Africa; Israel Ogunseye Oladipupo, #EndSARS, Nigeria; Kim M Reynolds, Our Data Bodies, USA and University of Cape Town, South Africa

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