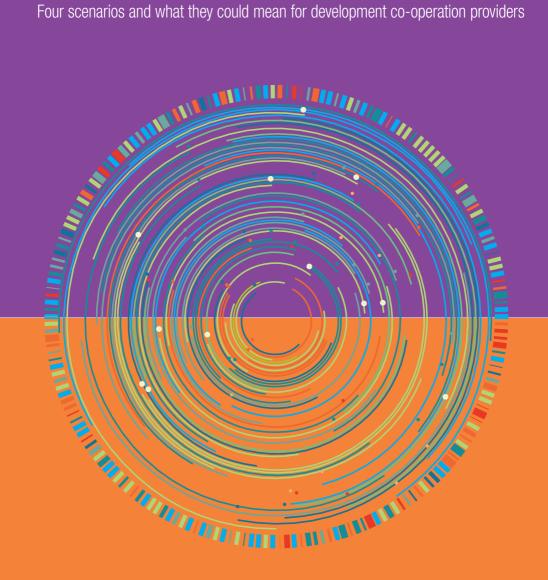# DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE FUTURES OF CIVIC SPACE TO 2030

Four scenarios and what they could mean for development co-operation providers

The international community needs to **understand the rapidly evolving digital landscape and make the connection to civic space issues, including to future threats.**

- Carothers, T. & Brechenmacher, S. (2019). *Defending Civic Space: Is the International Community Stuck?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE FUTURES OF CIVIC SPACE TO 2030

Digital transformation is providing new ways to exercise the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, as well as new ways to restrict those rights.

. . . .

The implications of digital transformation for fundamental freedoms and civic space are particularly relevant in the context of public health and other national emergencies, including pandemics and terrorist threats, during which governments deploy digital surveillance tools to track and monitor populations.

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These trends are challenging the way members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and other providers of development co-operation promote an enabling environment for civil society to contribute to sustainable development.

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Foresight analysis assists DAC policy makers to prepare for and shape the future of civic space in a dynamic way. It does so by exploring the different possibilities of what the future might look like, the paths to those possible futures, and their respective implications for policy making today.

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Four possible futures of civic space could materialise within a 10-year horizon and be fully realised by 2030. Civic space could either *collapse* or *flourish*. It could also *transform* itself or *break apart.*

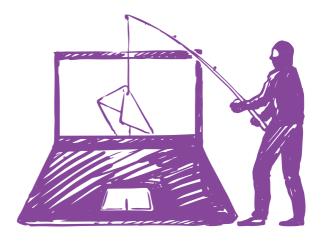. . . . .

Action can be taken today by designing development co-operation policies that leverage the opportunities and mitigate the risks of each of these plausible future scenarios.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IS ALTERING CIVIC SPACE

At a time when physical space for civil society is shrinking globally, digital transformation has opened new spaces online. It is connecting civic spaces at a global level, supporting mass mobilisation of social movements offline, and creating more dynamic and inclusive civic spaces, marked by greater activism and engagement.

From the #FridaysForFuture to the #MeToo movement, civil society are joining forces in solidarity to make their voices heard and advance common goals across borders such as climate action and women's rights. Drones, camera apps (eyeWitness) and satellite technology are used to detect violations of human rights. Virtual reality is supporting CSOs' communication and advocacy. Mobile phone data informs humanitarian responses. In addition, online civic engagement platforms like GovChat in South Africa are allowing civil society to participate in decision-making and other democratic processes.

At the sametime, across the world, digital technologies are being exploited to silence, surveil and manipulate civil society, as well as to express extremist views or hate speech. The current business models of technology companies present risks to data protection, algorithmic bias, discrimination and infringement of privacy, undermining the safety and security of online civic spaces. The control of online spaces by technology companies are challenging CSOs' independence. In contexts where individuals do not have equal access to digital technologies, new forms of exclusion are proliferating. In the context of Covid-19, mass surveillance systems used to track and monitor infected individuals along with health data disclosure requirements have triggered concerns related to personal privacy and civil liberties on a global scale. Hate speech targeting vulnerable groups, fake news and misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic are spreading through social media and other digital tools; efforts to eliminate disinformation are also resulting in purposeful or unintentional censorship.

Freedom House reports that 71% of people who have access to Internet live in countries where individuals were arrested or imprisoned for posting content on political, social, or religious issues. Sixty-five per cent live in countries where individuals have been attacked or killed for their online activities since June 2018. There have been cases where news corporations have engaged in phone-hacking activities in the pursuit of stories; consultancy firms have harvested personal data from millions of peoples' social media accounts without their consent for political advertising purposes. Divisions are being exacerbated through the digital divide: only 24% of the population in Africa has access to the Internet versus 80% in Europe; women who face cultural barriers are up to 50% less likely to be connected.

Plausible Future #1: Civic Space Collapses

WHAT DOES THIS FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

Actors (governments, companies, media outlets, certain civil society actors such as extremist groups, etc.) have free rein to leverage digital technologies in adverse ways that restrict civil society actors' activities and lead to the gradual collapse of civic space. Two main drivers influence this evolution: state crackdown, partly enabled by the export of surveillance technology to developing countries; and, in reaction to this, the voluntary desertion of hostile online spaces by digitally disadvantaged civil society actors who fear exposure and reprisals.

HOW TO TAKE ACTION

- Have a civil society or CSO-specific strategic policy document(s) recognising the need to protect civic space and address the challenges associated with digital transformation. Support policies and programming that address the interconnection between civic space and digital transformation.

- Conduct risk assessments and refrain from providing digital support to countries where such support could inadvertently do harm (for example countries that have poor records in protecting civic space) while supporting initiatives that directly support partner countries to protect civic space and reach the most vulnerable civil society actors e.g. digital capacity building of local CSOs.

- Work with partner countries – in co-operation with other providers of development co-operation – to promote civic space and counter negative narratives by highlighting the benefits of an open and enabled space for civil society (e.g. for the economy, to deliver on the SDGs, to tackle difficult social issues and corruption, etc.).

- Consider and address risks for civic space in: (i) aid for trade policies that involve surveillance technology; (ii) co-operation with other providers of development co-operation that export digital technologies; (iii) engagement with the private sector (technology companies).

- Engage with partner countries in developing rights-respecting governmental measures during a national emergency or crisis, and establishing safeguards to minimise civic space risks induced by digital surveillance and other laws. Support partner country governments' work with civil society to undertake an impact assessment of such measures and strengthen the capacities of legislative and judicial officials to conduct oversight.

- Strengthen compliance with article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ensuring hate speech provisions do not violate freedom of expression); strengthen partnerships with new and traditional media to address hate speech narratives; support a new generation of digital citizens, empowered to recognise and reject hate speech.

Plausible Future #2: Civic Space Flourishes

WHAT DOES THIS FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

An enabling legal framework exists for civic space to flourish both on line and offline. A democratic model of digital governance has been established through which fundamental rights are respected across the digital sphere. Space is defended and expands through the action and interactions of responsive states, companies and other actors. Civil society actors, digitally empowered in part by development co-operation providers, have found ways to circumvent restrictions to civic space. Two main drivers influence this evolution: the emergence of a human-centric and human-driven global digital governance regime and the agency of responsive stakeholders.

HOW TO TAKE ACTION

- Engage civil society, partner countries and other relevant stakeholders such as technology companies and investors in policy dialogues related to digital transformation and civic space; support mechanisms for civil society and other relevant stakeholders' feedback in the design and implementation of national digital strategies in partner countries.

- Strengthen digital-related laws in developing countries which comply with international human rights laws and civic rights; as well as media and social media-related laws which tackle disinformation.

- Support programmes that build (i) local capacities of legal, judicial and security officials and institutions to address violations of digital rights; and (ii) local media capacities for quality, investigative journalism.

- Support programmes that tackle disinformation by strengthening e.g. public communication efforts (proactive, transparent and pre-emptive dissemination of information and deployment of counter-narratives); media literacy among civil society; and public service media.
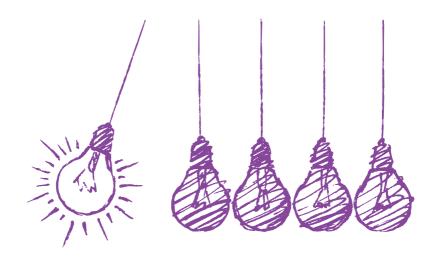
Plausible Future #3: Civic Space Transforms Itself

WHAT DOES THIS FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

Social movements form the bulk of civic activism; they permeate online and offline civic spaces and engage primarily in political activism. Institutionalised CSOs are no longer as prominent; they operate primarily in physical civic spaces and their activities are limited to apolitical service provision. The evolving interactions and dynamics between civil society actors as well as between civil society and governance structures and institutions transform the nature and purpose of civic space. Civic space is not only a space to assemble, express oneself and associate; online space has also become a modern *agora* where people practice direct democracy - at national, regional and global levels - ushering in a new age of democratic renewal. Two main drivers influence this evolution: the behaviour of civil society actors who gradually use civic technologies on a wide scale (i.e. the digital tools that enable citizens to easily and effectively engage with civic life); and the deconstruction of state-citizen relations and of current political institutions based on models of representative democracy.

HOW TO TAKE ACTION

- Develop new modalities to work with and support non-traditional, digitally-empowered forms of civil society actors such as small-scale decentralised or large-scale global social movements

- Review policies and strategies for engagement with and support to non-traditional private sector partners such as non-profit technology companies which specialise in the development of civic technologies.

Plausible Future #4: Civic Space Breaks Apart

WHAT DOES THIS FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

Civic space has broken into micro spaces that vary in levels of openness and inclusiveness. Some spaces are nearing collapse or have collapsed; others are thriving because stakeholders have adopted human-centric and human rights-based technology principles as well as other measures necessary to protect and expand civic space; while other spaces are somewhere in between, facing heavy restrictions but still managing to ward off a complete closure, partly through the use of civic technologies. As a result, civic space as a whole is not cohesive nor integrated but has become dysfunctional and is considerably weakened and limited. The fragmentation of civic space – across and within countries - is amplified and exacerbated along the following lines: geography, age, level of education, gender, and level of income. Two main drivers influence this evolution: 1) The proliferation of self-contained digital regimes, which have disrupted international civic space, and made it difficult for civic actors bound by different regulations to connect, co-ordinate and mobilise; and 2) Increased inequalities, which have disrupted national and local civic spaces by making it difficult for different communities to engage equally.

HOW TO TAKE ACTION

- Promote digital inclusion (i.e. 'leaving no one behind' in the digital era) towards a digital space that is free, open and inclusive, including by supporting legal frameworks that protect Internet rights and digital freedoms of all people; digital infrastructure programmes; and digital literacy policies and training programmes for marginalised civil society groups.

- Support programmes that strengthen the press and community-level media in particular, as an agenda integrator locally, regionally and globally, and as a fundamental pillar of civic space cohesion.

- Strengthen the compliance of national laws and regulations with international digital governance frameworks, while also paying attention to country context.

WHAT CAN THE DAC DO?
The DAC can consider supporting the development of policy guidance or a recommendation on enabling environments for civil society, which addresses among other issues, effective donor support for the promotion and protection of civic space – including in the digital age.

HOW WE BUILT THE 4 SCENARIOS

We used a scenario-based foresight process to reveal several plausible futures of civic space to 2030 in the context of digital transformation. The scenarios were constructed using the inductive or bottom-up scenario building method:

1. Identification and analysis of variables [e.g. current trends, drivers of change (mega-trends, emerging patterns and early signals), and uncertainties about the future] that could influence the future trajectory of civic space in the face of digital transformation.

2. Study of the possible interactions of these variables.

3. Selection of the most logical interactions of variables in terms of (i) inter-connectedness between variables and (ii) causality to the final outcome.

4. Step-by-step build-up of the future scenario, following a logical sequence and timeline of events to 2030.

The scenarios were designed in a way to give equal weight to thefollowing criteria:

(i) Plausibility* factor: The combination and sequences of the drivers of change can logically be connected to the final outcome of each scenario.

(ii) Differentiation factor: Each scenario provides insights that the others cannot.

(iii) Disruptive power: Each scenario adds value beyond the 'business as usual' trajectory.

(iv) Policy-making utility: Each scenario can help policy makers identify policy implications for action today.

(v) Memorability factor: Each scenario is easily memorable to increase their use and impact in policy discussions and processes.

*Plausibility does not imply that the future will happen. It means that the combination and sequence of variables grounding a future scenario can logically be connected to the final outcome of this scenario.

FURTHER READING

OECD (2020), *Digital Transformation and the Futures of Civic Space to 2030,*
Development Policy Paper, OECD Publishing, Paris.

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